

BL
27
.U59
1950
V.1

THE ANABAPTIST CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of Theology
United College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Divinity

by
J. A. Toews
March 1950

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. MEDIEVAL AND REFORMATION CONCEPTS OF THE CHURCH . . .	1
1. The Church Concept in the Middle Ages	3
2. The Church Concept of the Reformers	9
a. Diversity of Preparatory Movements	9
b. Variety of Concepts of the Church	13
c. Luther's Concept of the Church	18
d. Calvin's Concept of the Church	28
3. The Anabaptist Vision	35
II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ANABAPTISM	39
INTRODUCTORY	39
1. Anabaptism in Switzerland	42
a. As a Radical Wing of Zwinglianism	43
b. As a Distinct and Separatist Movement	46
c. Expansion and Persecution	51
2. Anabaptism in Moravia	53
a. Rise and Growth	54
b. Divisions and Persecutions	56
3. Anabaptism in the Netherlands	59
a. The Chiliastic Anabaptists up to the Muenster Tragedy. (1535)	61

CHAPTER	PAGE
b. The Quiet Anabaptists under Menno Simon's leadership	64
III. FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF THE ANABAPTIST CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH	72
1. Radical Biblicism	73
2. Eschatological Views	86
3. Theology of Martyrdom	91
4. Heritage From Medieval Evangelical Sects.	97
*IV. CARDINAL ELEMENTS OF THE ANABAPTIST CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH	105
INTRODUCTORY	105
✓ 1. The Concept of the Church as an "Ecclesia".	107
a. Only Professed Believers Admitted to Membership	111
b. A Strong Emphasis on New Testament Discipleship	114
✓ c. Strict Church Discipline	118
2. The Concept of the Church as a Brotherhood.	121
a. The Principle of Church Polity: Congregational	122
b. The Principle of Mutual Responsibility.	125
3. The Concept of the Church as a Missionary Body	128
4. The Concept of the Church as a Body Separated from the World	131

CHAPTER	PAGE
a. The Church Separated from a Non-Christian Society	132
b. The Church Separated from the State	136
CONCLUSION	141
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	145

"Christ is the head of the church; and he is the Savior
of the body." Eph. 5:23.

CHAPTER I

MEDIEVAL AND REFORMATION CONCEPTS OF THE CHURCH

(Every great religious crisis in the history of Christianity has called for a re-examination of traditional concepts and a re-interpretation of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. One of the persistent and central problems in all such attempts of re-orientation has been the question as to the nature of the Church. It is one of the most pertinent problems that confronts modern christianity, especially in view of the contemporary ecumenical movement.)

It is significant to note, that in the Amsterdam Assembly Series, prepared under the auspices of the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, this subject is given primary emphasis and treatment. (This special consideration is justifiable because the meaning of the Church is implied in all our christian work and worship.)

The various concepts of the Church as expressed in the teaching of the major denominations of contemporary Protestantism can be traced back to the great Reformation of the

sixteenth century. The Anabaptist concept of the Church also has its historical roots in that period of unprecedented religious upheavals. An analysis of this concept, however, must take full account of the concrete historical situation in which it was formulated and by which it was modified. The Anabaptist concept of the Church, moreover, must be studied in comparison with, and in relation to, the other classical concepts of the Church during the age of the Reformation. The question as to the true nature of the Church of Christ undoubtedly constituted one of the chief problems of the Reformers. The doctrine of the church was a significant part of that which is called the Reformation and, as Emil Brunner states it, the normative and dogmatic theory concerning the Church was "formulated first at the time of the Reformation."¹ The pretensions of the Roman Catholic Church to exclusive authority forced the Reformers to define their views on the nature of the Church. Based upon the witness of Biblical revelation, a new doctrine of the Church was developed by them.

In order to get the proper historical perspective for a treatment of the Anabaptist Concept of the Church, we shall now first turn to an analysis of the Medieval concept of the Church.

¹ Emil Brunner, "One Holy Catholic Church", Theology Today. October, 1947. p. 319.

I. THE CHURCH CONCEPT IN THE MIDDLE AGES

(The Medieval concept of the Church was the product of a historical process in which cultural and political conditions had exerted strong modifying influences.) The Church of the Middle Ages had travelled a long way from the Church of the Apostolic Age. In the New Testament the Church is never an "institution", a "something" but it is simply the "people of God", the true Israel.²

Therefore, also, the New Testament knows nothing of a Church which is the object of faith. It is seen as the body of which Christ is the head. It is composed of people who "in every place call upon the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord."³

(The Church of the New Testament was, to use the words of Karl Barth,⁴ "the living congregation of the living Lord Jesus Christ." Because the church was a living reality to the early Christians,) a doctrine of the Church was not formulated. It is only indirectly, therefore, that a "doctrine of the church" can be constructed from the teaching of the New Testament. During the first two centuries we have a similar picture with no attempts

2

Loc. cit.

