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THE ANABAPTISTS AND THEIR
REJECTION OF INFANT BAPTISM

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before our Lord Jesus Christ left this earth to return to Heaven, He made a statement which constitutes what might be called the "marching orders" of His Church on earth. He told His disciples gathered around Him, and He is telling us today, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). Ever since that historic moment, the practice of Christian baptism has held a near-central position in the body of doctrine and in the life of the Christian Church.

Almost from the beginning of the Christian era, there have been disagreements among theologians of the church as to the Scripturally correct form, time, and objects of baptism. Questions have been asked and not always satisfactorily answered. One of the problems was concerned with the mode of baptism. Should baptism be administered by immersion or by affusion? Should the mode of baptism even be a matter of major concern? What happens when someone is baptized by a heathen or a heretic? Is this baptism valid before God? This, and other problems, troubled the church in the third century.

One problem area in particular has been with the church since the very early days of the New Testament era. This is

the matter of infant baptism. From a very early date, Christian theologians have had their serious and sincere doubts about the advisability of practicing infant baptism. This way of thinking found its culmination in a 16th century sect called by their opponents, "anabaptists." Following on the heels of the reformatory efforts in Zurich and Wittenberg, the Anabaptist movement listed as one of its basic principles of reform the absolute rejection of the doctrine and practice of infant baptism.

The ideas born in the early centuries of the church, and nourished so enthusiastically by the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, are still being held today. This fact prompted the writer to study this problem. There are many people, and especially the Baptists in the southern areas of the United States, who are spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists, holding basically the same views. When working with people of a Baptist background or inclination, the writer has personally, and by contact with many ministers in the field, discovered that the matter of infant baptism stands as one of the major obstacles to doctrinal agreement between Baptist and Lutheran Christians. Sometimes Lutheran young people marry persons who are or were members of the Baptist Church. In discussions with these Baptist people, ministers find only a few areas of disagreement. But when infant baptism is brought up, although these people try their best, they cannot, in most cases, agree with us on this point.

Why did the Anabaptists reject infant baptism? Why do groups such as the Southern Baptists reject infant baptism today? This thesis shall attempt to find some of the underlying reasons for this rejection.

Rather than being an exhaustive study of perhaps one of the reasons for the Anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism, this thesis presents a somewhat broader look at the background of the movement, and the social, political, and theological attitudes of the Anabaptists, followed by a more thorough investigation of five of the particularly fundamental objections the Anabaptists raised against infant baptism. The writer shall attempt to be as objective as possible in presenting the material contained in the body of the thesis. His subjective evaluation and conclusions are contained in the last chapter.

In many cases, the information gathered was from the Anabaptist point of view and may at times, therefore, be somewhat biased.

The second chapter discusses the Anabaptists as an historical movement, treating also some of the men outstanding in the activities of the Anabaptists. It was felt such information would give the reader a better background for viewing the rejections presented in the fourth chapter.

The third chapter touches briefly on some of the fundamental social, political, and theological views of the Anabaptists. These viewpoints are included because they are

closely related to the movement's rejection of infant baptism.

The fourth chapter investigates five of the major reasons for the Anabaptists' opposition to the doctrine and practice of infant baptism. Briefly, the Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, because, in their opinion, (1) Infant baptism is not commanded or practiced in the New Testament; (2) Adult believer's baptism is the only type of baptism enjoined in the New Testament; (3) Baptism is unnecessary for infants because infants are saved by Jesus without outward ceremonies and live in a state of grace even before they are baptized; (4) Baptism should not be administered to infants because it could not benefit them at all since it is not a means of grace or an instrument of regeneration; and (5) Infant baptism was a necessary ceremony for the maintenance of the state-church which was contrary to their view of the nature of the church.

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¹ James Garrigue, *Christiana's History* (New York: Van-
 tage Press, 1853), pp. 327.

² W. G. Barnes, "Progress of Baptist Principles from Con-
 sidering to Luther and the Anabaptists," *The Baptist and Ex-
 position*, XXXII (January, 1906), 52.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY HISTORY OF THE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT

The Predecessors of the Anabaptists

The Anabaptist movement did not emerge in the 16th century as an isolated and entirely new way of thinking. It very definitely had roots in many of the preceding centuries of the Christian era. That the thoughts and deeds of thousands of Christians living hundreds of years before the early 1500's formed the groundwork of Anabaptist practice and preaching cannot be denied. There were many "non-conformist" sects throughout the Middle Ages and even before, to a limited extent, who rejected the union of church and state, baptismal regeneration, and infant baptism. Among them are numbered the Montanists, Novatians, Paulicians, Arnoldists, Albigenes, Henricians, Petro-Brussians, Waldenses, Peterines, and Studists. All called themselves "anti-pedobaptists."¹ Dr. Ludwig Keller, State Archivist at Muenster, groups all these pre-Reformation evangelical sects into one class--the "Old Evangelical Party."²

¹Uuras Saarnivaara, Scriptural Baptism (New York: Vantage Press, 1953), pp. 85f.

²W. W. Barnes, "Progress of Baptist Principles From Constantine to Luther and the Anabaptists," The Review and Expositor, XXIII (January, 1926), 59.

By and large these sects were merely an intensification in the fullness of time of the tendencies and doctrines springing up in different places and at different times throughout the Christian era. In Bohemia, Moravia, Switzerland, and Germany, the Waldenses, the Wycliffites, and the Hussites among others were saying,

that the Kingdom of Christ was an assembly of true and real saints, and ought therefore to be inaccessible to the wicked; and also exempt from all those institutions which human prudence suggests, to oppose the progress of iniquity, or to correct and reform transgressions.³

Even today, Baptists like to trace their principles of soul-competency and soul-democracy back to the time of Christ. This democratic principle they found on the ability and right of each and every person to know God without the necessity of any means or agency of God's grace, whether it be church, priest, or sacrament. Of course, these "true" principles have always been more or less vigorously opposed by the articulate majority in Christendom. But the leaven was at work and was not to be denied.

From time to time through the Middle Ages a voice here, another there, and another yonder, like one crying in the wilderness, will raise the cry of the competency and the freedom of the human soul.⁴

It is pertinent to the purpose of this paper to treat briefly several of the more significant of these sects which

³Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, "The Anabaptists and the Reformation," Enthusiasm--a Chapter in the History of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 118.

⁴Barnes, op. cit., p. 44.

stand as the predecessors of the Anabaptist movement. All external sacraments were categorically denied and rejected by the Paulicians, active in the latter half of the 7th century, A. D. They felt baptism was entirely out of order since, according to their way of thinking, the words of the Gospel were the only baptism necessary for the faithful. To take the place of the traditional baptismal ceremony, the Paulicians substituted a rite called the Consolamentum, or baptism of the Spirit, which they administered by laying a copy of the Gospels on the head of the candidate and praying for him.⁵

The first real evangelical "heretics" of the Middle Ages were the Cathari, or Albigenses, who appeared on the scene in southern France in the 11th century. Active in northern Italy, France, Saxony, Spain, and the Netherlands, this group held the New Testament to be authoritative over all man-made doctrines, traditions, and ceremonies of the church, and rejected baptismal regeneration.⁶ The many instances of immorality extant in the Roman clergy of that day were largely responsible for this group's active preaching ministry against clerical sensuality and the easily abusable doctrine of ordination. The great struggle which ensued between the Roman Church and the Albigenses ended in the latter's being

⁵Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 88.

⁶Ibid., pp. 89f.

decisively uprooted by that feared arm of Roman Catholic law enforcement, the Inquisition.⁷ But the seed had been sown. The idea had been planted in man's soul and only time could show that the spirit of the Albigenses had definitely not been extinguished.

Following in the footsteps of the 11th century Albigenses were the Waldenses, disciples of Peter Waldo, a wealthy citizen of Lyons, France, who was born in 1140. In general, this group neither vigorously opposed infant baptism, nor were they advocates of the doctrine. They were anti-clerical, democratic, proponents of the lay movement, and they rejected everything not specifically taught in Scriptures.⁸

Here we see very definitely the beginnings of later Anabaptist tenets.

Pierre de Bruys, a Gospel preacher for twenty years in Aquitaine and Provence, was the spiritual leader of the Petro-Bruissians, another of the forerunners of Anabaptism. This group taught that infant baptism is useless, that prayer is effective not only in the traditional places such as churches, but even in lowly inns, that there is no change in the elements of the Lord's Supper, and that prayers for the dead are futile since the departed souls had already met their Creator. Evident here is the basic Baptist (and Anabaptist)

⁷Barnes, op. cit., pp. 45f.

⁸Ibid., p. 52.

principle of personal soul-competency. Each person may come to God without human mediation of any kind. Obviously, this was a frontal attack against conditions in the Roman Church. Since man is in this direct and personal relationship to his God, such "crass materialism" as is involved in the doctrine of transubstantiation and in the "worship" of the cross is to be wholly eliminated. Southern Baptist W. W. Barnes says, "In these followers of Pierre de Bruys we are glad to hail our spiritual kinsmen, heralds of the Gospel of Grace after the midnight of the Dark Ages."⁹

Last of the pre-Anabaptist groups to be treated are the Pyghards. Joannes Slechts Costelecius wrote a letter to Erasmus, dated October 10, 1519, or about three years prior to the outbreak of Muenzer and Storch. Of the Pyghards he has this to tell Erasmus:

These men have no other opinion of the pope, cardinals, bishops, and other clergy, than as of manifest Anti-Christ: . . . They own no other authority than the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. They slight all the doctors, both ancient and modern, and give no regard to their doctrines. Their priests, when they celebrate the offices of the mass or communion, do it without any priestly garments: nor do they use any prayers or collects on this occasion, but only the Lord's Prayer; by which they consecrate bread that has been leavened.

They believe or own little or nothing of the sacrament of the Altar. Such as come over to their sect must everyone be baptized anew in mere water.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. p. 47.

¹⁰ W. Wall, The History of Infant Baptism (London: Griffith, Farran, Browne, & Co., 1862), II, 156f.

Keller points out that Staupitz, Luther's teacher, was the connecting link between the free spirits of the Middle Ages and these unrestrained and independent thinkers of more recent times. It was Ritschl who suggested that the pietists of the late Middle Ages and the Spiritual Franciscans were the forerunners of the Anabaptists. It is plain to see there were many groups and many individuals who influenced the Anabaptists.¹¹ We will notice that almost all the more important Anabaptist views were held by some other group previously. Yet some commentators feel there is no satisfactory way of tracing a direct relationship and line of influence from the Middle Age sects to the Anabaptists. It has been suggested that first of all the Anabaptists themselves were unaware of any connection between themselves and any prior sects. They considered themselves merely the spiritual children of a renewed study of the Bible. Furthermore, all Anabaptist leaders were at one time members of the Roman Church.¹² Therefore, it is felt that it is at most a coincidence that the Anabaptists and earlier groups held basically the same views. It would indeed prove difficult to demonstrate any conscious and direct relationship.

¹¹George Huntston Williams, editor, Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers, in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), XXV, 26f.

¹²"Anabaptism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), I, 406.

However, it is undoubtedly true that these early sects did lay the groundwork for the Anabaptist movement. They plowed the virgin soil with their new and bold ideas and, although their efforts were largely premature, these ideas became the common property of searching religious thinkers, of whom the Anabaptists were a major group.

The Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Environment

It would be unfair to discuss the Anabaptist movement without touching on the social, political, and ecclesiastical climates that obtained in Europe at this time and the influence these important factors exerted on the Anabaptists. Coming out of the "Dark" Ages as it did, the Reformation Era was an unsettled and perilous period in human history. There was deep and widespread dissatisfaction especially among the peasant classes. Feudalism was still a thing to be resentfully remembered, and the "have-nots" felt a real yearning to be free of their political harness. Closely connected with this political subjugation was the autocratic Roman Church. H. Richard Niebuhr states in his book on the sources of denominationalism that the Anabaptist movement was one that cropped up among the socially and economically oppressed lower classes.¹³ Such men as Storch, Muenzer, and Huebmaier maintained that it was unfair for some to be so

¹³Harold S. Bender, "Conrad Grebel, the Founder of Swiss Anabaptism," Church History, VII (June, 1938), 161.

rich and others so poor. Of these leaders, Wall comments, Abundance of people flocked to them. And the more, for that there had been before discontents, and some insurrections, of these poorer sort of people, because of their aforesaid hardships.¹⁴

Although the Anabaptist movement was at face value a religious reaction, its chief interest and value lay in the "protest which the Anabaptist groups made against the political order of the time, rather than in the religious principles which they adopted."¹⁵

For our purposes a brief investigation of specific conditions in the contemporary Roman and Reformation Churches will be of value. The free Anabaptist thinkers had the courage to stand outside their church membership and view somewhat more objectively how their church measured up to New Testament standards. Menno Simons would grant that

if to meet publicly, although in all manner of vanity, pomp, pride, and splendor, to preach in worldly fashion, to baptize infants, to break the bread with the impenitent, to pray in sham, and exterminate thieves and murderers with the sword, constitute the Church of God,¹⁶

then also the Popes and other officials of the church were members of the Church of Christ on earth. Of course, Simons would never have accepted these as marks of the church.

The Reformers were faced with a perplexing problem.

¹⁴Wall, op. cit., pp. 154f.

¹⁵Harold H. Schaff, "The Anabaptists, the Reformers, and the Civil Government," Church History, I (March, 1932), 161.

¹⁶Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), p. 746.

They sincerely desired success for their reform measures. And so they turned to the state for help. Incidentally, the princes at this time were more than happy to get out from under the restraints of the Papacy and gladly cooperated with the Reformers by granting them protection of the law and many other special favors. The price the Reformers had to pay was their consent to a union of church and state, which meant the organization of a church comprising, by force of law, the entire population of a province or state. The Anabaptists felt such action involved a very definite compromise and modification of New Testament teachings.¹⁷

Schwenckfeld, an adherent of Luther's in the early days of the Reformation, became very disappointed when Luther consented to such a marriage of church and state. As far as he could tell, a union of this type had not produced in the Roman tradition and was not at the present time producing in the Protestant groups a higher level of spirituality and morality. "Dr. Luther has led us through the sea into the wilderness and would now have us believe that we are already in the promised land."¹⁸

Since in some cases people joined the church against their will, the spiritual level of these members left much to be desired. If to be a member of the church, even if

¹⁷John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe, in Mennonite History (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), 1, 193f.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 138.

such membership were entirely mechanical and meaningless, were sufficient for a person's salvation, which the Romans allegedly held, fine. But the Anabaptists could not see this at all. Their opinion was that the state-church was misleading the common people and estranging them from God with its easygoing doctrines, false conceptions of Christ's sacraments, and especially with its new baptism which, they felt, was altogether foreign to the New Testament and "not so bitter to the flesh as the baptism of Christ."¹⁹ The highly articulate Simons had the following description of the contemporary state-church:

When I think to find an irreproachable church without spot and without wrinkle, one which serves the Lord with all its power and which conforms to His Word, then verily I find such an ungodly, awful, corrupted, and confused people, so carnal, idolatrous, immoral, cruel, wicked, unbelieving, ignorant, bloody, unmerciful, drunken, pompous, luxurious, proud, avaricious, greedy, envious, adulterous, false, deceitful, perverted, refractory, disobedient, rebellious, vain, and so devilish that a God-fearing soul must stand dumbfounded and be ashamed, and yet they pride themselves to be the true bride, the believing congregation or church of Christ.²⁰

As we shall see below, such a concept of involuntary church membership seemed to the Anabaptists to be altogether outside the tradition of the New Testament. The New Testament, they felt, demanded a heart religion rather than one composed of mere outward ceremonies, such as masses, matins, vespers,

¹⁹Simons, op. cit., p. 502.

