

Are you Ready For Some Radical Reformation?

By Steve Ramer

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World Fellowship Sunday

Scripture

Luke 2 (selected verses)

... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him... "Bear fruits worthy of repentance..."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation..."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire..." Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon

On the evening of January 21, 1525 a dozen or so folks gathered for a clandestine prayer meeting in Zurich, Switzerland at the home of Anna Mantz, the mother of one Felix Mantz.

These folks had gathered to pray together in order to seek God's direction after the town council had passed a resolution expressly forbidding those who advocated for adult baptism to meet together.

According to the earliest accounts of that evening's events, after a time of prayer, George Blaurock, a Catholic priest from a rural area outside the city stood up and asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him. After his baptism, Blaurock proceeded to baptize all others present. The newly baptized then pledged themselves to remain as true disciples of Christ, to teach the gospel and to hold firm to their new faith.

Such defiance of the legally established government was punishable by arrest, incarceration, torture and possible banishment from the region.

Both actions also departed from a more than thousand-year old set of traditions that had been key to social control in Europe.

Soon the penalty for adult re-baptizing would intensify to include far more severe forms of torture and even death. Within five years, five of those present that night would suffer a martyr's death for practicing their convictions.

All punishments were handed out by Christian governments both Catholic and Protestant.

Anna Mantz' son, Felix, would be the first to die on January 8, 1527, by being drowned in the icy Limmat River of Zurich. In the 50 or so years that followed, conservative estimates calculated that more than 4,000 Anabaptists were executed by the church-state authorities in western Europe. Tens of thousands more suffered arrest, incarceration, exile, torture and slavery for disobeying the religious rulers of their day!

All of that just over the practice of baptism? Really? It is, no doubt, hard for us to conceive of such a thing, especially since we were raised in a socio-religious culture where adult baptisms seem so ubiquitous. But in early 16th century Europe that action and the ideas which lead to it, were major tectonic shifts politically, socially, culturally as well as religiously.

As many of us know, the Protestant Reformation began with Martin Luther posting his 95 theses on the chapel door of Wittenberg College in 1517. That would have taken place nearly eight years prior to and a couple hundred miles away from those more humble beginnings of our own Anabaptist movement or what is also often referred to as the Counter Reformation.

But both of these movements did not occur in a vacuum, both were sparked by numerous tremors that had been stirring throughout Europe during the centuries prior.

As I mentioned before, for more than a thousand years there had been only one dominant socio-political and religious reality in Western Europe which was called the Holy Roman Empire.

It had, interestingly enough, actually begun in what is now eastern Europe, during the early fourth Century,

following the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine and the eventual establishment of his empire's new headquarters in Constantinople (which is Istanbul, Turkey today).

Constantine also decided to establish his new found faith, Christianity, as the new official religion of the realm. And thus every subsequent emperor needed to be a member of as well as blessed by the leadership of this one, universal or in ancient Greek, "catholic" church.

The fact that every person in the realm was a Christian made the empire Holy and it was Roman due to its origins in Rome! This marriage of church and state meant that any threat to one was then a threat to the other and so both the imperial government, and the imperial church worked seamlessly together.

Hand in hand they spread not only the borders of the empire but church membership as well. Taxes and "tithes" were collected to not only pay for governors and palaces but for priests and cathedrals as well.

But throughout that millennium there were also many who stood up to criticize the excesses of wealth and power that often resulted from such a union of church and state.

First were the monastics, who attracted large numbers of folks to follow a way of life that included poverty, chastity and obedience as they established radical communities that were counter to both the society around them and the institutionalized church. Through both life and words they critiqued the accumulation of power and wealth as they sought to serve the poor.

Another group of dissenters were the mystics, men and women who cultivated an inner, more personal experience of God. And while the mystics did not reject the priests, sacraments and traditions of the church, they considered much of this as merely helpful rather than essential for one's spiritual journey.

Last but likely the most influential were the "humanists" who inspired and inhabited the life of the Renaissance, a movement that led to a new age of freedom and inquiry. Now all the leading reformers of the 16th century, Luther as well as the Anabaptists, would have likely received a humanist form of education.