3

I Corinthians 1:2.

4

Karl Barth, "The Church, --the Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ." Man's Disorder and God's Design. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1948), p. 67.

at a formal definition of the Church. That which is self-evident does not need to be defined. In his article, "The Church: Her Nature and Task", George Florovsky points out that this accounts for the "absence of a special chapter on the Church in all early presentations of Christian doctrine: in Origen, in St. Gregory of Nyassa, even in St. John of Damascus."⁵ I think, however, that Bartmann, whom Florovsky quotes, is historically not quite correct when he claims that "the Church existed for about fifteen hundred years without reflecting upon its nature and without attempting its clarification by a logical conception."⁶ We find that at the end of the fourth century Augustine felt compelled to formulate a real theological argument and definition of the Church. During the fourth century Christianity experienced a tremendous change. It was recognized as the religion of the state. (No longer was the Church only a struggling minority, but it had become a "peaceful majority" which was not in opposition to an unbelieving "world". More and more it was identified with the totality of the people in the Roman Empire. It was then that the distinction between the "saved" and the "institution" clearly emerged.) This distinction became explicit ^{clear, outspoken} during the Donatist controversy. The Donatists, following in the footsteps of the

5

George Florovsky, Man's Disorder and God's Design. p. 43.

6

Loc. cit.

Montanists and Novations, were anxious to raise the moral level of the Church of the fourth century and tried to exclude those who did not conform to a rigorous standard of discipline. In the course of the long debates with the Donatists, Augustine was forced to develop a position on the nature of the Church "which clearly distinguished the visible institution in history from the true body of the faithful."⁷ To the charge of the Donatists, that he had two churches and thus had renounced the unity of the Church of God, Augustine replied that it was really one and the same Church, but its temporal manifestation must not be confused with its eternal nature. In its historic existence it was not yet perfect; it was now mixed with the ungodly but in its eternal fulfilment it would be pure and holy.⁸ It was this concept of "the invisible Church" which at a much later time proved to be so perilous as pointed out by Brunner.⁹

In another way Augustine laid the foundation for the development of the church concept of the Middle Ages. (He conceived of the Church as an instrument, that God uses to make His purpose known unto men, and to endow them with the divine

⁷
C.C. Richardson, The Church Through the Centuries.
(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 59.

⁸
Ibid., p. 61.

⁹
Emil Brunner, op. cit., p. 319.

life in Jesus Christ.) (He never hesitated to assert that the gospel, to which the historic Church witnessed, was the divine truth, and the sacraments that it administered were the very acts of God. It was this aspect of his teaching that had such a profound influence on the development of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and was really the basic presupposition on which the whole fabric of the medieval papacy was reared.) "It led to the development of the most extreme claims of the Church; and it was against this unwarranted identification of a particular institution with the sole channel of God's grace that the Reformers waged insistent and courageous warfare."¹⁰

To really understand the Church in the Middle Ages one must realize that (the unity of medieval society was ecclesiastical rather than political.) When during the Barbarian Invasions empires fell and classical civilization experienced an almost total eclipse, the church not only survived, but emerged stronger than ever before. (It was the one great all-inclusive organization whose influence transcended racial, national, and social barriers. The church gave meaning and direction to medieval life. Its authority was superior to that of all territorial princes. It conserved learning and culture during the dark days of the Barbarian Invasions. The ancient unity of

10

Richardson, op. cit., p. 64.

the Roman Empire found a new expression in the unity of catholic Europe. The Popes became the successors to the Caesars. To sum up, the "Church with its extensive organization, with its political, economic, and spiritual power, claimed to be the sole and ultimate authority in the world."¹¹)

All this lends a deeper meaning to the famous dictum "extra ecclesiam nulla salus". The Church was the savior of society and of civilization by preserving order, by providing stability, and by giving a certain unity to Western Europe. These are the salient features of the historical situation which gave to the Christians of the Middle Ages some basic conceptions of which even the Reformers could not free themselves to any great extent. (One of these controlling ideas was this, that religious uniformity is indispensable for social and political concord. Consequently, all those who disagreed with the Church on any religious issue were not only branded as heretics, but were also looked upon as rebels against the "Social Order"--the State. Another parallel idea was the conception that Church and State are but two aspects of one social organism. The Church was not only in, but of the world; it could not be "against the world" anymore because it was identified with it. The doctrine of the separation of church and State is of comparatively recent origin;

¹¹

Ibid., p. 79.

in the medieval world it was either a Church-state or a State-church, depending on the relative strength of the two, but the union was maintained in both manifestations.