²⁰Ibid., p. 299.

pilgrimages, holy water, and other strictly human inventions.²¹

And so the Anabaptists were torn between two impossible extremes. They could not remain in the Roman Church because it was a religion of form rather than their desired "heart religion." Neither could they espouse the Protestant cause because the Reformers, in their opinion, had not improved conditions in the church to a measurable degree. When Luther and Melancthon took such a firm stand against the peasants in the latter's revolt, the Anabaptists interpreted this as a clear indication of the former's lack of sympathy for their cause.²²

The History of the Anabaptist Movement

We shall now turn to a brief survey history of the Anabaptist movement itself. Very basic to the movement was one of the primary principles of the Reformation. The Reformers tirelessly pointed out that it is each Christian's responsibility and God-given privilege to read the Bible and to interpret it for himself. No church councils or officials were to interfere. Many of the people began to read their new Bibles.²³ And they found many things being practiced

²¹Ibid., p. 88.

²²Schaff, op.cit., p. 29.

²³Ibid., pp. 28f.

in their churches which could not to their knowledge be substantiated by clear word of Scripture. It so happened that the concept of the church became a primary concern and with it, the practice of infant baptism and its usage as a compulsory initiatory ceremony for church membership.

At this time Ulrich Zwingli was the spiritual leader of the Reformation in and around Zurich in Switzerland. Zwingli, too, studied the doctrine of infant baptism and agreed that it could not be demonstrated by any clear word from the Bible.²⁴ Indeed, it was Zwingli himself who converted Balthasar Huebmaier and Hans Hottinger to the view that infant baptism was not commanded in Scriptures.²⁵ As far as Zwingli was concerned, baptism was an act of confession. "Baptism is a rite which lays definite obligation on those who accept it and indicate they are determined to mend their lives and follow Christ,"²⁶ and therefore it would be far better not to baptize infants at all. Zwingli agreed with Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz that infant baptism is both unnecessary and indeed not baptism at all. They felt that people must be baptized according to the ordinance of Christ Himself, since

²⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 45.

²⁵Harold S. Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists (Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), pp. 126f.

²⁶Horsch, op. cit., p. 44.

the Lord said, "Whosoever believes and is baptized will be saved."²⁷

But then Zwingli started to back down from his previous firm stand. Even though the Scriptures do not command or demand infant baptism, he felt the best interests of the church required infants to be baptized.²⁸ Taken to its logical conclusion, the thinking being done by the Anabaptist leaders would undoubtedly lead to a split in Protestantism, and Zwingli, being a reasonable man, wanted to avoid this at all costs.²⁹ When Zwingli and others such as Oecolampadius saw how infant baptism worked out in practice, they were convinced "without too much trouble of the Scripturalness of the practice and thereafter remained its firm advocates."³⁰ Thus Zwingli betrayed his original stand to "please men rather than God," or so thought the Anabaptists.³¹ It was characteristic of the Anabaptists to obey what they felt God commanded regardless of the outcome. Grebel, for example, did not believe in considering circumstances before making important decisions. When he saw what God commanded him in His Word, Grebel wanted absolute loyalty to this Word of God

²⁷Williams, op. cit., pp. 42f.

²⁸Horsch, op. cit., p. 44.

²⁹Henry C. Vedder, Balthasar Huebmaier--The Leader of the Anabaptists (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 118.

³⁰Ibid., p. 104.

³¹Williams, op. cit., p. 45.

regardless of the consequences, and he was willing to accept these consequences in his personal life.³² Thus we see that the Reformation principle of personal interpretation of the Bible together with a growing dissatisfaction with the lack of courage on the part of some of the Reformers to practice what they preached led to the Anabaptist movement.

It should be pointed out that many others were at this time doubtful about the advisability of continuing infant baptism. Oecolampadius in Basel thought about stopping infant baptism in his city in 1524 but was dissuaded by Zwingli. Gerhard Roussel in Meaux, France, heard that there were in Basel those who postponed baptism "ad annos discretionis." Erasmus wrote from Basel in the summer of 1524 that there were already then many opponents of the practice. Infant baptism was made optional in Strasbourg in the summer of 1524.³³

The first recorded refusals to baptize infants occurred in the spring of 1525 when infant baptism really came to the fore as a theoretical and practical problem for the church and civil authorities. Two fathers in the village of Wytikon refused, under the direction of Pastor Wilhelm Reublin, to have their children baptized. In the neighboring village of Zollikon, three fathers withheld baptism from their children

³²Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 169.

³³Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists, p. 127.

with the knowledge and support of their pastor, Johannes Broetli. They said that, according to the Word of God, children should not be baptized at infancy but should wait until they were able to testify to their own faith. Reublin was brought before the City Council and imprisoned and the recalcitrant parents were fined one silver mark.³⁴ Zwingli tried to win Reublin over by private discussions, but the latter demanded proof for infant baptism from Holy Scriptures, and Zwingli was not able to bring forth evidence. Reublin could not be moved from his fundamentalist position until force and the power of the state prevailed.³⁵

When Zwingli took a firm stand on the authority of Holy Writ and then began to waver in his dealing with the many distasteful implications and necessary consequences of such a stand, he alienated himself from a group of brilliant men which went on to form the nucleus of Anabaptist leadership. Especially significant were Conrad Grebel, later leader of the Swiss Brethren, and the foremost representative of the original Anabaptist dogmas in their pure form,³⁶ Felix Manz, brilliant Hebrew scholar, and Balthasar Huebmaier, famous pastor of Waldshut, who soon became one of the leading figures

³⁴Ibid., p. 124.

³⁵Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 171.

³⁶Ibid., p. 158.

in the movement, especially in and around Zwingli's Zurich.³⁷ In 1524 this group of "dissenters" was in contact with the radicals, Thomas Muenzer and Andreas Carlstadt, and, as a result, took on decided anti-pedobaptist tendencies. However, public opinion in Zurich was very much against Grebel and his followers, and they were brought before the magistrate on January 18, 1525, for a formal discussion and debate. The Council demanded that unbaptized children be baptized. The dissenters, led by Grebel, Manz, and George Blaurock, said they would comply with the Council's wishes if shown definitive proof from the Bible. The Council agreed and said those who rejected infant baptism would be given an opportunity to discuss the whole matter with three local pastors and four representatives of the Council. The first parents remained convinced that infant baptism was wrong. As it turned out, the meetings only led to a widening of the chasm because the opponents mercilessly abused the clergymen and because Grebel's men complained that they had not been permitted to speak their minds on the subject.³⁸

After the "debate" was ended, the Council decreed that all children must be baptized, all parents refusing to have

³⁷"Anabaptists," Universal Cyclopaedia and Atlas, edited by Charles Kendall Adams (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905), I, 169.

³⁸Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists, pp. 127-129.

their children baptized should be banished, all meetings of the Anabaptist group were forbidden, and all foreigners advocating the radical views would be forced to leave the country.³⁹ This brought the problem to a head, and the time was ripe for the most important decision in the history of the Anabaptist movement. Grebel had a two-week old daughter who had not yet been "baptized and bathed in the Romish water bath."⁴⁰ Grebel, his conscience bound as Luther's had been, decided not to compromise, and so he refused to have his daughter baptized. The next move for the small group was to meet in the home of Felix Manz in Zurich on January 21, 1525, to discuss the momentous events of the previous days and to make plans for future action. Until this time there had been no program of adult or believer's baptism. In a moment of what they confidently believed to be divine guidance, the aforementioned George Blaurock requested that the leader of the group, Conrad Grebel, baptize him.⁴¹ Blaurock having been baptized, he then proceeded to baptize the entire group of Anabaptists present.⁴² Here for the first time people

³⁹"Anabaptists," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), I, 161f.

⁴⁰Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 171f.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 172.

⁴²Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists, p. 137.

had been re-baptized because of a voluntary confession of personal faith and dedication to God. Anabaptism was under way.

The new movement spread like wildfire. The little group that had gathered at the home of Manz had gone out with a clear vision of their mission and duty in life. They were active missionaries from the very beginning and achieved remarkable success.⁴³ Instrumental in this rapid expansion was Huebmaier. Reublin of Wytikon went to Waldshut and preached the Anabaptist doctrine to his brother pastor, Huebmaier, until the latter was firmly convinced of its Scriptural verity. Reublin "re-baptized" (actually the first baptism for the Anabaptists, who did not consider infant baptism to be baptism in the strict sense of the term) Huebmaier and sixty others, and on Easter Day of 1525, Huebmaier baptized over three hundred of his townsmen with water from a milk pail. On Monday and Tuesday after Easter, Huebmaier baptized seventy to eighty more, and on Tuesday he gave them the "bread from heaven" and washed their feet.⁴⁴

Such action on the part of Huebmaier and Reublin met with sturdy opposition, and the controversy between the Waldshut Anabaptists and the Austrian authorities reached a climax in the fall of 1525. Huebmaier could conceivably

⁴³Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 172f.

⁴⁴Vedder, op. cit., p. 112.

have requested aid from the Swiss government except for the fact that he had once and for all alienated himself from Zwingli by his bitter attack on the Swiss Reformer's alleged vacillations, and Zwingli would no doubt never have come to his assistance. At any rate, the Austrian forces demanded that the people return to the old faith and that Huebmaier and eight leading citizens be handed over to them. Although the citizens at first refused to obey this demand, a Roman Catholic minority pleaded for the town's return to Austrian control. So Huebmaier and other prudent citizens fled Waldshut, and the town was occupied by the Roman Catholic Austrian forces on December 5, 1525, thus ending the Reformation in that place.⁴⁵

Huebmaier fled to Zurich, where he was arrested and tried. After some pressure had been exerted on the ailing pastor, he recanted. But later he recanted his recantation and was promptly subjected to re-imprisonment and torture. In such a stressed situation he "apologized" for his views on infant baptism and was permitted to leave Zurich, settling in Nikolsburg, Moravia, where he continued to preach the Anabaptist views.⁴⁶

In the face of vigorous persecutions, many Anabaptists fled to Strasbourg, where mild censorship and a well-organized welfare program adequately suited their needs, enabling

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 140.

them to carry out their missionary activities more efficiently.⁴⁷ About at this time, Grebel's "pure" Anabaptist doctrines began to be abused by men who definitely produced more heat than light. Melchior Hofmann appeared on the scene in Strasbourg, coming there from Kiel and Emden as a confirmed Zwinglianist. However, he soon absorbed Anabaptist teachings and became an active proponent of Anabaptism, especially in the Low Countries, where, from 1530 on, the movement spread rapidly. He set up a sub-sect called the "Hofmannists," but this group was soon swallowed up by the larger body of Anabaptism.⁴⁸ Somehow he got the people to believe in him as the inspired interpreter of prophecy and as an inspired leader generally. He said he was one of the "two witnesses" spoken of in Revelation 11:3, that Strasbourg was to become the New Jerusalem and the seat of universal rule, and that non-resistance should be replaced by a more vigorous means of proselytism. Imprisoned in Strasbourg in 1533, Hofmann was forced to relinquish his leadership to less able and more radical men such as Jan Mathys and John Bochhold. As we shall see below, these men took over the fairly solid foundation constructed by Hofmann and

⁴⁷Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptists and the Civil Authorities of Strasbourg, 1525-1555," Church History, XXIV (June, 1955), 100.

⁴⁸"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, edited by John M. Clintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1895), I, 211.

erected a system of church government that Hofmann would never have sanctioned.⁴⁹ Other men who fostered the Anabaptist movement at this time were David Joris and Pilgram Marpeck. Joris, a glass-painter from the city of Delft, showed remarkable insight and imagination in his works. Efforts to unify the various salient trends of Anabaptist outreach were his primary concern. Rather an unsettled person, Joris travelled extensively but eventually settled in Basel in 1554 under an assumed name. After his death in 1556, his long-concealed "heresy" was exposed, and his body was ordered burned.⁵⁰

Pilgram Marpeck, a mining engineer and refugee from Tyrol replaced Reublin as leader of the Anabaptist congregation in Strasbourg. Under his leadership the cause grew most rapidly, especially from 1528-1532. A more orthodox Strasbourg pastor, Martin Butzer, called Marpeck his most formidable opponent, a "stubborn heretic," and "unduly strict."⁵¹ The Mennonite Encyclopedia states that Marpeck and his Vermaehnung were, next to Huebmaier, the most important contributory factor to the rejection of infant baptism

⁴⁹"Anabaptists," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 163.

⁵⁰"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, I, 211.

⁵¹Kreider, op. cit., pp. 106f.

and the Anabaptist practice of the "sacrament" of baptism in general.⁵²

It is hoped that the preceding brief glances into the lives of these Anabaptist leaders has given the reader a somewhat keener insight into the movement and the type of personalities involved.

The Anabaptists spread mainly in Germany. Other countries experienced the movement, to be sure, but in many cases this was not the sound Anabaptism that prospered in the German states. Friedmann says that Anabaptism as a "leaven for the propagation of the Kingdom of God on earth is mainly restricted to the German-speaking peoples."⁵³ The Dutch Mennonites, however, were probably most successful in setting up a church where non-conformity was practiced more rigidly than anywhere else. It was in the Low Countries that the divisions resulting from the Anabaptist concept of the church as a group of saints were settled for the first time.⁵⁴ The seeds of Anabaptism having been sown in the Low Countries by Melchior Hofmann, Menno Simons left the Roman Catholic clergy in 1536 and became the leader of the Dutch Anabaptists and the leading spokesman for Anabaptism considered as a move-

⁵²"Infant Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), III, 36.

⁵³Robert Friedmann, "Conception of the Anabaptists," Church History, XIX (December, 1940), 364.

⁵⁴Cornelius Krahn, "The Historiography of the Mennonites in the Netherlands," Church History, XIII (September, 1944), 205.

ment.⁵⁵ Eventually, nearly all the "brotherhood" came under his influence.⁵⁶

The Fanatical Anabaptists

Thus far we have concerned ourselves primarily with the spread of "sober" Anabaptists. If there had been only such men as Conrad Grebel and his more conservative companions, perhaps Anabaptism would not have been such a short-lived movement. There was, unfortunately, another side of Anabaptism, which must in all fairness be objectively viewed and evaluated. This was the highly radical and, at times, fanatical left-wing branch of the Anabaptist movement. Some Anabaptists fell under the spell of fanatical preachers "whose learning was no match for their eloquence." On the basis of a false exegesis of the Bible, these men preached that the Parousia was coming momentarily together with the founding of Christ's millennial Kingdom. They were rabid literalists who found Scriptural backing for their teachings of non-resistance, avoidance of oaths, non-payment of taxes, and community of goods.⁵⁷ Common to all radical Anabaptists were disappointment in the moral aspects of territorial

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 184.

⁵⁶"Anabaptists," Universal Cyclopaedia and Atlas, I, 169.

⁵⁷Vedder, op. cit., pp. 2f.

Protestantism, as proposed by Luther and Zwingli, and the outright disavowal of several of Protestantism's basic doctrines and institutions. They proposed a distinctive Christology and a corresponding mystical-physical view of the Lord's Supper. There was a common resistance to the linking together of church and state, a relationship which the Reformers "espoused in practice and the Counter-Reformation acquiesced for reasons of expediency."⁵⁸

These left-wing Anabaptists set down their platform thus:

Impiety prevails everywhere. It is therefore necessary that a new family of holy persons should be founded, enjoying without distinction of sex, the gift of prophecy, and skill to interpret divine revelation. Hence they need no learning: for the internal word is more than the outward expression. No Christian must be suffered to engage in a legal process; to hold a civil office, to take an oath, or to hold any private property; but all things must be in common.⁵⁹

To them, the Old Testament was just as important as the New Testament for theology in general and especially for the constitution of the church. Their aim was to set up a church modeled after the church of the Apostolic Age.⁶⁰ Most all of these radical men practiced adult baptism, not as a sacrament, but as a sign of differentiation from the

⁵⁸Williams, op. cit., p. 21.

