

“George the Blue Coat and the First Anabaptist Baptism”

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Scriptures

Matthew 5:9-14, 38-45

Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all...

38“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...

Sermon

Narrator (played by Cathy):

As you all likely know, this past Tuesday was the 495th anniversary of the first Anabaptist baptism. The adult baptism of George Blaurock by Conrad Grebel, was a spontaneous event that occurred during a secret meeting on a cold January night in Zurich, Switzerland. The meeting had been called in response to the Zurich city council's decision that all parents must baptize their infant children and thus conform to the teaching of the one official church of Zurich.

In honor of this monumental occasion Steve managed to find a guest speaker for today. And I want to point out that our guest this morning is a pretty big deal! He was there, in Zurich, as an eyewitness to what actually happened. And not only was he there, he was in fact, the very first person to receive an Anabaptist baptism.

He is none other than George of the house of Jacob, or more commonly know as George Blaurock, or literally in English, "George the Bluecoat." But it appears that he and Steve hit some traffic on I-25 on their way here from the airport, but we expect them at any moment!

In addition to being the first to be baptized he was one of the most colorful characters (not just because he wore a "blue coat") of the early Anabaptist movement. An early account described him as an "ordinary and simple priest but with a godly zeal in matters of faith, who, through the grace of God which was given him acted in a strange manner." He also would...(George enters from the back cutting off the intro)

George (played by Steve):

Lies, lies, all lies! I only spoke and followed the truth as it is clearly expressed in the gospels. Would you consider that strange? Do you consider it strange behavior, that once the Christ has pierced your heart, mind and soul with his truth, that you would then want to share that liberating truth with any and all who will listen living in the streets and the rural foothills of Zurich?

And would you also consider it "strange" that in order to get God's truth out that I was compelled quite often, to enter the state sanctioned churches and shout down those government paid preachers as they were leading their congregants astray from Christ's gospel?

And make no bones about it, it was the government, specifically the Zurich City Council (ZCC), who pushed us into something that (so far as we knew it) had never been done before!

But before I get into the specifics of that night, a little bit of contextual information is important.

For you see, Europe in the early 16th century was undergoing massive social, political, economic and cultural changes. You can blame much of it on old Gutenberg and his printing press. Suddenly books, fliers and pamphlets could be reproduced and circulated in mass quantities.

New ideas from around the world were spreading quicker than any local government or even the Holy Roman Empire could control. And even more importantly these ideas were being translated from the official learned languages of Latin and Greek into the vernaculars of the less educated common folk. Martin Luther and others began to translate the Bible into German and other local languages that the masses spoke and understood. Peasants throughout central Europe were violently revolting against their feudal masters.

Religious wars raged between Catholics and Protestants who sought, through military force, to convert or reconvert those under their control to their version of God's truth. And those wars required soldiers. And one of Switzerland's most valuable exports at the time were young mercenaries.

That was the larger context when I arrived in Zurich only a few years after Martin Luther had posted his reformation thesis on the chapel door of Wittenburg College.

As a rural priest I had seen the oppression of poor rural peasants and the complicity of the church in this oppression. I had also heard about a powerful preacher named Zwingli, who was leading a reform movement as the lead priest of the new official church in Zurich.

He was preaching daily, going through the Bible verse by verse, reading and explaining exactly what was in God's word. This systematic study began to lead him to reject many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church at that time and eventually he resigned as a Catholic priest. But immediately he was reinstated by the authority of the ZCC to be the leading cleric of what would become the Swiss Reformed Church.

He was also deeply critical of the practice I mentioned before, of recruiting and sending mercenaries, and critical of the baptism of babies. (which Luther too had struggled with early on)

But his "biblical" studies would soon lead him into conflict with the ZCC. One of the first controversies was his teaching that a certain tax levied on all the citizens of Zurich was not biblical. And though his teaching ran afoul of the council, it was definitely quite popular among the poorer populations of the city.

For you see, not only was the tax a difficult burden for the poor, but it also was a source of deep resentment for the rural populations since most of those tax dollars were spent on urban projects within the city limits of Zurich. Sadly, Zwingli soon back-tracked on this and some of his other "biblical" reforms when they faced pushback from the governing authorities.

Consequently, many of us increasingly became dissatisfied, not only with the slowing pace of reforms, but angry with his deference to governmental authorities who were overruling the scriptures. We even tried to find a compromise with him by attempting to form

what you all would call a political or “reformist party” that through the ballot box would remove the incumbents on council and replace them with our own reform candidates.