Richardson very clearly discerns the difficulties and dangers of such a relation between Church and State. "It so involves the church in the temporal situation that it robs it of perspective to transcend it. It can never voice the judgment of God upon an age and culture, which is its prophetic mission."¹²

The claims of the Roman Church, however, did not pass unchallenged during the Middle Ages. Aside from the opposition which the papacy encountered from the territorial Church, *which* was usually allied with local and secular interests, it had to contend with a variety of sects which also challenged its authority. These anti-churchly sects in Italy, France, and South Germany sprang from many diverse traditions. The one factor which the dissenting bodies of the Middle Ages had in common was their determined opposition to the Roman hierarchy.¹³ We need not enter into a discussion of such opposition movements as the Waldenses and the Cathari at this point. Suffice it to say, that they were ruthlessly stamped out with the aid of the secular arm. It remained for the Reformers, who were

¹²

Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹³

Ibid., p. 125.

much better equipped to challenge the very premises of the Medieval concept of the Church, to vindicate the faith and convictions of these martyrs.

II. THE CHURCH CONCEPT OF THE REFORMERS

A movement so dynamic in nature and so gigantic in scope cannot be treated adequately in a few paragraphs. It will also not be necessary for the development of the central purpose of our study. We shall briefly direct our attention to the diversity of preparatory movements that had been at work during the later Middle Ages, indicate the variety of concepts of the nature of the Church which the Reformation produced, and then present the concepts of the Church of the two greatest leaders of the Reformation: Luther and Calvin.

(a) Diversity of Preparatory Movements.

Evangelical influences of many types and under diverse names long before the sixteenth century had prepared the way for the Reformation. The diversity of these forces is significant in that it accounts, partially at least, for the variety of concepts that arose regarding the nature of the Church. Dr. A. H. Newman in his Modern Church History discusses four such movements for reform. We can but mention them here:¹⁴

¹⁴A. H. Newman, Manual of Church History. Vol. II., (Philadelphia: American Baptist Pub. Society, 1931), p. 3-5.

Non-political, Biblical Reform. When the corrupt hierarchy of the Roman Church had reached the summit of its powers, the so-called "heretical" parties (Waldenses, Albigenses, etc.) raised their protest with great earnestness and courage. It seems that their attacks were directed more against the corruption of life than against false doctrinal conceptions and unscriptural organization of the Roman Catholic Church.

Patriotic-Realistic Reform. Christian patriots arose, which cried out against the extortions and oppressions to which their fatherlands were subjected. In these movements we have a strong blending of religious and patriotic motives for reform of the Church. The Hussite movement in Bohemia and the Wycliffite movement in England were of this type. The leaders of these movements were patriots in that they objected to the fleecing of the people by foreign priests, who performed no service in return for their extorted revenues. But they were also realists, believing in one universal Church, corresponding to an exalted ideal.

Mystical Reform. A little later came the mystics with profoundly speculative minds who despaired of reforming the Church and emphasized the importance of the inner life. Outward forms are of no account. We must become united with God, they taught, God being in us and we in God. Because of its indifference to external church order, this movement

could not of itself bring about a radical reform.

Humanistic Reform. The "Revival of Learning" with its contempt for scholasticism and human authority, its restoration of the study of the Scriptures in the original languages, its promotion of freedom of thought, was a powerful force in undermining the authority of the Roman Church.

The Humanists, like the Mystics, had a profound influence on the Reformers, because they were in essential agreement in their opposition to a hardened externalism and a mechanical institutionalism. Such works as the "German Theologia" and the writings of Tauler, which emphasized evangelism and a living piety, strongly influenced Luther. This can also be claimed for the Humanism of the Erasmian type. Humanism, however, was but a half-way house on the road to Reformation and could not effect a true reform.

Singly all these elements which had entered the arena one after another, had failed of immediate success. It was the genius of Luther, that in him all these elements were combined in a unique way. He was "influenced by and partially embodied in his reformatory scheme all the various reformatory forces that had been developed during the medieval time."¹⁵

¹⁵

Ibid., p. 41.

Although the Reformation presented a great diversity in its religious aspects, yet the Protestant churches were agreed in three fundamental convictions, according to Richardson.¹⁶ In the first place, they held that the Roman Church was not the sole and infallible medium of God's authority in the world. The will of God was not revealed in any human institution but was made known to men in the Holy Scriptures read by faith. We shall see later how the Anabaptists were in danger of overemphasizing this great truth. Secondly, the Reformers rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation whereby the grace of God was limited to the sacrament and made dependent upon the ministry of a priest who acted as mediator between the people and God. And thirdly, the Reformers with profound insight insisted that reconciliation was not the work of man, but of God. Forgiveness was the gift of God through Jesus Christ.