⁵⁹"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, I, 210.

⁶⁰Williams, op. cit., p. 29.

outside world which they considered to be an evil influence.⁶¹

These left-wing activities very definitely gave the entire movement a bad reputation. By their lawless fanaticism, the leaders of the more radical groups completely separated themselves from the cause of the Reformers, and with the subject of infant baptism as their distinctive characteristic, they introduced all types of principles subversive of all religious and civil order. As the movement grew in size and notoriety, police action led to bitter persecution which, in many cases, tended to spread the seeds of their teachings in all directions.⁶²

Two general areas of radical thought and practice have been associated with the left-wing brand of Anabaptism. The first, that movement led by Thomas Muenzer, is considered by some to be entirely outside the responsibility of pure Anabaptism. The other movement centered around the city of Muenster and is definitely a part of the movement, although it is obviously an abuse rather than a true example of what the Anabaptists really thought and taught.

Thomas Muenzer, a Lutheran pastor from Zwickau in Saxony, was greatly influenced by Nicholas Storch, a weaver

⁶¹Friedmann, Church History, XIX (December, 1940), 350.

⁶²"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, I, 210.

deeply tinged with chiliastic views, rejection of oaths, opposition to the magistracy, warfare, infant baptism, and insistence on community of goods. These men called themselves the inspired "Zwickau Prophets," and many people rallied around their banner. They came to Wittenberg while Luther was still at the Wartburg and tried to win over the faculty there. Carlstadt and Cellarius were very much impressed and joined their ranks. Melanchthon was on the brink when Luther returned and vigorously attacked Muenzer and his followers.⁶³ From this time on, Luther was one of the most powerful and uncompromising foes of Anabaptism.⁶⁴

Muenzer had to leave Zwickau in 1524, and he travelled in Switzerland, Bohemia, and Thuringia, spreading his revolutionary ideas and repudiating the civic and religious authority which had become so oppressive to the people over the years. The movement rapidly gained momentum because of the common opposition to tyranny. The end result was the infamous Peasant's Revolt in southern Germany in 1525. Begun as a revolt against feudal oppression, it soon developed into a war against all constituted authority as well as an attempt to establish forcibly an ideal Christian commonwealth

⁶³"Anabaptists," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 162.

⁶⁴"Anabaptism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, I, 406.

with communistic institutions.⁶⁵ The movement was decisively defeated at the Battle of Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525.⁶⁶

The second radical tendency of Anabaptism which has remained a permanent blotch on its escutcheon was the incident at Muenster. John Bochhold, a twenty-six year old tailor from Leydon, and Jan Mathys, a Haarlem baker, came to Muenster in Westphalia in 1553. Mathys changed the program initiated by Melchior Hofmann, transferring the capital of the "Kingdom" to Muenster and advocating force to maintain it there.⁶⁷ The people of Muenster had been won over to the principles of the Reformation, and it was not difficult for the highly persuasive Mathys and Bochhold to gain their confidence. The city officials tried desperately to thwart the rebellion but to no avail. Soon the radicals were in control of the Council-House, and the town was taken by force. People from neighboring villages soon swelled the ranks and decisively took over the government of the city. Mathys set himself up as the "Prophet," called himself the "other witness" mentioned in Revelation 11, and instructed the people to pool their money and property for the common good and to

⁶⁵"Anabaptists," The Encyclopedia Americana (New York: Americana Corporation, 1936), I, 599.

⁶⁶"Anabaptists," Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1951), I, 858.

⁶⁷"Anabaptists," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 163.

burn all books except the Bible. Mathys' reign was short-lived, however, for he, thinking he was another Gideon, took thirty [sic] men against the Bishop of Muenster and was promptly killed in battle.⁶⁸ At this juncture, Bochhold and a man called Knipperdolling took over the leadership of the insurrection.⁶⁹

These men proceeded to destroy the churches and set up twelve judges after the manner of the Old Testament. In the general chaos that soon followed, Bochhold (John of Leydon) summarily abolished this form of government and set himself up as King of the New Zion. From 1534 on, Muenster was the scene of extreme fanaticism, lust, polygamy, cruelty, and neglect of civil order. For example, John of Leydon had four wives, one of whom he beheaded in the marketplace in a fit of frenzy.⁷⁰ He was dreaded by his people who realized he was greedy and obviously concerned primarily about his personal welfare, but were afraid to react because he frequently staged executions to keep them in line. While his city was in the midst of famine and pestilence, John persuaded his people to resist the overwhelming power of the besiegers. The city fell, however, on June 24, 1535, and

⁶⁸"Anabaptists," Encyclopaedia Britannica, I, 858.

⁶⁹"Anabaptists," The Encyclopedia Americana, I, 599.

⁷⁰"Anabaptists," Encyclopaedia Britannica, I, 858.

Rothmann and many, many others were killed.⁷¹ John of Leydon and two other radicals were tortured to death by red-hot pincers, and their dead bodies were enclosed in iron cages and suspended from the steeple of St. Lambert's Church in Muenster to serve as a vivid reminder to the people that the state would not tolerate such outbursts.⁷² After this ignominious failure, Anabaptism never again had the opportunity to become a political force of any consequence, especially because the civil authorities now expended even greater efforts in attempting to stamp out the Anabaptist movement wherever it reared its head.

The writer has now shown two sides of the Anabaptist movement. It is his opinion that it would be very unjust to generalize that all Anabaptists were radicals or that no Anabaptists ever possessed these left-wing tendencies. It is very important that a distinction be made at all times between the evangelical Anabaptists with their more conservative teachings born in the "bosom of Zwinglianism" in Zurich in 1525, and the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, and even anti-nomian groups.⁷³ The former never

⁷¹"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, I, 210.

⁷²"Anabaptists," The Encyclopedia Americana, I, 599f.

⁷³Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 8.

really forsook the body of Christianity's theological and Christological teachings as formulated in the traditional creeds. They were never "fanatical millenarianists, individualistic spiritual reformers, or ardent social revolutionaries."⁷⁴ The less fanatical Anabaptists such as Hofmann, Joris, and Grebel rejected the radical views of Muenzer and Muenster such as polygamy, community of goods, and intolerance of opposing views, and preached the doctrine of earlier Anabaptist thought.⁷⁵

The fanaticism of these radical Anabaptist men has been explained by reference to man's obvious tendency to rush to extremes. The Papacy's iron grip which had cramped the church for years was suddenly relaxed, and the new-found freedom went to the people's heads and they went off on opposite tangents.⁷⁶

Some Anabaptist writers have suggested that it is not correct to link such men as Mathys, John of Leyden, and Muenzer with orthodox Anabaptism. Mathys practiced infant baptism and rejected many of the central teachings of Anabaptism, advocating, as he did, the utter destruction of his

⁷⁴Henry A. DeWind, "Anabaptism," Church History, XXI (March, 1952), 20.

⁷⁵"Anabaptists," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, I, 210f.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 211.

enemies and giving sanction to horrible instances of immorality.⁷⁷ Muenzer, although he has been classified as an Anabaptist, was never re-baptized and practiced infant baptism as late as 1523.⁷⁸ Luther called all opponents, and especially men such as Muenzer, "Schwaermer, enthusiasts, dreamers, prophets, and naked runners."⁷⁹ Yet these men never really belonged to the Anabaptist movement, Friedmann wishes to point out, for they either neglected the Bible entirely or gave it a highly radical interpretation. On the other hand, the true Anabaptists, states Friedmann, were always strong Biblicists and followed a more sober and spiritual interpretation of God's Word.⁸⁰ Anabaptists and their descendants have always vigorously objected to the term "anabaptist" because of the evil connotations the name brings to mind. Already at the time of Justinian (529 A. D.) the name was used to describe one of the two heresies punishable by death -- re-baptism and anti-Trinitarianism.⁸¹

⁷⁷F. M. Powell, "From Luther and the Anabaptists to Roger Williams," The Review and Expositor, XXIII (January, 1926), 67.

⁷⁸"Anabaptism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, I, 406.

⁷⁹Friedmann, Church History, XIX (December, 1940), 342f.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 343.

⁸¹"Anabaptist," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955), I, 113.

The Persecutions of the Anabaptists

The writer has alluded to the fact that the Anabaptist movement underwent severe persecutions. Several reasons have been brought forward to answer the "why" of these violent counter-measures. The state thought the Anabaptists were "dismembering" the church, the body of Christ. The state felt the Anabaptists were undermining the authority and prestige of the magistracy. The state feared the vigorous missionary program and the dormant revolutionary ideas that might suddenly flare up at any moment. And the state was frankly annoyed with the Anabaptists because of the insolence and boldness displayed by the latter in their dealings with their political superiors.⁶²

The Reformers were very active in the persecutions of the Anabaptists because they felt the latter went too far in their statements and activities. Looking at the matter from the other side, however, the Anabaptists despaired of ever repairing or reforming the old church and sought to build a new church based on the foundations of Scriptures, literally interpreted. And so without the help or sanction of the state or the existing church bodies, these men boldly set out to reform the work of the Reformers, to continue where the Reformation had left off, to complete what had been

⁶²Kreider, op. cit., pp. 114f.

so nobly begun.⁸³ The Anabaptists felt the Reformers had drawn back from their logically derived original position. Powell states that Zwingli,

like Luther, became more concerned about his system than about the New Testament Christianity. . . . The Reformers, for fear of the consequences, drew back from their original contentions, while the Anabaptists, unwilling to bide their time or consider their difficulties, went even beyond the New Testament in their zeal to return to the primitive church.⁸⁴

The Anabaptists have been classified by Vedder as more thorough, consistent, logical, and less lukewarm than the other Reformers. So it is only

natural that such a party, a veritable Ishmael among the Reformers, should come to be disliked, feared by all, and that it should be denounced with commensurate warmth and energy.⁸⁵

As time went by, these persecutions grew in number and intensity. In a 1527 edict issued by the Cantons of Bern, Zurich, and St. Gall, it was decreed that death by drowning should be the punishment for all who were "teachers, baptizing preachers, itinerants, leaders of conventicles, or those who had once recanted and then relapsed."⁸⁶ Foreign Anabaptists were banished, and if they returned, they were

⁸³"Anabaptism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, I, 406.

⁸⁴Powell, op. cit., pp. 66f.

⁸⁵Vedder, op. cit., pp. 1f.

⁸⁶"Anabaptists," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 162.

drowned. All citizens were encouraged to inform on the Anabaptists. Persecutions similar to this occurred in southern Germany, Austria, Tyrol, Netherlands, and England.⁸⁷ Felix Manz, early Anabaptist leader, was the first martyr for the cause, being drowned on January 25, 1527.⁸⁸ Powell, possibly writing with somewhat of a bias, states that the Anabaptists were resented and persecuted "with all the hatred which religious bigotry and fervor can engage--there is no hatred so unrelenting as one that has a religious sanction. Nothing was too cruel or inhuman to inflict upon the Anabaptists."⁸⁹ The Anabaptists were

hunted and hounded, beheaded, burned at the stake, starved, tortured with all the devilish enginery that a Protestant inquisition could devise. Many of them were drowned in derision of the mode of baptism which was always maintained by some of them.⁹⁰

As is the case with almost every religious persecution, the Anabaptists' religious thought, which religious authority was trying so hard to stamp out under its heel, spread rapidly into neighboring areas. While some people kept silent and others outwardly conformed in the face of persecution, many of the Anabaptists fled to contries such as Holland and Germany where they could more freely spread their Gospel.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Williams, op. cit., p. 45.

⁸⁹Powell, op. cit., p. 68.

⁹⁰Ibid.

Other Anabaptists migrated to Bohemia, Moravia, Poland, and northeast Italy (where the movement took on a decided anti-Trinitarian bent).⁹¹

The Decline of the Anabaptist Movement

Despite its remarkable initial growth, in a matter of ten years there remained only scattered remnants of the Anabaptist movement, made up largely of small clusters of families in isolated places. The Anabaptist movement was a case of "arrested religious development unparalleled in Christian history."⁹² It sprang up in many places and got very strong, but ecclesiastical and civil authorities soon began to suppress it most vigorously. Some reasons for the rapid decline were the lack of leadership and organization, the growth in so many isolated places at one time, and the generalization made by many people in sixteenth century Europe that all Anabaptists were akin to the Zwickau Prophets and the Muensterites, and therefore deserving of eradication.⁹³

Grebel and Manz did give some unity to the movement, but at the same time many small groups cropped up which actually had nothing of real importance in common, and yet all were

⁹¹"Anabaptism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, I, 408.

⁹²Ibid., p. 410.

⁹³Ibid.

classified as Anabaptists. Probably one of the major contributing factors in the decline of the movement was its "lunatic fringe." Because of the lack of central authority, many revolutionary and dangerous men were able to infiltrate the Anabaptist ranks and lead the common people to unwholesome extremes. With the persecutions in full swing, most of the leaders were soon liquidated, and the days of Anabaptism as an active and progressive movement were numbered. Mystical-minded enthusiasts took over and completely changed the flavor of the original teachings of the Anabaptist founders. After the defeats at Frankenhausem and Muenster and after Anabaptism had been driven into the Catholic lands of southern Europe by the constant pressure of northern opposition, the movement was quickly swallowed up by the all-embracing machinery of the Roman Church.⁹⁴ Anabaptism as a movement was dead. How long its spirit will continue to thrive all over the world of Christianity, God alone knows.

⁹⁴Knox, op. cit., p. 127.

CHAPTER III

TEACHINGS OF THE ANABAPTISTS

This chapter shall deal with some of the fundamental teachings of the Anabaptist movement. Political, social, and theological issues will be briefly treated in order to give the reader a somewhat better view of the basic premises upon which the Anabaptists constructed their rejection of the doctrine and practice of infant baptism.

The Anabaptist View of the State

Absolutely basic to the whole Anabaptist framework of doctrine was its view of the world. Anabaptism differed drastically from the other Reformers on this point. Luther and his school of followers felt it was futile to spend a lot of time and incur a lot of headaches trying to change the world. As far as the Anabaptists were concerned, the Lutheran view considered the world as it surrounds us a necessary evil and felt that it is our duty in this regard to bring about a compromise between the world and our views, retreating to our inner life with its experience of the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins, when we need spiritual refueling. The Calvinists, on the other hand, stoutly maintained that the church must never compromise with the world, but must rather expend every effort to regenerate the social order, by force if necessary. Grebel

looked about him and decided that this world very definitely needed regeneration by God, but he was highly pessimistic about the success of such a revival. He, therefore, wanted to separate the true Christian from the world order and all its evil institutions. He urged his followers to shun participation in any of the activities of the state that were contrary to the spirit and teachings of Christ. The Christian must withdraw from the world and become part of a strictly Christian social order. From this safe haven, he should then venture out into the wild waters of the world and attempt to win members of the evil world order over to the Christian social order, the "gathered church," set up by the Anabaptists.¹

To the Anabaptists, the state belonged to the "realm of darkness." All political dominion must be inaugurated on a foundation of grace, and any ruler or government not in a state of grace was automatically dethroned in their eyes. The true enthusiast could feel at home only in a theocracy, and any other form of government, "because its sanctions depend on the natural order, is not merely inadequate, but evil."²

When looking for some basic principles of the Anabaptists'

¹Harold S. Bender, "Conrad Grebel, the Founder of Swiss Anabaptism," Church History, VII (June, 1938), 176.

²Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, "The Anabaptists and the Reformation," Enthusiasm--a Chapter in the History of Religions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 122f.

view of civil authorities and the role of the Christian in society, we find they believed that the claims of God are always primary over the claims of the state, that the magistracy is divinely ordained by God for the punishment of evil and the protection of good, and that the magistracy is therefore essential for all non-Christians, that the church and the Christian owe obedience to the state as long as the laws of God are not compromised, that a Christian should not hold public office, not because public office was evil per se, but because of the dubious methods so commonly associated with office-holding, that the idea of a state-church was diametrically opposed to the New Testament concept of the church, that non-resistance was required of the Christian, that to swear civil oaths was against the will of God, that it was wrong for a Christian to bring suit against his neighbor, that the Christian must refuse to conform to civic mores, and that it was mandatory that every Christian, when moved by the Spirit, should testify to the authorities concerning the great issues of faith and morality.³

The Anabaptists saw the Protestant and Roman forces endorse warfare as an instrument of the state's policies, even employing it in religious conflicts, and they felt that this, too, was definitely contrary to the Bible. While Anabaptists

³Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptists and the Civil Authorities of Strasbourg, 1525-1555," Church History, XXIV (June, 1955), 113f.

agreed to the use of the sword by the state authorities according to the institution of God, they denied the Christian the possibility and sanction of serving the state since the sincere Anabaptist could not, with clear conscience, use the sword. This Biblical pacifism was one of their primary reasons for not holding public office. They were not anarchists, objecting to the state per se. They just felt the Christian could not participate.⁴ Grebel wrote a letter of rebuke to Muenzer when the latter was arousing the peasants to revolt. He stated,

True, believing Christians are as sheep in the midst of wolves . . . they . . . must reach the fatherland of eternal rest, not by overcoming bodily enemies with the sword, but by overcoming spiritual foes. They use neither the worldly sword nor engage in war, since among them killing has ceased entirely, for we are no longer under the old covenant.⁵

As was previously stated, this withdrawal from the world was one of the very basic tenets of the Anabaptists. Their plan was to evangelize the world from their isolated fortresses of strict Christian living and to have nothing to do with society outside of these mission endeavors.

The Anabaptist View of the Church

The concept of the nature and purpose of the Church of Christ on earth was actually the heart of the Anabaptist

⁴Harold S. Bender, "The Pacifism of the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists," Church History, XXIV (June, 1955), 127.

⁵Ibid., pp. 121f.

body of teachings. Should the church be a universal organization including the whole population of a state by reason of birth and infant baptism? Or should the church be an organization composed of adult believers only, people who were ready to assume the full responsibilities and obligations of Christian discipleship? This was the choice that faced Zwingli and Grebel.⁶ Here we see the issue of infant baptism coming up as a basic consideration for the Anabaptist view of the church.

The Reformers had started the reaction against the existing church order. The Roman system was offensive to all. Grebel wanted to know if the new evangelical movement would result in a state-church as before where the state dictated the faith, life, and worship of the church, or whether the Reformation would bring into existence a new type of free, voluntary church membership based on personal faith and dedication.⁷ At first the Reformers stood up for the restoration of a vital, primitive Christianity, but, according to the Anabaptists, they soon adopted the view that the union of church and state was necessary for the success of the church. This compromise decision necessitated drastic modifications of the New Testament doctrine and example of the church, the Anabaptists felt, and when the Reformers refused to alter

⁶Harold S. Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 171.

⁷Ibid., p. 168.

their position, the Anabaptists felt compelled to secede.⁸

The church was not to be an institution for the reception of grace via a sacramental-sacerdotal system, neither was it to be the instrument of God for the proclaiming of the Word of God so that man could experience the grace of God in his inner self. The church was rather to be a brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian ideal was expressed. It was unthinkable for the Anabaptists that anyone could possibly be a true Christian without creating a new life based on divine principles.⁹

According to the Anabaptists,

The New Testament concept of the church is that of a body of disciples of Christ, united by faith to Him as Savior and Lord, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, sharing a fellowship of mutual love and brotherhood with one another, witnessing individually and corporately for Christ in the world.¹⁰

Menno Simons listed several marks he considered necessary for the presence of the true church. (1) Its doctrine is the salutary and unadulterated doctrine of God's holy and divine Word; (2) It practices the "right and Scriptural use of the Sacraments of Christ, namely, the baptism of those who, by faith, are born of God, who sincerely repent, who

⁸John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe, in Mennonite History (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), I, 21.

⁹Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 22.

¹⁰"Church," The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955), I, 594.

bury their sins in Christ's death, and arise with Him in newness of life"; (3) It advocates obedience to the Holy Scriptures, or the pious Christian life which is of God; (4) It practices sincere and unfeigned love for the brother; (5) It confesses the name, will, word, and ordinance of God confidently in the face of all the "cruelty, tyranny, tumult, fire, sword, and violence of the world"; and (6) It bears the pressing cross of Christ, which it does for the sake of Christ's testimony and Word.¹¹

Simons went on to point out that the true church of Jesus Christ here on earth is the assembly of the pious, is the church established by Christ in the New Testament, is of God, is begotten by sincere, pious preachers and Christians who have been actuated by the Spirit of Christ, is begotten by the Spirit and Word of Christ, is begotten for the purpose of hearing the Lord, of fearing, loving, serving, praising, honoring, and thanking God sincerely, is at all times disposed and minded as Christ was, and brings forth fruit.¹²

Basic for the Anabaptists was the voluntary aspect of church membership. They vigorously opposed any form of church enrollment which permitted the initiate to join without a burning desire to belong to the church. The church,

¹¹Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), pp. 739-741.

¹²Ibid., pp. 734-738.

they felt, is a voluntary fellowship of those Christians who have considered a specific experience in their lives to be their conversion and who can commit themselves to discipleship.¹³ "There is to be complete freedom of conscience, no use of force or compulsion by state or church."¹⁴

The church is to be made up entirely and only of those who have been born again. Only "those who are regenerated, renewed, and converted; who hear, believe, and keep all the commandments of God," are to belong to the true church.¹⁵

Simons described the true Christian congregation thus:

They verily are not the true congregation of Christ who merely boast of His name. But they are the true congregation of Christ who are truly converted, who are born again from above of God, who are of a regenerative mind by the operation of the Holy Ghost through the hearing of the divine Word, and have become the children of God, have entered into obedience to Him, and live unblamably in His holy commandments, and according to His holy will all their days, or from the moment of their call.¹⁶

Simons, who wrote extensively on this subject of the nature of the true Christian, stated that "people need to die and rise with Christ, to be spiritually circumcised, to receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost, to put on Christ."¹⁷ The

¹³"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955), I, 225.

¹⁴"Church," op. cit., p. 594.

¹⁵Simons, op. cit., p. 234.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 88.

saints of the Lord are those who have

washed their clothes in the blood of the Lamb; who are born of God and driven by the Spirit of Christ, who are in Christ and have the Holy Spirit in them; who hear and believe His Word.¹⁸

Fundamental to the Anabaptist position was their conception of the church as a Sonderkirche, consisting of the elect only and strictly separate from the godless, outside world.¹⁹ They were quick to point out that Luther himself was an advocate of a "gathered church" in his early years. Schwenckfeld reported that Luther was thinking of entering in a book the names of those who personally confessed themselves to be earnest in their Christian profession. Luther felt discipline could be exercised among this group in a Biblical fashion, and he thought of preaching to this select assembly in the chapel of the former Augustinian monastery while a chaplain conducted services for those who had not made a confession of personal faith and dedication. Luther supposedly regretted that there was no Christian church which was really separated from the secular world and he is reported to have said,

it would be fully in accordance with Gospel principles, if "they who had obtained evangelical enlightenment, who were in earnest in their Christian profession, and who confessed the Gospel with the lives and tongues," would have their names entered in a book and have meetings

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 402.

¹⁹ R. N. Carew Hunt, "Thomas Muenzer," The Church Quarterly Review, CXXVI (July-September, 1938), 214.

separately from the multitude.²⁰

To sum up, the Anabaptists felt the church should consist only of those persons who sincerely wanted to become members of their own free will, who had been reborn through the power of the Holy Spirit, and who had experienced a renewal of their lives in accordance with the example of Christ. This would necessarily exclude all infants and children who could not possibly make such decisions on their own, and it would require the abolition of all church bodies whose membership was synonymous with the population of the state.

The Anabaptist View of Holy Scripture

With reference to their view of the Holy Scriptures, the Anabaptists could well be classified as the fundamental literalists of the sixteenth century. It is very important that we understand their view of the authority of the Bible and to what extent the Bible was to serve as a basis and norm for all their doctrine and practice.

The principle of the sole authority of the Bible was not an exclusive Anabaptist possession, for this issue was at the very foundation of the Reformers' platform. But, while the Reformers emphatically proclaimed the principle, Anabaptists protested that the former were not consistent in applying the principle to the problems of setting up a new type of

²⁰Horsch, op. cit., p. 27.

church life,

being led at times by theological and practical considerations to depart from the strict teaching of Scripture. The Anabaptists, being Biblicists and usually unsophisticated readers of the Bible, not trained theologically, and having made a more complete break with tradition than the Reformers, were more radical and consistent in their application of the principle of sole Scriptural authority.²¹

As was stated above, this principle of personal knowledge and interpretation of the Scriptures on the part of each and every Christian was actually the issue that initiated the Anabaptist movement in the area of Zurich early in the sixteenth century. And this principle remained basic in the thought of the Anabaptists. Pilgram Marpeck, leader of the movement in Strasbourg, said,

We should sincerely admonish every Christian to be on the alert and personally study the Scriptures, and have a care lest he permit himself to be easily moved and led away from the Scriptures and apostolic doctrine by strange teaching and understanding; but let everyone, in accordance with the Scriptures and apostolic teaching, strive with great diligence to do God's will, seeing that the Word of truth could not fail us nor mislead us.²²

In view of the possibility that some might wonder how the Anabaptists arrived at their rather radical views, Dr. Rufus Jones is quoted in his Scriptural Reformers as saying,

Luther found himself forced to produce a fixed touchstone of faith and a solid authority to take the place left by the old church, and he swung naturally to the dogma of the absolute authority of Holy Scriptures; and

²¹Bender, Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 14.

²²Horsch, op. cit., p. 351.

he laid, without wishing to do so, the foundation for the view that the infallible Scripture is God's final communication to helpless man, and is the ultimate and only basis of authority in religion.²³

However, the Anabaptists differed from the Reformers in that they considered the Bible infallible when interpreted by an inspired person, whereas the Reformers thought of the Scriptures as having inherent infallibility, needing only clarification. These Anabaptists believed furthermore that revelation was progressive and definitely not static or once and for all. Belfort Box points out in his Rise and Fall of the Anabaptists that the Anabaptists were considered to be consistent with the spirit of Biblical Christianity when they were unwilling to admit to any break in the conditions of revelation between Biblical times and the present time. They felt, Box states, that it was just as possible for prophets to exist in the sixteenth as in the first century. Box adds that this principle led to "irregularities of conduct."²⁴ The Anabaptists were trying to break away from the earlier traditions of the church that considered laymen incapable of intelligent reading and interpretation of the Bible.

Each Christian could and was encouraged to read and interpret the message of Holy Writ for himself. And this interpretation was then final and to be considered the solitary

²³Knox, op. cit., p. 134.

²⁴Ibid., p. 135.

source of all Christian doctrine and practice. In this regard, the Anabaptists were most emphatic. Simons said,

My dear brethren, I for myself confess that I would rather die than to believe and teach to my brethren a single word concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost at variance with the express testimony of God's word, as it is so clearly given through the mouth of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles.

Only show us God's word and our matter is settled. For we seek nothing else (God who is omniscient knows) than in our weakness to walk in obedience according to the divine ordinances, word, will, for which we poor persecuted people are shamefully reviled, banished, robbed, and slain in many countries.²⁵

Anything contrary to what Scriptures had to say, whether it be in the general area of doctrines, beliefs, sacraments, worship, or life, had to be measured by this infallible standard and "demolished by this just and divine scepter, and destroyed without any respect of persons."²⁶

Anabaptist leaders felt that the Roman Catholic Church very definitely, and also Protestantism at times, based its doctrines and practices on foundations other than the Word of God, and they felt very strongly about the inadvisability of such policies. Simons defended the authority of the Bible against the pronouncements of "emperors, kings, princes, doctors, teachers, counsels of the fathers, and customs of long standing."²⁷ The Christian individual must never be

²⁵Horsch, op. cit., pp. 353f.

²⁶Simons, op. cit., pp. 159f.

²⁷Ibid., p. 129.

bound by what men command, but must be "governed by the plainly expressed commands of Christ and the pure doctrines and practices of His holy apostles."²⁸ In his typically vivid style, Menno Simons attacks all groups who base their Christianity on the words of men:

Just as the wife cannot bear legitimate children to her husband without his procreative seed, so the church cannot bring forth children to its husband, Christ, except from His seed, that is, His holy Word. If a woman conceives by any other means she is an adulteress and her child a bastard. So also if the Church of Christ brings forth children from the doctrine of man and not from God's Word, she is not faithful unto Christ and her children are not His seed.²⁹

Perhaps it should also be mentioned that the true Anabaptists considered the New Testament to be far superior to the Old Testament. The Old Testament was to the New Testament as "promise is to fulfillment, shadow is to reality, a foundation is to the building itself."³⁰ It was the New Covenant of the New Testament after which they modeled their sixteenth century church. In their opinion, the Old Testament was over-worked by the state-church theologians in support of their doctrine of infant baptism, the union of church and state, the persecution of dissenters, and the waging of "just" wars.³¹

²⁸Ibid., p. 129.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 164f.

³⁰Horsch, op. cit., p. 354.

³¹Ibid.

In summation, then, the Anabaptists said that if anyone wanted to be a true, New Testament Christian, he must follow without reservation the Bible itself and let nothing more and nothing less guide his thinking.³²

The Anabaptist View of Baptism

Because this paper has set out to discuss the Anabaptists and their rejection of infant baptism, it would prove helpful to understand their view of baptism. Since the next chapter will treat the various reasons for their rejections, including their opposition to the Reformers' view of baptism and infant baptism, this section shall be limited to the Anabaptists' conception of baptism and an answer to the question that might fairly be asked the Anabaptists, "If you reject all this about baptism, what do you believe is the nature and primary purpose of baptism?"

It should be pointed out, first of all, that infant baptism was not at the center of the controversy between the Reformers and the Anabaptists. Zwingli is supposed to have said that he and Grebel disagreed only on minor unimportant points. The main issues were definitely the nature of the true church and the proper relationship of the Christian to the world and social order in which he lived.³³ At times it

³²Simons, op. cit., pp. 290f.

³³Bender, Church History, VII (June, 1938), 174f.

appeared as though the controversy was centering around infant baptism, and Zwingli felt this was intentional. However, the Anabaptists claimed they did not plan it so, and they had no program of re-baptism until a later date.³⁴

First of all, baptism was for the Anabaptists a mark of separation and commitment to a holy life. They felt that voluntary church membership with believer's baptism as a sign or symbol of what the person has felt in his heart is the only "logical, admirable procedure of initiation."³⁵

Baptism also served as a medium of admission into the church on earth. This was always preceded by regeneration, however. "Born again in faith, man becomes a member of the church by believer's baptism."³⁶ The church thus controlled entry into its ranks by requiring of all aspirants to church membership evidence of repentance, the new birth, and a holy life before they were formally enrolled via baptism,³⁷ If this was the guard standing watch at the door of the church, the ban controlled the exit from the Christian congregation,

³⁴Harold S. Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists (Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), p. 132.

³⁵"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 225.

³⁶George Huntston Williams, editor, Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers, in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), XXV, 113.