But Zwingli refused, fearing the social chaos that might result from encouraging such a mass enfranchisement.

After all, what would happen if one part of Zurich decided to remain Protestant while another returned to being Catholic, and even other portions became Anabaptist?

(Again, a quick reminder that sectarian conflict between Christians was devastating the continent at the time! And any kind of multi-pluralistic democracy was at least two centuries away.)

Failing to see any direct instruction by Jesus to baptize infants and with the added knowledge that baptismal records were used by local officials to ascertain which men in a particular parish were of fighting age, many in our group stopped baptizing their babies.

Eventually the ZCC passed an ordinance requiring all infants to be baptized, punishing those who refused with arrest and exile.

And so we gathered that night, at the home of Anna Mantz, to pray and to discern as a community, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what we should do in response to the government’s edict.

As a result, most of us at the meeting would not live very long. Conrad who baptized me, died a year later of the plague. Anna’s son, Felix, would become the first Anabaptist martyr only two years later when he was drowned in the river that flows through Zurich, on order of the ZCC.

As for me, I actually escaped prison -- several times -- and like so many others fled to other parts of central Europe. I shared that radical and dangerous ideas of believers’ baptism, simple living, shared economics, voluntary conversion and church membership, as well as local congregational selection of leaders and local control of religious practices.

But eventually, after nearly five years on the lam, the governmental authorities finally caught up to me. I was actually kidnapped by the “Taufenjager” or literally an “Anabaptist hunter,” a specially trained force established by the Austrian king to search and capture Anabaptist heretics.

It was in the Tirol region where the persecution of the Anabaptist was particularly harsh. For example, in most county jails in other parts of central Europe, they were satisfied with merely torturing you until you recanted and then they released you and killed you if you didn't.

The Austrians however tortured and killed every Anabaptist they could find while mercifully offering a less painful death to those who recanted. My earthly journey ended when I was burned at the stake, a rather common form of execution of many Anabaptists.

Many more of us would be arrested, detained, tortured, forced into exile, and some even sold into slavery . Many recanted while others chose to violently respond to those who were oppressing them. But the persecution did force us to spread out and to spread the unique understandings that God had revealed to us.

Now I just realized that I have not given you many details of what actually happened that night I was baptized. But in the end, details are not as important as outcomes. Certainly, meeting in a home on a cold January night gave us neither space nor desire to fill a tub with enough water to dunk us.

But again, the how is really far less important than the why. We may have gathered to resist the government's imposition of infant baptism, but in the end we "discovered" an even more powerful practice of baptizing those who voluntarily and consciously professed a commitment to follow Jesus. It may have seemed spontaneous at the time but I believe that it was an eruption of what had been stewing for a long, long time.

But before I go, I must clarify one thing that really gets tiresome. We were called ANA-baptists, not ANTI- baptists by those who hunted us and condemned us.

"Anabaptist" literally and simply means "those who re-baptize!" Since every adult at that time had already been baptized as an infant, each of us who practiced adult baptism was being Re-baptized as a free conscious individual choice.

But each generation will find themselves under great pressures to conform to what society and the government deems acceptable. And every generation has and will produce its share of martyrs who have chosen to follow God's ways over human authorities.

The Bible is filled with such examples as is the history of our own Mennonite church movement that started back in the 16th century and then continued to more recent times with young Mennonite men dying in U.S. jails because they refused to fight in WWI.

But there are also examples outside of our religion and our particular group as well, such as M. Ghandi and MLK Jr., whose lives were taken because they too refused to use violence to change our world.

Each generation may also have its own unique form of baptism. For us it was adult baptism, for others it was rejection of military duty. For others it was the organizing of peasants in Latin American into Basic Christian Communities.

But more importantly, what does baptism mean for you today? Is there an action or a lifestyle choice that may result in you being misunderstood, or mistreated, or falsely accused or even killed or left to die?

Think about it?

After all, you supposedly live within a tradition that worships an executed criminal named Jesus. This tradition follows in the footsteps of martyrs executed by state authorities nearly 500 years ago for the crime of voluntarily and non-violently trying to follow Jesus the best they could.

Yes, sometimes water is just water, but the faith and actions that true baptism can inspire, well it too can sometimes truly change the world.

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