An education that would have encouraged strenuous scholarship, serious study and the asking of lots of new questions. The individual was now free to question and to explore

far beyond those former and far more stifling limits
in every arena of inquiry of science, art and religion.

But back to the stars of our Anabaptist show.
By the time of their clandestine midnight meeting,
the reformation in Zurich, lead by Ulrich Zwingli,
was now beginning its third year.

And those who had chosen baptism that night would have been
some of his most enthusiastic supporters from the beginning.
But by the end of 1524, however, it had become clear
that two camps had formed and that
an irreconcilable confrontation was likely.

Among Zwingli's reforms, popular with the younger "radicals"
as they were called, included such things as the local control
of the churches as well as the local selection of priests.

For Zwingli this meant the replacing of Rome's authority
with the Council of the 200 or Zurich's town council.
He had also resisted the payment of the "tithe,"
a tax collected by the local diocese that was sent to Rome.
This "tithe" was a particular burden for rural peasants.

Zwingli also wanted to reform the mass so that all
could participate in the sacrament and not just the priests.
He was also beginning to question infant baptism.

But the "radical reformers" had become frustrated with what they viewed
as Zwingli's plodding pace and far too cautious attempts at reform.

The "radicals" were especially upset by his constant deference
to the wishes of the town council, who decided instead to continue
the collection the tithe for the city treasury but still resented by the poor.

The council also continued to promote the baptism of infants
as well as reversing some of the changes Zwingli
had already incorporated into his new Mass.

But allow me one more thought on this particular event before I close.
Now the uniqueness of this event was not the baptizing of adults,
per se, but it was in the nature of this kind of baptism, it was,
what we in the movement call, a "believers baptism."

What made this a radical departure from the status quo,
was the fact that it was an individual's choice,
an informed decision that took into account
all the expectations and possible consequences
that might come with making such a public statement.

By being baptized again in the name of Christ,
what those who were the first to be re-baptized were saying
was that individuals and not the state were the ones to decide belief,
practice and the boundaries of the religious community.

And in their particular situation it meant a thoughtful decision
to follow the example of Jesus and to possibly die for their beliefs.
Each person was to freely follow the way of Christ and
one's belonging to a community of faith must be voluntary.

Let me make this clear. Baptism, for those early Anabaptists,
would have been a declaration of their radical change of allegiance.
The baptism of a child was not only the automatic membership
into a certain church (Reformed, Lutheran or Catholic),
but it was also the automatic conference of citizenship,
into a nationality either, German, Roman or Swiss.

And this was important for those nation states who
for most of the next century would wage wars against each other,
battling for religious freedom as well as territorial supremacy.

Adult baptism, according to these early Anabaptists
became a sign that one's ultimate Christian identity
was to follow in the way shown by Jesus
and that one's ultimate empirical allegiance
was first to the Kingdom of God.

In so doing they were not only rejecting those national churches
built, they felt, by human effort and ego,
but they were rejecting as well all those demands made
by all earthly kingdoms for primary allegiance.

Today, that Anabaptist movement has grown
to nearly 2 million baptized believers in over 80 countries.

We here, in little ole Ft Collins, are part of global movement
with many languages and cultures, all seeking
to be true disciples of Christ, by teaching the gospel
and holding onto this radical faith.

Some in our global movement still experience persecution
and even martyrdom today.

Some of us, especially in North America may want to ask as well,
"Why we do not face death and persecution for our faith?"
The Mennonite World Conference is called to be a communion
of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another
in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship,
worship, service, support and witness.

World Fellowship Sunday provides us an opportunity to not only remember our common roots, and to celebrate our worldwide Anabaptist movement of faith, but to support and to pray for one another.

World Fellowship Sunday helps all Anabaptist churches enter more fully into fellowship, intercession and thanksgiving with and for our global faith family.

Let us not forget the faithful martyrs of our past but take inspiration from them to hold fast to a radical faith that is still needed today! A faith and a hope that is radically rooted in the following of Jesus in both word and deed!

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