³⁷"Church," op. cit., p. 595.

using church discipline to maintain purity of doctrine and life.³⁸

By means of baptism, a covenant of a good conscience toward God and a pledge to a complete commitment to obey Christ was effected in the Christian's heart. So baptism was not particularly a symbol of some experience of the past. Rather it was to be a looking forward to a life in the coming years wholly dedicated to the service of the Lord. Baptism was always a means and never an end for the Anabaptists.³⁹ Melchior Hofmann also spoke of baptism in connection with the idea of a covenant or betrothal,

the true apostolic emissaries of the Lord Jesus Christ will gather the elect flock and call it through the Gospel and lead the Bride of the Lord into the spiritual wilderness, betroth, and covenant her through baptism to the Lord. Thus also St. Paul (II Corinthians 11:2) had betrothed the church of Corinth to the Lord as a virgin to her husband and bound it under the covenant.⁴⁰

The Anabaptists denied vehemently that baptism as an outward act could convey the grace of God to the person being baptized. This shall be treated more fully in the next chapter. Baptism was not without benefit in the Anabaptist framework, however. Dietrich Philips said,

These two tokens (baptism and the Supper) are left us by the Lord that they might admonish us to a godly walk (Colossians 2:6; Romans 16:18), to a mortification of

³⁸Williams, op. cit., p. 261.

³⁹Bender, Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 15.

⁴⁰Williams, op. cit., p. 188.

the flesh, to a burial of sin, to a resurrection into the new life, to thanksgiving for the great benefits which have been given us by God, to a remembrance of the bitter sufferings and death of Christ, and to a renewing and confirming of brotherly love, unity and fellowship again, that they should distinguish the congregation of God from all other sects, who do not make right Scriptural use of the sacramental symbols of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴¹

Huebmaier said of water baptism,

Water baptism . . . is an external and public testimony of the inward baptism of the Spirit, set forth by receiving water. By this not only are sins confessed, but also faith in their pardon, by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, is declared before all men.⁴²

To avoid any possibility of superstition's entrance into the new church's practice, the Anabaptists were quick to insert that those benefits derived from baptism are never conferred to us because of the water or the sign alone, but always and only by the power of the divine Word received through faith. They pointed to the examples of Moses at the Red Sea and the brazen serpent to show that symbols such as baptism can in themselves never confer grace just as it was not the words of Moses or the presence of the serpent but rather the Word of God that effected the miracle for the Children of Israel.⁴³

There seems to be a lack of agreement among students of

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 243f.

⁴²Henry C. Vedder, Balthasar Huebmaier--The Leader of the Anabaptists (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), pp. 201f.

⁴³Simons, op. cit., pp. 123f.

the movement as to the mode of baptism utilized by the Anabaptists. Some say that the Anabaptists held that baptism was valid only when immersion was practiced.⁴⁴ Vedder notes that Grebel met a man named Wolfgang Uoliman on the way to Schaffhausen and so thoroughly instructed the latter that "he would not simply be poured upon with water from a dish, but, entirely naked, was pressed down and covered in the Rhein."⁴⁵ Vedder interprets this as an indication that immersion was the usual practice of the well-instructed Anabaptist.⁴⁶ While the Mennonites are reported to have been strong on immersion as the only permissible mode of baptism, the Anabaptists were "too busy" with their concern about infant baptism to argue about the mode. Some Anabaptists practiced affusion, and there supposedly never was a time when immersion was not practiced somewhere in Europe.⁴⁷ John Christian Wenger, editor of the complete works of Menno Simons, notes that all the evangelical Anabaptists practiced affusion.⁴⁸ Apparently, the first believer's baptism performed by Conrad Grebel and

⁴⁴"Anabaptism," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, edited by John M'Clintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1895), I, 210.

⁴⁵Vedder, op. cit., p. 143.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷F. M. Powell, "From Luther and the Anabaptists to Roger Williams," The Review and Expositor, XXIII (January, 1926), 69.

⁴⁸Simons, op. cit., pp. 139n, 350n.

George Blaurock was performed by means of affusion since it took place in the home of Felix Manz. Huebmaier must have poured in his baptism of three hundred with the water from a milk pail.⁴⁹ It must be assumed then, that the mode of baptism was not the issue for the Anabaptists, and that some of them immersed and others poured.

Anabaptism as an Extension of the Reformation

In all the teachings of the Anabaptists discussed in this chapter, it is seen that in many ways this movement was an extension of the Reformation of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, although not always necessarily so as far as quality goes. Ever since 1848 men such as Max Goebel, C. A. Cornelius, Johann Loserth, Karl Rembert, John Horsch, Ernest Correll, and Fritz Blanke have proposed the idea that the Anabaptists were the "culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli."⁵⁰ Luther did not intend to make a complete break with the Roman Church, hoping rather to reform certain abuses. The Anabaptists felt that

if Luther had been willing to go to the logical conclusions of his widely and loudly heralded principles of "justification by Faith" and "the Bible the Word of God," likely we would never have heard of Anabaptists as such. They, already in spiritual existence for centuries, by

⁴⁹Vedder, op. cit., p. 143.

⁵⁰Bender, Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 9.

various names and organizations, would have gone with him in a complete return to the New Testament ideal.⁵¹

Bender feels that the Anabaptists retained the original vision possessed by Luther and the other Reformers, enlarged it, gave it body and form, and set out to form a church composed entirely of believers. He feels they were not at all concerned about numbers or statistics. They refused to compromise and advocated a radical break with the contemporary church so that the New Testament church could be restored. They were not entered in any popularity contests, and they certainly won none by popular acclamation.⁵² They merely took off from where the Reformers stopped and made active life principles of the fundamental dogmas of Protestantism--the importance of the subjective element, initiative and individuality in judgment, and personal faith.⁵³

⁵¹Powell, op. cit., pp. 65f.

⁵²Bender, Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 13.

⁵³"Anabaptists," Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1951), I, 857.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANABAPTIST REJECTION OF INFANT BAPTISM

Having treated Anabaptism as an historical movement and having touched on the principle teachings of the Anabaptists, both socio-political and theological, we shall now discuss the Anabaptists with particular reference to their rejection of the doctrine and practice of infant baptism. It has been pointed out and should be kept clearly in mind that infant baptism was not the fundamental point at issue between the Anabaptists on the one hand and the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Churches on the other. The concept of the church and the relationship of the Christian to his environment were primary. However, the rejection of infant baptism was a very basic by-product of the Anabaptist concept of the church, and even today, when "Anabaptist" is mentioned, infant baptism is one of the first things of which people think. As was stated in the introduction, the present chapter shall endeavor to consider several of the reasons that led the Anabaptists to reject sincerely and categorically this historic doctrine and church practice.

Early Rejections of Infant Baptism

Although apologists have claimed Apostolic usage for the practice of infant baptism, Anabaptists and especially their descendants in later years have never been convinced that

infant baptism was practiced from the very beginnings of the Christian Church. It is therefore necessary that we look briefly at some of the early rejections and note that the Anabaptists were by no means the first group to oppose the doctrine.

A contributor to the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia flatly denies that infant baptism was practiced in a general way in the early church. Adult baptism was the rule and

infant baptism the exception in the apostolic age, and not until the fifth century, when the church was widely established in the Roman Empire, was infant baptism general.

Compulsory infant baptism was unknown in the Ante-Nicene Age; it is a profanation of the Sacrament, and one of the evils of the union of church and state, against which Baptists have a right to protest.¹

Huebmaier concluded that infant baptism was not a general practice in the early centuries of the Christian era because the walls of the catacombs in Rome were bare of any depiction of a ceremony involving infant baptism. These walls, which chronicled so graphically the early days of Christianity, contained many pictorial sketches of baptisms, but none at all were found dealing with infant baptism.²

Menno Simons argued against the early general practice of infant baptism because he noted that the entire rubric

¹"Baptism," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), I, 451.

²"Infant Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), III, 37.

relative to the time and mode of baptism changed so often throughout the early centuries. He pointed out that at the beginning people were baptized in common "unexorcised" water upon their first profession of faith. Later, candidates were examined seven times before they were permitted to be baptized. Soon baptisms were being held, not whenever children were born, but rather on two prescribed days during the year-- Easter and Whitsunday. In the year 407, Innocent confirmed infant baptism by a decree. Simons contended that if infant baptism had actually been practiced in the very early church, such a decree would have been unnecessary. If infant baptism was in accordance with the direct command of Christ Himself, why then, he asked, did all these changes occur?³

Others, by way of rather complicated argumentation, have decided that infant baptism was not in the tradition of the early church. They have pointed out that according to the records, many of the church fathers did not baptize their infants. Ambrose was thirty-four, Jerome about twenty, Augustine, thirty-three, and Gregory of Nazianzus was thirty at the date of their respective baptisms. Basil, bishop of Caesarea, the patriarch Nectarius, Ephraeus Syrus, and Chrysostom were all baptized later in life. Now if infant baptism had been established as the custom of the church, there would, according to these apologists, have been vigorous protests

³Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 128.

when such high officials in the church postponed baptism until such a late date. For a doctrine (like infant baptism, for instance) to arise in direct contradiction to the tradition and in many places at once, without evoking sharp criticism on the part of leading theologians and church councils, would be a psychological impossibility. There were no such protests. Therefore, reasoned the Anabaptists, infant baptism cannot be considered a tradition of the early church.⁴

Some of the church fathers were active opponents of infant baptism and these men were freely quoted by the Anabaptists. Tertullian, who lived from 160-240 A. D., opposed infant baptism in his De Baptismo, arguing that it was too important a doctrine to be entrusted to little children to whom not even earthly goods were given, and because sponsors were inviting to themselves extreme responsibilities. He, together with the Montanists, believed that baptism forgave all past sins and that sins committed after baptism were almost unforgivable. He therefore advised that the baptism of infants, and indeed all people, should be postponed as long as possible until their period of "youthful appetite and passion had passed."⁵

⁴"Infant Baptism," op. cit., p 37.

⁵"Baptism," Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, edited by John M'Clintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1895), I, 648.

It should be noted that Tertullian was fighting against a custom that was being practiced at his time, which in a sense argues against the Anabaptist contention that infant baptism was not a custom of the early church.

Some of the Anabaptists did their best to disprove the testimony of the Fathers. Huebmaier said the witness of Pelagius and Cyprian proved nothing because the sayings of the church Fathers were to be considered false when they disagreed with the Scriptures. Huebmaier also pointed out that Origen's testimony for infant baptism came from a free Latin translation by Rufinus who wanted to fit Origen's teachings to the later orthodox customs. "Origen did not declare himself in favor of infant baptism; furthermore, he was frequently in error, too."⁶ So we see that there had been objections to the doctrine and practice of infant baptism long before the days of the Anabaptists. It is not within the scope of this paper to decide once and for all time whether or not infant baptism was practiced in the early church. That the Anabaptists were definitely not the first to reject this practice is the point of these paragraphs.

Moving to the Middle Ages, we find other groups which blazed a trail for the Anabaptists as far as a rejection of infant baptism was concerned. The Petro-Brussians, followers

⁶"Infant Baptism," op. cit., p. 37.

of Pierre de Bruys, rejected infant baptism and insisted on immersion of all believers. They contended that the church must be made up of regenerated people only, and rejected all thought of baptismal regeneration.⁷ The efficacy of infant baptism was denied also by the Albigenses, the Lollards, and the Beghards. Their concept of a spiritual church included the idea that the church

consists simply and solely of those who are actually predestined to eternal life, (and) the sacrament which attests admission to the church cannot reasonably be conferred on any but those who are conscious, or at least show signs of election.

The Novations re-baptized all Roman Catholics who came their way. However, they did this because these people came from what the Novations considered a corrupt church, and not because they had been baptized as infants.⁹

Friedmann submits that anti-pedobaptism is almost as old as the Christian Church itself, and points to the Donatists for support of his thesis. He interprets history to mean that adult baptism was widespread among the radicals of the sixteenth century as a sign of differentiation, sometimes for Biblical reasons, other times for reasons having to do

⁷Uuras Saarnivaara, Scriptural Baptism (New York: Vantage Press, 1953), p. 89.

⁸Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, "The Anabaptists and the Reformation," Enthusiasm-a Chapter in the History of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 122.

⁹Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 88.

with their formal principles.¹⁰ Thus we see that the Anabaptists fell heir to a long line of men and groups which gave thought to infant baptism and then rejected it for some reason or another. The Anabaptists were merely a culmination at the appropriate moment of the thoughts travelling through the years from the days of the early church to that January day in 1525. And yet the Reformation contained in its body of thought some ideas which would without a doubt have made the Anabaptists' rejection of the doctrine inevitable even if there had been no predecessors to guide their thoughts and actions. When the Roman Catholic idea of the ex opere operato in the sacraments was rejected, it was only a matter of time until thinking evangelicals found the practice of infant baptism called into question. Bender insists that whenever infant baptism was retained after the Reformation, some kind of compromise with the truth was involved.¹¹

Infant Baptism in the Sixteenth Century

The Anabaptists therefore considered both the Church of Rome and of the Reformation to be in error because both held the doctrine of infant baptism. This status quo in the contemporary churches was most offensive to the Anabaptists.

¹⁰Robert Friedmann, "Conception of the Anabaptists," Church History, XIX (December, 1940), 341f.

¹¹Harold S. Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists (Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), p. 125.

For one thing, baptism had come to assume a near magical quality in the minds of the common people. Harnack wrote,

Whether infants or adults were baptized, baptism in either case was held to be a mystery which involved decisive consequences of a natural and supernatural kind. It was the general conviction that baptism effectually cancelled all past sins of the baptized person, apart altogether from the degree of moral sensitiveness on his own part; he rose from his immersion a perfectly free and perfectly holy man.¹²

The Roman Catholics held that baptism was essential to salvation, efficacious for washing away original sin and all sins committed up to the time of a person's baptism, and that it conveyed grace to the person automatically (ex opere operato). They maintained that baptism should be administered to infants as soon as possible since they were, in their opinion, lost without baptism.¹³ With this stand on baptism being taken by the Roman Catholics, the Protestants had their opportunity to eliminate infant baptism altogether, thought the Anabaptists. However, they insisted, the Reformers turned their backs on the true baptism of Christ and followed the leadership of the Papists; then to add insult to injury, the Reformers defended with the sword this false teaching which they had received, not from the Bible, but from the last place the Anabaptists felt they should have been deriving their principles of faith and life, the "father and

¹²H. P. Mackintosh, "Thoughts on Infant Baptism," Expositor, Series 8, XIII (March, 1917), 196.

¹³"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955), I, 224.

head of Anti-Christ," the Pope.¹⁴ By denying the Roman Catholic's ex opere operato, the Reformers brightened the picture tremendously. However, they then went on to say that infants could believe, which was altogether outrageous to the Anabaptists. Luther at first held that the infants possessed a sleeping or dormant faith, later that the faith of the parents and godparents bringing the infant to baptism could have some effect on the infant, and finally that infants could believe, such faith being a miraculous, though temporally unspecified, gift from the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Besides being offended by these "superstitious" views of infant baptism held by both the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, the Anabaptists took issue with the political relationships involved with the practice of infant baptism. The situation after the Reformers appeared on the scene was little improved over pre-Reformation days, as far as they were concerned. They were shocked when Luther considered it inconceivable that a church could exist without being fostered by a state. They said that Luther "knew that infant baptism was unscriptural but dared not go beyond the willingness of the state to back him," and therefore continued

¹⁴George Huntston Williams, editor, Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers, in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), XXV, 41f.

¹⁵"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 224.

to baptize infants.¹⁶ This then was the situation that confronted the Anabaptists with reference to the doctrine and practice of infant baptism.

"Because Infant Baptism is not Commanded
in the New Testament"

We shall now discuss several of the more prominent reasons, either stated or implicit, in the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism. First of all, the Anabaptists rejected the doctrine because they felt it was neither commanded in the Bible nor practiced in the early Christian Church by the Apostles of our Lord. We must remember that the Anabaptists stated that they would do nothing forbidden in the Bible, would do all things commanded in the Word of God, thus setting up the Scriptures as the absolute norm of their thought and action. Therefore, to practice infant baptism, or any other ceremony, there must first be some clear word of the Bible commanding Christians to observe such a ceremony. For the Anabaptists, such clear word of Scripture was entirely lacking in the case of infant baptism.

The Anabaptists waxed dogmatic in denying New Testament usage for infant baptism. That there "is no trace of infant baptism to be found in the New Testament may be considered

¹⁶F. M. Powell, "From Luther and the Anabaptists to Roger Williams," The Review and Expositor, XXIII (January, 1926), 66.

a fact in scientific exegesis." De Feine wrote, "The practice of infant baptism in the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic period is not demonstrable." Drews stated,

There is complete absence of evidence that children were baptized in apostolic times. Whenever the attempt has been made to offer Scriptural proof for infant baptism, it has been a waste of effort.¹⁷

Some theologians have maintained that the burden of the proof rests on the side of the Anabaptists. For the former have studied the Jewish customs and have decided that there are many similarities between the Old Testament ceremony of circumcision and the practice of infant baptism in the New Testament. They say that since the Jews were accustomed to admitting infants into their Mosaic covenant, they would have had no scruples about admitting infants into the New Testament covenant by means of the counterpart of circumcision, infant baptism. Since the Old Testament did admit infants, they would never have thought of refusing to admit infants into the New Covenant unless expressly forbidden to do so by the Lord.¹⁸ Edward Koehler has noted in the Concordia Theological Monthly, that if Christ had wanted to

limit his Baptism to adult persons only, excluding infants, then we should expect that in the face of the prevailing Jewish custom of baptizing also infants, he should have forewarned his disciples, telling them very plainly that they should disciple or proselyte for Him

¹⁷"Infant Baptism," op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁸Richard Whately, "On Infant Baptism," Essays on Some of the Difficulties in the Writings of the Apostle Paul (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1865), p. 325.

only adult persons. Wherever a custom is continued, nothing need be said; but if a radical change is made, then those who have grown up under the old custom must be told.¹⁹

The elements of rhetoric inform us that

the burden of proof lies with him who proposes an alteration, simply on the ground that since a change is not good in itself, he who demands a change should show cause for it.²⁰

To answer such statements, the Anabaptists would deny first of all the direct relationship between circumcision in the Old Testament and infant baptism in the New Testament. Menno Simons contended that circumcision was not the means of entering God's covenant relationship in the Old Testament. It was only a sign. We become children of God, he felt, only by means of election of grace through Jesus Christ, and never by outward signs. If the covenant had depended on some sign like circumcision, what was the state and fate of female infants who were not circumcised? What about the male infants who died before they were circumcised? Were all these damned because they had not been outwardly introduced into the Kingdom? The Anabaptists did not think so.²¹ So they spoke of an inner circumcision, comparable to their inner baptism. Not dependent on any outward signs or ceremonies, it was entirely a matter of the grace of God. Simons

¹⁹Edward Wilhelm August Koehler, "Infant Baptism," Concordia Theological Monthly, X (July, 1939), 483.

²⁰Whately, op. cit., p. 325.

²¹Ibid., p. 133.

said that our "native Adam's nature" must be cut off with a spiritual knife and we must be circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.²² In this way the Anabaptists overcame the difficulties of this particular problem, at least to their own satisfaction.

Other right-wing Reformers and their schools have suggested that the New Testament does command infant baptism in that infants must have been included in the several household baptisms recorded in the New Testament. The Anabaptists would not grant validity to such an argument. Zwingli had attempted to prove New Testament usage for infant baptism by a synecdoche, or proof, in this case, for the part from the whole. He stated that whenever a group activity was described in the New Testament, all the aspects of that activity applied equally to all the segments and all the individuals of the whole. He pointed to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by "our fathers" and to the household of Stephanas in I Corinthians 1:16. The Anabaptists, however, refused to recognize any tampering with the literalness of the Word.²³ Menno Simons argued against deriving infant baptism from the instances of household baptism on the basis of the following points: (1) He pointed out that the proponents of such a view have to admit that it is purely

²²Ibid., p. 133.

²³Guy Franklin Hershberger, editor, The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957), p. 204.

conjecture and not positive and final proof; (2) With a doctrine as important and vital to the life of the church as baptism, would it be wise to build one's stand on such uncertain ground? (3) Of the four [sic] families mentioned, three were made up entirely of believers. Since Lydia's household is called by her name, it is probable that she was either widowed or unmarried and therefore, the existence of children in her household is unlikely; (4) The terms "house" and "household" do not include children, for Paul speaks of vain talkers who subvert whole houses (Titus 1:11). Simons thought children obviously could not be subverted by false doctrines; (5) The appeal to Origen and Augustine is false because they have not derived their support from clear evidence in the Bible.²⁴ Evans concludes:

In every New Testament case where specific information is given about the baptized company, they are said to be believers, and the clear cases should govern our interpretation of those that are obscure.²⁵

Remembering that the watchword of the Reformation was "sola Scriptura," we are not surprised that the Anabaptists closely scrutinized all the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church and neither are we surprised that they stopped to dwell on the subject of infant baptism. These seekers found that the New Testament could offer them no definite

²⁴Simons, op. cit., p. 136.

²⁵p. W. Evans, "Can Infant Baptism be Justified?" The Evangelical Quarterly, XV (1943), 294.

word on any ceremony of infant baptism. They found that the New Testament does not even mention infant baptism or cite an instance of such baptism, and indeed that infant baptism could not be made to agree with the teachings of the Apostles.²⁶ It was this problem that introduced Menno Simons into the ranks of the Anabaptists. A Roman clergyman, he was somewhat shocked when he heard that a man had been executed because he had been re-baptized. So he checked his Bible but could not find any support for the doctrine. When he consulted his pastoral advisor, Pingjam, the latter admitted that infant baptism has no Scriptural basis but that reason showed it to be necessary and justifiable. Next Simons searched the Fathers, and when he found there the statement that infants needed baptism because of original sin, he returned to the Bible to check his findings. He decided that infant baptism constituted a clear-cut conflict with the New Testament teaching that Jesus' blood and not the water of baptism cleanses us from our sins.²⁷

The Anabaptists actively challenged all comers to prove to them that infant baptism was Scriptural. Grebel said,

I should like to listen to anyone who, out of the Scriptures, can prove to me clearly and in the truth that John, Christ, or the Apostles baptized children or taught that they should be baptized.²⁸

²⁶"Infant Baptism," op. cit., p. 34.

²⁷Simons, op. cit., pp. 6-8.

²⁸"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 225.

In the "Open Appeal of Balthasar of Friedburg to all Christian Believers," Huebmaier said,

Whosoever wills, let him show that we ought to baptize young children, and let him do this in German, with plain, clear, simple Scriptures, relating to Baptism without addition.²⁹

However, no one was able to disprove their view to the satisfaction of the Anabaptists. Hofmann concluded,

Accordingly, all human notions are sternly forbidden by the Lord, and pedobaptism is absolutely not from God, but rather is practiced, out of wilfulness, by anti-Christians and the satanic crowd, in opposition to God and all His commandments, will, and desire.³⁰

Hofmann also stoutly maintained,

Nowhere is there even a letter in the Old or the New Testaments in reference to children. And there is absolutely no order enacted by the apostles of Jesus Christ nor have they taught or written a single syllable about it. And also, it has not been discovered that they ever baptized any child, nor will any such instance be found in all eternity!³¹

In conclusion, then, the Anabaptists rejected infant baptism on the grounds that it is nowhere clearly commanded in the New Testament nor is there any instance in Scripture of its occurrence. They rejected the arguments based on the "whole household idea," and, in their opinion, the relation between circumcision and infant baptism did not follow. The Mennonite Encyclopedia summarizes the matter in this way,

²⁹Henry C. Vedder, Balthasar Huebmaier-the Leader of the Anabaptists (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 109.

³⁰Williams, op. cit., p. 193.

³¹Ibid., p. 192.

Modern scholars have in general agreed that infant baptism cannot be positively proved from the New Testament either theologically or historically, thus granting the Anabaptists' claim, and many concede that the logic of the requirements of personal repentance, faith, and obedience as called for by Christ and the apostles, requires baptism to be only upon confession of faith.³²

"Because the New Testament
Commands Believer's Baptism"

Secondly, the Anabaptists rejected the doctrine and practice of infant baptism because they were convinced that the New Testament commanded and gave examples of the baptism of believers rather than of infants. They believed that there was only one type of baptism described in the Bible accounts, that of adult believers, and that this represented death to sin, resurrection to a new life, the answer of a good conscience toward God, and the washing of regeneration. They categorically denied that the New Testament speaks of another baptism besides believer's baptism which was to be applied to infants, signifying nothing more than that they had been washed.³³ Menno Simons stated that believer's baptism was definitely commanded in the New Testament by the Lord Himself (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19) and that the Apostles taught and administered baptism upon the confession of faith

³²"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 224f.

³³Simons, op. cit., p. 249.

(Acts 2:38; 8:37; 10:47; 16:15; 18:8; 19:5).³⁴

Huebmaier made a little joke of the whole matter to drive home his point that the New Testament deals only with believer's baptism. He said if a person believed in infant baptism, he should baptize also his jackass. If the person replied that he meant only human beings to be the objects of his baptism, Huebmaier would suggest baptizing the Turks or Jews. If the person protested that he meant only people who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior, Huebmaier demanded to know why they then wanted to baptize infants.³⁵ He then went on to list several New Testament records of baptism which all included the necessity of the recipient's faith. The Samaritans believed Philip and were baptized. Simon and the chamberlain of Queen Candace believed and were baptized afterwards. Paul was baptized after he was "converted." The households of Cornelius, Lydia, and the jailer at Philippi were baptized after they believed.³⁶ On the Scripturalness of believer's baptism, Martin Butzer of Strasbourg would admit that believer's baptism rather than infant baptism would be far more in accord with the practice of the early church and also with those directives set down by our Lord and recorded in the

³⁴Ibid., p. 513.

³⁵Vedder, op. cit., p. 116.

³⁶Ibid., p. 203.

Bible.³⁷

The Anabaptists eagerly quoted Luther as saying that baptism should be administered to no one except those who personally believe and no one should be baptized except on his own faith. They readily agreed with Luther here, but parted company when Luther went on to say that he believed infants could believe and should therefore be included in baptismal ceremonies.³⁸

It was the opinion of the Anabaptists that baptism should be administered only to those who first of all had been instructed in the doctrines of Christianity. Baptism should be administered to all who have been instructed and have given evidence of repentance and a change of life. .

..³⁹ Because baptism always assumes the necessity of confessing one's faith and the taking on of the obligation to live one's life in accordance with the commands of the Lord, the Anabaptists believed baptism should be received only by persons who had been instructed and had acquired faith as a result of this instruction.⁴⁰

Defenders of infant baptism would contend that baptism should come before instruction. They would state that faith

³⁷John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe, in Mennonite History (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), I, 322.

³⁸Ibid., p. 321.

³⁹Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁰"Infant Baptism," op. cit., p. 35.

together with repentance and a new life,' accompanies baptism. For the Anabaptists, this order was all wrong. According to Huebmaier, the true Scriptural order of baptism is preaching, hearing, faith, baptism, and works.⁴¹

Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers that baptism was a washing of regeneration but disagreed with some of the implications of such a position. Regeneration was, for the Anabaptists, an inner change which converted a man by the power of God from evil to good. Simons wrote,

For we are not regenerated because we are baptized, as may be perceived in the infants who have been baptized; but we are baptized because we are regenerated by faith in God's Word. For regeneration is not the result of baptism, but baptism the result of regeneration.⁴²

Here we see a basic difference in the way the Lutherans and Anabaptists viewed the nature and benefits of baptism. Simons went on to say,

To be regenerated, to put on Christ, and to receive the Holy Ghost is one and the same thing and, according to their powers, not different But that does not at all concern infants, for regeneration as well as faith takes place through the Word of God and is a change of heart, or of the inward man, as was said above. To put on Christ is to be transplanted into Christ and be like-minded with Him. To receive the Holy Ghost is to be a partaker of His gifts and power, to be taught, assured, and influenced by Him, as the Scriptures teach. These cannot concern infants, for they have no ears to hear the Word of the Lord, and no understanding to comprehend it. For through the Word and the hearing all must follow.⁴³

⁴¹Horsch, op. cit., p. 166.

⁴²Simons, op. cit., pp. 264f.

⁴³Ibid., p. 134.

Since baptism should follow rather than precede regeneration, the First Article of the Schleitheim Confession of 1527 stated that

Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who truly believe that their sins are taken away by Christ, and wish to be buried with Him, and to all those who with this significance request it of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the pope.⁴⁴

They also believed that baptism must be followed by a new life, which they felt was obviously impossible for infants to achieve. "It will not avail us anything to bury our sins in baptism if we do not arise with Christ Jesus from the power of sin unto a new life."⁴⁵ The new life of the new man was one of the inevitable signs that a man had been regenerated. If he did not exhibit new life under Christ, he was not regenerated. How could a little infant show such signs? How could a little infant be said to have been regenerated? This the Anabaptists could not understand and therefore rejected.

The Anabaptists had considerable to say about the possibility of infants believing. In this connection, they had to battle Luther who proposed that infant baptism should not be abandoned on the grounds that infants could not believe, for he was not ready to rule out their ability somehow to

⁴⁴"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 225.

⁴⁵Simons, op. cit., p. 122.

have the faith required for baptism. At first, Luther based his proof of infant baptism on the creed or on the faith of those bringing the child to baptism. Later, around 1522, he began to claim faith for the child.⁴⁶ Luther could not say wherein this faith consisted but he did believe it was there. He said,

If we cannot prove that infants believe for themselves and have faith, then my honest judgment and advice is straightway to cease, the sooner the better, and nevermore baptize an infant.⁴⁷

Luther also said at one time that infants should be baptized because of faith which was dormant in them. This, also, the Anabaptists rejected vociferously.⁴⁸ John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb, we are told. Luther construed this to be faith on the part of the pre-natal John. The Anabaptists answered that Balaam's ass spoke, too, but this cannot be taken to mean that all infants have faith even before they are born, or that all asses have the ability to speak intelligibly. They thought these cases constituted special miracles performed by the Lord for some specific purpose.⁴⁹ When attacked by the Anabaptists, Luther answered that they did not understand what baptism was all about. The Sacrament of baptism, he pointed out to them, is never dependent on the strength of the

⁴⁶"Infant Baptism," op. cit., pp. 34f.

⁴⁷Horsch, op. cit., p. 321.

⁴⁸Simons, op. cit., p. 126.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 134.

person, which faith is often weak. This and all sacraments are dependent on the command of God. If God tells us to baptize infants (which Luther felt God had done), then we should do this and not reject it just because we can not reasonably understand it. Accompanied by God's Word, baptism becomes a means of grace, Luther maintained.⁵⁰

Some have said that, just as children in the Old Testament benefited from circumcision even when the child did not and could not understand or enjoy the blessings promised in the covenant, the child nevertheless gradually observing the law of God and partaking of its benefits because of its parents who would bring up the child in the strict Jewish way, so also children baptized in their infancy would grow into a fuller enjoyment of this benefit previously conferred upon them.⁵¹ This was entirely foreign to the Anabaptists' concept of the nature of baptism, which was supposed to be a sign or seal of an experience empirically verifiable.

When antagonists pointed out that Jesus said in Matthew 19:14, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come to me, for of such is the Kingdom of heaven," the Anabaptists maintained that the "of such" refers not to the fact that these were little children, but rather to their humility and meekness. The passage which says that whoever offends one

⁵⁰Hershberger, op. cit., p. 211.

⁵¹Whately, op. cit., p. 327.

of these little ones that believe in me shall be cast into the sea, the Anabaptists took to refer not to little children but to the person who has faith like a little child. The "that believe in me" does not mean infants; it means "Whosoever shall humble himself" like one of these babes.⁵²

It was an obvious and demonstrable fact for the Anabaptists that infants could not believe and ought not therefore be baptized. Since infants cannot hear, they cannot believe. Since they cannot believe, they cannot be born again. Simons declared:

Reason teaches us that they cannot understand the Word of God. That they do not believe and are not regenerated is evident from their action. Whether they are baptized or not, the nature in which they are born is prone to evil from their youth. They know no difference between Christ and Satan; between good and evil. . . . The regenerating Word must first be heard and believed with a sincere heart before regeneration and the putting on of Christ, and the impulsion of the Holy Ghost can follow.⁵³

True faith brings with it true knowledge of the difference between good and evil, the fear of God, the love of God and neighbor, obedience to God, and desire to live according to the righteousness displayed in the life of Jesus. Simons asked, "What fruits and righteousness which are the evidence of faith do our little children bring forth?"⁵⁴

Dislike for children was not the point at all. The

⁵²Simons, op. cit., p. 710.

⁵³Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 240.

Anabaptists would gladly have baptized infants if they could honestly have determined that infants have what is represented by baptism, namely, death to sin, a new life, a new birth, the putting on of Christ, and the possession of the moving, quickening Spirit of God by which we are baptized into the body of Christ. "But this will nor can ever be found in irrational children."⁵⁵ The Anabaptists read the Bible to say that baptism was instituted by Christ for those who of their own free will made a confession of personal faith in Christ and dedicated their lives to His service. As much as they may have wanted to, they could not bring themselves to apply this to infants.

"Because Infant Baptism is Unnecessary"

Thirdly, the Anabaptists repudiated the doctrine of infant baptism because they sincerely felt it was unnecessary. They could find nothing in the Bible which made it necessary to believe that infants needed baptism, and that they would be damned if they died before they had been baptized. Original sin, however, was a real issue to be faced by the Anabaptists. Simons, for one, stressed the depravity and wickedness of the human race, for as he looked back over man's history, he saw a long trail of apostasy and sin. He observed that man not only wants to walk in sin, but also forcibly resists every

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 239.

effort on God's part to induce him to live a godly life.⁵⁶

He continued,

Just as Adam and Eve were bitten and poisoned by the Satanic serpent and because of sinful nature, and subject to eternal death if God had not again accepted them in grace through Christ Jesus, so we, their descendants, are also born of a sinful nature, poisoned by the serpent, inclined to evil, and by nature children of hell, of the devil, and everlasting death. And we cannot be delivered therefrom (we speak of those who have come to years of discretion and to actual sin) unless we accept Christ Jesus the only and eternal means of grace by true and unfeigned faith,⁵⁷

These men would conclude that man is by nature sinful and unclean, and inclined toward evil by inheritance.

Just as all men have been born of the unclean seed of Adam, so through Jesus Christ, the second Adam, we are "graciously helped to our feet and justified." However, we are always justified through the blood of Jesus and never through the water of baptism, and to say that we are saved through baptism would make Jesus' death for us of no avail, or so thought the Anabaptists.⁵⁸

While the Anabaptists were reasonably unanimous in their stand on original sin, feeling that all men, including infants, were born in sin and inclined toward evil, they would not concur with the Reformers in saying that baptism cleanses men, or infants, from this original (or actual) sin. Simons contended that baptism very definitely does not cleanse us from

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 290.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 504.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 130.

original sin or wipe away the inherited sinful nature which is in our flesh so that it is completely and forever destroyed in us. For we can easily see, he said, that this sinful nature is obviously present in our lives long after baptism. He was of the opinion that in baptism we desire to die unto our inherited sinful nature and we would like to destroy it, so that it will no longer be our master. But to think that baptism automatically and somewhat mysteriously wipes away all original sin forever, was entirely alien to his way of thinking.⁵⁹

Though the Anabaptists asserted that all infants were born in sin and that baptism should not be administered to them because it had no power to destroy original sin, they were not worried about the fate of their infants. They firmly believed that infants did not need baptism and that, despite their sinful origin and nature, they were saved without any ceremonies, even if they died before they could have been baptized in some later year of discretion. Simons affirmed that if children died before the years of discretion, before they could possibly understand and have faith, "then they died under the promise of God, and that by no other means than the generous promise of grace given through Christ Jesus."⁶⁰ He went on to say that, for Jesus' sake, sin is

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 245.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 241.

not imputed to innocent, little children. Life is promised infants, not through any external ceremonies, but through the blood of the Lord Jesus. The Lord is quoted by Simons as having said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of heaven." (Mark 10:14). Simons interpreted this to mean that infants were in a state of grace, and he could find here no command of the Lord about baptizing infants.⁶¹

Dirck Philips wrote,

Hence we conclude with the Apostles and with the entire Holy Scriptures that inherited sin has been atoned for and taken away by Christ to this extent; the infants may not be judged and condemned for the sin of Adam. That the nature of the children is inclined toward evil does not condemn them; it is through the grace of God not accounted as sin to them, but as long as they are childlike and without the knowledge of good and evil, they are pleasing and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.⁶²

Menno Simons and Crebel were very explicit in their testimonies that infants do not need baptism since they are in a state of grace utterly independent of any ceremonies or rites. Simons wrote,

And although infants have neither faith nor baptism, think not that they are therefore damned. Oh, no! They are saved; for they have the Lord's promise of the Kingdom of God; not through any elements, ceremonies, and external rites, but solely by grace through Jesus Christ. And therefore we do truly believe that they are in a state of grace, pleasing to God, pure, holy, heirs of God and of eternal life. Yes, on account of this promise all sincere Christian believers may assuredly

⁶¹Ibid., p. 131.

⁶²Horsch, op. cit., p. 370.

rejoice and comfort themselves in the salvation of their children.⁶³

Grebel corroborated Simons' statement in a letter to Muenster,

We hold (according to the following passages: Genesis 8:21; Deuteronomy 1:39; 30:6; 31:13; 1 Corinthians 14:20; Wisdom of Solomon 12:9; 1 Peter 2:2; Romans 1, 2, 7, 10; Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15; Mark 9:33-47; 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17; and so on) that all children who have not yet come to the discernment of the knowledge of good and evil, and have not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge, that they are surely saved by the suffering of Christ, the new Adam, who has restored their vitiated life, because they would have been subject to death and condemnation, only if Christ had not suffered; but they are not yet grown up to the infirmity of our broken nature - unless indeed, it can be proved that Christ did not suffer for children.⁶⁴

The third rejection the Anabaptists registered against the doctrine of infant baptism, therefore, was their idea that it was unnecessary. They felt, to sum up, that children do not need such a sacrament because Jesus died also for little children and placed them, too, in a state of grace. Even though children should die before they were baptized, the Anabaptists felt they were saved by the grace of God, the absence of outward ceremonies notwithstanding.

"Because Infant Baptism is not a Means of Grace"

The fourth point of contention between the Reformers and the Anabaptists on the subject of infant baptism was

⁶³Simons, op. cit., p. 370.

⁶⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 81.

the matter of the efficacy of baptism. The Roman Catholics and the Lutherans held that baptism was a sacrament in that it conveyed the grace of God to the recipient and forgave his sins. The Anabaptists (and some of the Calvinistic schools of the Reformation) maintained that baptism was not a sacrament in this sense and that it did not constitute a means of divine grace. Since it was not a sacrament, it was therefore pointless to baptize infants out of fear that they might be damned without the ceremony, the Anabaptists contended. Had they been convinced that baptism did forgive sins and confer the grace of God to the recipient, no doubt their view of baptizing infants would have been radically different.

We shall now discuss their opposition to the traditional view of baptism as a means of grace. To begin with, we must note that the Anabaptists appear to have distinguished very sharply between inner and external baptism. While Lutherans would believe that baptism consists of both internal and outward elements, the Anabaptists rejected the Lutheran and Roman Catholic baptisms because they felt these rites were made up entirely of outward forms and ceremonies, not incorporating an inner change at all. Simons pointed out that the new birth so necessary in our understanding of the true nature of Christian life does not consist of water or words. Rather,

it is the heavenly, living, and quickening power of God in our hearts which flows forth from God, and which by the preaching of the divine Word, if we accept it by

faith, quickens, renews, pierces, and converts our hearts, so that we are changed and converted from unbelief to faith, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from evil to good, from carnality to spirituality, from the earthly to the heavenly, from the wicked nature of Adam to the good nature of Jesus Christ.⁶⁵

Not the water but the vows of baptism properly and rightly constituted the sacramental quality of baptism as far as Huebmaier was concerned. He was very careful to disclaim all sacramental efficacy for baptism as an outward activity.⁶⁶

In directing his disciples to the difference between inner and outer baptism, Simons noted that St. Peter taught that it is inner baptism that saves man, by which man is truly washed clean of his sins. Outer baptism follows later as an evidence or seal of the obedience the new man has, which is faith. Simons felt that if we would speak of outward baptism saving, without the inner renewal, then the whole Bible which speaks of the new man would be spoken to no purpose. Outward baptism does no good, he felt, if the person is not first of all inwardly renewed, regenerated, and baptized with the fire of God's Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ Once a person has experienced this inner baptism, outward baptism is not a matter of choice or convenience. Menno Simons said, "we are constrained" to bind ourselves by the outward sign

⁶⁵Simons, op. cit., p. 265.

⁶⁶Vedder, op. cit., pp. 202f.

⁶⁷Simons, op. cit., pp. 124f.

of the covenant of water which is enjoined on all believers by Christ Himself.⁶⁸ Thus the Anabaptists felt that inner baptism was vital and that outward baptism, which they concluded was all the other Reformers and Roman Catholics had, was definitely not the important thing in baptism, but rather an inevitable by-product of the true and Scriptural inner baptism.

In a sense, the Anabaptists would have agreed that baptism saves and that it forgives sins. But when making such a statement, they would have been referring to their inner baptism and never to the outward ceremony. Huebmaier declared that, according to the Scriptures, baptism was in some way connected with the remission of sins. He agreed that water baptism, as he called it, was given for the remission of sins and that it brought the person into communion with the true God, the heavenly hosts, and the whole Christian Church, outside of which, he added, there can be no salvation. Not that Huebmaier would have ascribed the remission of sins to the water itself. This capacity he always reserved for the power of the "keys which Christ by His Word had given His spouse and unspotted bride, the Christian Church."⁶⁹ In Grebel's letter to Muenster, we read:

The Scriptures describe baptism for us thus, that it

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 125.

⁶⁹Vedder, op. cit., p. 205.

signifies that by faith and the blood of Christ, sins have been washed away for him who is baptized, changes his mind, and believes before and after; that it signifies that a man is dead and ought to be dead to sin and walk in newness of life and spirit, and that he shall certainly be saved if, according to this meaning, by inner baptism he lives by faith; so that the water does not confirm or increase faith, as the scholars at Wittenberg say, and does not give very great comfort nor is it the final refuge on the deathbed. Also Baptism does not save, as Augustine, Tertullian, Theophylact, and Cyprian have taught, dishonoring faith and the suffering of Christ in the case of the old and adult, and dishonoring the suffering of Christ in the case of the unbaptized infant.⁷⁰

Thus the Anabaptists would call water baptism, or the external ceremony, of no effect as far as salvation was concerned. Rather it was a sign, seal, or symbol of what God has wrought in man's heart through inner baptism. Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists concurred in their belief that the outward baptism had no power to convey grace, but was merely a "symbol of acceptance into the church and pledge to Christian nurture."⁷¹ However, the right- and left-wing extensions of the Reformation definitely disagreed as to what the act of outer baptism symbolized. Zwinglians contended that baptism was a symbol of membership in the religious body and a New Testament parallel to the Old Testament ceremony of circumcision, and that therefore infants should be baptized. This was the rankest heresy as far as the Anabaptists were concerned, for they considered baptism to be

⁷⁰Williams, op. cit., pp. 80f.

⁷¹"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 224.

a symbol of an experience of regeneration of the individual through faith and of his promise to obey Christ. They maintained that "obviously infants could not be baptized because they were incapable both of faith and of voluntary commitment to any program of ethics."⁷²

Dietrich Philips also touched on the symbolism of baptism,

In the first place (he ordained) baptism to remind [stress] mine us that He Himself baptizes within and in grace accepts sinners, forgives them all their sins, cleanses them with His blood, bestows upon them all His righteousness and the fulfilling of the Law, and sanctifies them with His Spirit.⁷³

The thought that an outward ceremony like water baptism could in itself confer grace from God upon a person (which the Anabaptists felt was the position of the Roman Catholics and Lutheran groups) was especially abhorrent to the Anabaptists because they considered such an opinion to be a robbery of Christ's true person and purpose on this earth. They expressed the view that such a teaching discredited the suffering and death of Christ, and nullified God's entire plan of salvation. Very specific was the Anabaptists' denunciation of baptism's ability to forgive sins. Menno Simons said,

Not, my beloved, that we believe in the remission of sins through baptism, by no means. Because even as by baptism we cannot obtain faith and repentance, so we can

⁷²Hershberger, op. cit., pp. 203f.

⁷³Williams, op. cit., pp. 212f.

not receive (by baptism) the forgiveness of sins, nor peace, nor liberty of conscience In short, if we had forgiveness of sins and security of conscience through outward signs and elements, then the reality would be eliminated and made to retreat together with His merits.⁷⁴

And again, the remission of sins is preached in baptism, not on account of the water or the ceremonies performed (for Christ, I repeat, is the only means of grace) but because men receive the promises of the Lord by faith and obediently follow His Word and will.⁷⁵

When Michael Sattler was tried at Rottenberg in 1527, he made the following statement on the efficacy of baptism:

Thirdly, as to baptism, we say infant baptism is of no avail to salvation. For it is written (Romans 1:17) that we live by faith alone. Again (Mark 16:16); He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Peter says the same (I Peter 3:21); Which doth also now save you in baptism (which is signified by that Ark of Noah), not the putting away of the filth of the flesh but rather the covenant of a good conscience with God by the resurrection of His son, Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

Therefore, Anabaptists would conclude that baptism is "not generally necessary to salvation," for salvation is by faith alone, entirely independent of all "priestly ministrations and ecclesiastical rules."⁷⁷ Baptism is always subsequent to faith and faith remains a consequence of conversion. What is essential to salvation is pre-baptismal conversion or

⁷⁴Simons, op. cit., p. 125.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 130f.

⁷⁶Williams, op. cit., p. 140.

⁷⁷Henry C. Coke, III, Why Baptize Babies? The Case for Infant Baptism Examined (Greenwich, Conn.: The Seabury Press, 1957), pp. 9f.

regeneration, and never baptism in itself, or so felt the Anabaptists.⁷⁸

Menno Simons and the other Anabaptists decided that Lutherans and Roman Catholics replaced the death of Christ with baptism as the means of salvation, especially for infants. Apparently, they felt that Lutherans excluded the blood of Christ from the redemption of infants, depending entirely on infant baptism. Therefore, they most vociferously attacked this stand of the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics, stating that the grace of God was never confined to outward deeds. Simons said,

For to tie the election, grace, favor, and Kingdom of God to a few words, works, signs, and elements is quite contrary to the merits, death, blood, and the Word of the Lord; yea, open seduction, abomination, and idolatry.⁷⁹

God does not act via means or agencies, they felt. His Holy Spirit very definitely works immediately. Here we are getting into a very basic and vital difference between the Lutherans and the Calvinist-Zwinglian-Anabaptist group. If the Anabaptists had believed in the saving efficacy of baptism, also for infants, no doubt there would have been no rejection of the doctrine. But they solidly opposed such a stand. Muenzer scolded the Reformers for their belief that God speaks to man only through their "stolen Scriptures."

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Simons, op. cit., p. 514.

He believed that the Holy Spirit alone was the "school-master of faith" and that a man might be led to faith and a true belief in Christ as his Savior even if he had never read or heard the Bible. According to his way of thinking, the Holy Spirit reveals Himself to man "in fear until the heart becomes softened and can receive the full gift of God."⁸⁰ Simons added,

There will in eternity be found no other remedy for our sins, . . . neither works, merits nor ordinances (even though they are observed according to the Holy Scriptures), . . . but alone the immediate blood of the Lamb.

The Scriptures know of only one remedy, which is Christ with His merits, death, and blood. Hence, he who seeks the remission of his sins through baptism, rejects the blood of the Lord and makes water his idol. Therefore let everyone have a care, lest he ascribe the honor and glory due to Christ, to the outward ceremonies and visible elements.⁸¹

To summarize this objection, we might say that the Anabaptists attached major importance to the distinction between what they called outer and inner baptism. Feeling that the Lutherans and Roman Catholics relied solely on outer baptism for salvation, the Anabaptists roundly condemned this idea and proposed instead that inner baptism saves and that outer ceremonies and rites have absolutely no value whatsoever, as far as salvation was concerned. Since baptism could not possibly benefit an infant, why profane the Biblical institution

⁸⁰R. W. Carew Hunt, "Thomas Muentzer," The Church Quarterly Review, CXXVII (January-March, 1939), 235.

⁸¹Horsch, op. cit., p. 371.

of the sacrament by administering it to someone who could not conceivably experience the inner baptism so essential to their concept of the true Scriptural doctrine of baptism?

"Because Infant Baptism Contributes
to a False View of the Church"

Finally, the Anabaptist movement was opposed to the existing doctrine and practice of infant baptism because, in its opinion, such a tenet contributed to a grossly false conception of the church of the New Testament, after which our churches must be modeled. They felt that in many cases political considerations constituted the real motivation for infant baptism since there existed in so many areas a state church, whose membership was made up of the entire population of the state. Standing in direct opposition to this idea, the Anabaptists felt that voluntary church membership based on true conversion and involving a sincere commitment to holy living and discipleship was the absolutely essential heart of the New Testament picture of the church. They said,

How could infants give a commitment based on a knowledge of what true Christianity means? They might conceivably passively experience the grace of God (though the Anabaptists would question this), but they could not respond in pledging their lives to Christ. Such infant baptism would not only be meaningless, but would in fact become a serious obstacle to a true understanding of the nature of Christianity and membership in the church. Only adult baptism could signify an intelligent life commitment.⁸²

⁸²Hershberger, op. cit., pp. 47f.

Indeed, Bender feels that this insistence on the part of the Anabaptists on a new church made up entirely of truly committed and practicing believers in opposition to the prevailing concept of the Volkskirche constitutes their major contribution to the development of the Christian church.⁸³

Wherever the Anabaptists looked, they saw what they thought were obvious indications that the state-church idea was not at all effective in raising levels of morality. If anything, they felt the opposite was the case. The abuses they saw on every side were considered by them to be the culmination of long years of the state's patronage of the church. After Constantine and his sons established Christianity as the official religion of the state, the situation soon degenerated to such an extent that the populace was in many cases compelled to make a profession of faith and join the church. All preliminary conditions for church membership were abandoned except baptism, which was made mandatory. The Anabaptists observed that, since the early church viewed baptism as being regenerative in nature, the entire church membership was considered to be a regenerated and spiritually renewed group regardless of individual faith or the lack thereof.⁸⁴

⁸³Harold S. Bender, Conrad Grebel: Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists, p. 211.

⁸⁴Horsch, op. cit., p. 1.

The Anabaptists took on the role of the Old Testament prophets in observing and censuring the contemporary church for the depraved conditions that had come to pass. They accused the Lutherans and Roman Catholics of maintaining the practice of infant baptism in order to establish and develop a national church. They felt that the common people believed, regardless of the theological intentions of their leaders, that infant baptism constituted some magical or near-magical means of salvation, the "means of incorporation into the general Christian society, and the solemn recognition of the beginning of life."⁸⁵ In the canton of Bern, church and state were as one in many of their respective functions. Births could not be recorded unless the infant was first baptized by some members of the Reformed clergy. Civil rights went only to those citizens who could give evidence of their baptism into the state-church.⁸⁶

Menno Simons observed that many of the members of the state-church were living in gross immorality and yet were considered members of the church, an idea immediately repulsive to his conception of the nature of being a Christian.

⁸⁵"Baptism," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 224

⁸⁶Delbert L. Gratz, Bernese Anabaptists and their American Descendants, in Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1953), VIII, 100.

He said that infant baptism had become an

accursed abomination and idol. For all those who receive it--even though their whole life is so completely pagan, undisciplined, reckless, and nothing but dissipation, drinking, fornication, cursings, swearing, etc.--are called Christians nevertheless, and are accounted under the Lord's grace, merits, death and blood, as though the natural water in baptism could beget them and keep them in Christ.⁸⁷

Perhaps exaggerating somewhat, Simons went on to say,

If they are the body of Christ as they boast, and if Christ is the head of His church, then Christ is the head of the unbelieving, the avaricious, perjurers, gamblers, drunkards, adulterers, fornicators, perverts, thieves, murderers, liars, idolaters, disobedient, blood-thirsty, traitors, tyrants, proud, and of all scamps, harlots, and knaves. For where is there one in the whole congregation of those who are baptized in infancy that walks unblamably in all the commandments of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, and who either inwardly or openly is not guilty before God of some or many of the before mentioned crimes?⁸⁸

Such practices were extremely distasteful to the Anabaptists who were even more incensed by the manner in which the basic principles of church membership were violated by the practice of infant baptism. As we have seen before, church membership must always be a voluntary decision on the part of the person who had experienced a true conversion and had sincerely dedicated his life to the Lord.⁸⁹ Opposed to the situation in Zurich where church and population

⁸⁷Simons, op. cit., p. 128.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 341.

⁸⁹Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 18.

became identical for all practical purposes, the Anabaptists proposed the New Testament idea of the church-- that the church is a fellowship, not of the many, but of the few, if need be, who truly believe and who live their lives in accordance with the example of Christ Himself. For the Anabaptists, this proposed church of theirs had as one of its primary marks, adult, believer's baptism.⁹⁰ Menno Simons attacked the unfortunate combination of infant baptism and the state-church relationship by saying that the true church is "no assembly of unbelievers, carnal or brazen sinners, even if they falsely appropriate the name of Jesus Christ and think of themselves as the church."⁹¹ They felt they must be able to distinguish between true Christians, or members of their gathered church, and the outside world. "The test of a true church," the Brethren pointed out, "is that it is distinct from the world and subject to Christ. As long as it is identified with the world, we cannot recognize it as a true church."⁹²

Thus we have seen that the Anabaptists rejected infant baptism also because of the moral and political abuses which were, in their opinion, the inevitable consequences of enrolling members in the church by infant baptism rather than

⁹⁰Hershberger, op. cit., p. 60.

⁹¹Simons, op. cit., p. 234.

⁹²Horsch, op. cit., pp. 99f.

by a voluntary decision. They felt the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans practiced infant baptism because they were both state churches, their membership encompassing the whole population by force of law, and infant baptism was the necessary initiatory ceremony. This was diametrically opposed to their idea of the church and they therefore protested against what they felt was the most likely and vulnerable point in this false conception, namely, infant baptism. Do away with infant baptism, the Anabaptists felt, and the church will experience a restoration, for its members will join its ranks at a later date when their initiation can be a matter of their own desire and intention. For them, the whole matter of infant baptism was, as one of their spokesmen put it, an ecclesiastical issue. If one considered the church to be a group of believers who had joined on the basis of a free and voluntary decision, then that person and that church could not consent to the practice of infant baptism. If one favored a church which as nearly as possible included the entire population, then he of necessity had to consider infant baptism as the act that brought people into Christendom and a means of "relieving all the descendants of church members of the necessity of making the decision."⁹³

⁹³"Infant Baptism." op. cit., p. 38.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions

In summary, the Anabaptist movement was the product of a renewed study of the Bible and of dissatisfaction with the achievements of the Reformation. When Zwingli and other reformers failed to change the government of the church from the state-church type to the gathered-church concept, the Anabaptists decided they must sever their connections with the original reforming movements and, on their own, restore the church to its proper New Testament framework. Soon many radical elements entered the Anabaptist fold and brought about the dissolution of the Anabaptists as a movement because of their lawless and fanatical practices.

The Anabaptists believed the church should be apart from the world and that its membership should be made up entirely of sincere believers. According to their view of Scriptures, the Bible was the only source and norm of faith and life. Every practice of the church, they felt, must be based on some clear word of Holy Writ. These two attitudes were basic in the Anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism.

It would be unwise to isolate any one of the Anabaptists' reasons for opposing infant baptism and set this up as the cause of their rejection. Without a doubt, it was all these working together that brought them to the decision that infant baptism was wrong and therefore should not be practiced

by sincere Christians. Of all the possible reasons, five stand out as very basic--the five treated in this thesis. They rejected infant baptism because, in their opinion, it was not commanded or practiced in the New Testament; believer's baptism was enjoined on all Christians by Christ's clear command; infants were saved without baptism; they did not believe that baptism was a means of divine grace or an instrument of spiritual regeneration; and infant baptism was conducive to the many abuses extant in the state-church of their day.

When evaluating the Anabaptist movement and its rejection of infant baptism, the writer discovered varied opinions. Many of the Anabaptist-minded commentators on the subject have made statements of evaluation. Rufus M. Jones writes in his Studies in Mystical Religions,

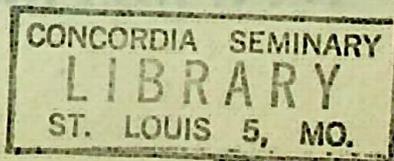
Judged by the reception it met at the hands of those in power, both in the church and in the state, equally in Roman Catholic and Protestant countries, the Anabaptist movement was one of the most tragic in the history of Christianity; but judged by the principles which were put into play by the men who bore this reproachful nickname, it must be pronounced one of the most momentous and significant undertakings in man's eventful religious struggle after the truth. It gathered up the gains of earlier movements, it is the spiritual soil out of which all non-conformist sects have sprung, and it is the first plain announcement in modern history of a programme [sic] for a new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially in America and England, has been slowly realizing--an absolutely free and independent religious society, and a church in which every man counts as a man, and has his share in shaping both church and state.¹

¹Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," Church History, XIII (March, 1944), 3.

Although the Anabaptists as a movement faded out of the picture long ago, there are many features of our American life today which are more or less a direct result of the Anabaptists' influence. Bender considers the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, all so basic to American Protestantism and so essential to American democracy, to be derived from the Anabaptists.²

Having studied the Anabaptists and their thought patterns to a limited degree, the writer has come to the conclusion that the Anabaptists were, by and large, a sincere and serious group of religious seekers. Perhaps they were not always as well-informed or as scholarly in their research as they might have been. What they lacked in study, they more than made up for in spirit. We should never judge the Anabaptist movement in its totality by what the radical Anabaptists taught and the extremes to which they went. Granted, there were within the Anabaptist framework ideas which could easily be abused and which were abused by irresponsible disciples. Fundamental Anabaptism, however, was made up by and large of sober, honest, and reasonably conservative attitudes. Thinking Protestant Christians cannot afford to pass over lightly the manner in which the Anabaptists were persecuted. We would surely agree they were wrong on many counts. But

²Ibid., p. 4.



can this ever be considered a valid reason for opposing such a movement with force and, at times, torture?

The writer would agree with the Anabaptists on several of their main premises. He would readily concur that the foundation, and the only foundation, of every Christian's faith and life must be and remain the Word of God. He would also agree that we must guard against any kind of magical or superstitious conception of the outward activities of baptism. We must always say, with Luther, that,

It is not the water indeed that does them (brings man benefits through baptism), but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water and no baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost.³

The writer would grant that the practice of infant baptism can easily be abused. When people feel that baptism is their "permit and passport" into the Kingdom of God and that nothing more is required, infant baptism can conceivably lead to laxity of life. However, this is an abuse and not inherent in the doctrine itself. The writer feels the Anabaptists definitely had a point when they observed that people were, in many cases, more zealous for Kingdom work when they were baptized and "converted" as adults than when they were born into the church.

³Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," Trislot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 551.

The writer would also agree that in many cases a tie-up between the church and the state can easily lead to corruption of either or both of these institutions. Church membership should never be made synonymous with citizenship in the state. Infant baptism must never be reduced to a club of possible disenfranchisement which the state holds over the heads of its people.

The writer would go along with the Anabaptists in saying that one should not dogmatically state that infant baptism was commanded and/or practiced in the New Testament. It is the writer's opinion that the doctrine of infant baptism is built on inferences. Neither, however, should the Anabaptists and their followers dogmatically state that it was not commanded and/or practiced. Looking at all the Scriptural references, the writer would go on record as one who believes it is very definitely the Lord's will that the Christian Church baptize its infants. The writer does not claim to understand how it can be effective in infants. He does believe that it is both effective and necessary for the salvation of infants.

The writer would have to disagree with the Anabaptists on several points. It is his opinion that the Bible states that God can and does work through means, and that the Word of God and the two sacraments of Baptism and Communion are conveyors of God's grace to men. Therefore, the sacrament of baptism does have benefit, also for infants. Moreover,

the writer would not agree that infants are not in need of this grace of God conferred in baptism. They are born in sin and need forgiveness just as everyone else does. We know that God is a God of mercy and love, but He is also a just, holy, and righteous God, and we should never procrastinate when it comes to such an important matter as the souls of our precious infants. The writer would agree that the Christian must never be of the world or identified closely with its citizens. However, Christians are in the world for a purpose, to "show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light," as St. Peter writes.

Lutheran Christians can profit from a study such as is described in this thesis. First of all, we are reminded that the church must never lag in its obligation to teach those who have been brought into its midst through infant baptism. The Lord added a very pointed command to teach in His Great Commission. We must never consider a person's baptism our last obligation toward his edification and spiritual pilgrimage. It is the responsibility of the infant's parents and godparents, first of all, to see to it that the child is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. However, it is also the responsibility of the Christian congregation into which the infant is born to feed and nourish the child in the ways of the Lord. If all congregations would take seriously this obligation, then

Lutherans, too, could have a "gathered church," made up almost entirely of those who have been brought to the Lord in baptism and who are voluntarily and happily walking with the Lord and serving Him.

We must never allow infant baptism to become a magical or superstitious rite. Our people must be taught what God has said about baptism and they must never come to think of it as all that is necessary for one's salvation. They must never develop "baptism complexes."

We must double our efforts to study what the Bible does and does not say about infant baptism. We must read the Church Fathers to determine what the early church did with this practice. We must always seek ways and means of conversing with our brethren in church bodies who reject infant baptism, going to the basic points at issue and trying our best, under God, to convince them that the Lord does want His infants to be brought to Him in baptism. A beginning for every serious Lutheran Christian is to become acquainted with the reasons for the Anabaptists' rejections and a working knowledge of the background from which these rejections arose. Only as we achieve and exhibit Christian understanding and love and attain first hand knowledge can we converse with and convince our brother of what we are firmly convinced is the will of the Lord.

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