These were the cardinal elements of the gospel preached by the Reformers which shook the foundation of medieval Europe. The "Catholic Synthesis", (to use the phrase of Reinhold Niebuhr) was effectively destroyed. The basic medieval conception of the unity of Europe as an organic and corporate whole, founded and centered in the religious sanction of the Catholic Church, ceased to have its former appeal.

¹⁶Richardson, op. cit., p. 144.

"Christendom" passed away and the Catholic and Protestant states of Europe were born.¹⁷

The gospel of the Reformers was not successful, however, in effecting a new "Protestant Synthesis" although it must be admitted that they ardently desired it. Very soon after the dawn of the Reformation the Protestant body showed signs of division. These divisions were partly due to differences of interpretation of the Scriptures (cf. Luther's and Zwingli's disputation on the Lord's Supper), but perhaps much more to the social, economic, and political conditions that prevailed in various countries. As a result, a number of distinct concepts of the Church were produced by the Reformation.

(b) Variety of Concepts of the Church.

Richardson defines four dominant concepts of the church during the Reformation period.¹⁸ In the Lutheran concept the Church was regarded as the body of the faithful, the corporate society who had heard and received the Word of God. Its essential meaning was its foundation in faith, which was interpreted as the humble acceptance of God's forgiveness in Christ. In the Reformed concept, represented by Calvin, the Church was viewed from two points of view. On the one

¹⁷
Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁸
Ibid., p. 147.

hand it was the body of the elect whom God had chosen and predestined to salvation from among all men and throughout the ages. On the other hand the Church could be regarded as an institution, distinguished by its preaching of the doctrines of Holy Scripture and by its celebrating the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The faithful were commanded by God to belong to this institution for the nourishment of their spiritual life. In the Anglican view, as represented by Richard Hooker, there is also a distinction between the company of the elect and the institution like in the Reformed conception. But Hooker thought of the latter in national terms. While the Church in its temporal manifestation embraced believers all over the world, it was divided into distinct societies, each with its own ecclesiastical polity. To Hooker, the Church was the "nation on its knees". Church and State were two aspects of a single society. In this view we have a revival of the medieval conception of the organic unity of society. (The Anabaptist concept of the Church constitutes another distinct trend. To the Anabaptists the Church was an association of believers, united by the symbols of adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, and truly representing the Kingdom of God in this world by its perfect justice and goodness.) The above differentiation is of practical convenience for the student of church history. The "Why", however, is left unanswered. Perhaps for the theologian a more

satisfactory grouping of the Reformation Churches is found in Johannes Kuehn's book, Toleranz und Offenbarung (Leipzig, 1923) which is cited by Robert Friedmann in his article "Conceptions of the Anabaptists".¹⁹ Kuehn's attempt of classifying the multiplicity of Protestantism is rather unique in its approach--it is an advanced "geistesgeschichtlich" and psychological one. It grants Anabaptism for the first time an equal rank with many other collective phenomena of church history. Kuehn discerns in biblical ("offenbarungs gläubigen") Protestantism five types of motives. Let us briefly look at the Reformation bodies from this perspective.

The prophetic type. Kuehn finds in Luther an example of this prophetic attitude. Here the main duty is felt to be the proclamation of the revealed divine will. This is an absolute objective will recognizable in the Holy Scriptures and requiring pure faith. The establishment of a church on this basis is possible.

The spiritualistic type. Schwenckfeld and Roger Williams are given as examples. Obviously Kuehn is not concerned very much with the sociological outcomes, since he puts (Schwenckfeld--who was more a churchman than a sectarian--with Roger Williams, the typical leader of the "gathered" congregation or sect. For this type the objectivity of the divine

¹⁹Robert Friedmann, "Conception of the Anabaptists" Church History. Vol. 9, 1940, pp. 355-56.

will does not exist any longer, and Scripture is more freely interpreted according to the spirit. But this "spirit" is still genuinely religious and is not identified with reason.

The "taeuferische Nachfolge" type. As illustrations of this type he mentions the Anabaptists and Quakers, though the latter sect does not practice adult baptism. We shall deal more fully with this distinct characteristic of "discipleship" when we come to the cardinal elements of the Anabaptist concept of the Church.

The mystic type. Under this caption Kuehn discusses David Joris as well as Jakob Boehme. Perhaps this grouping is rather arbitrary since Rufus M. Jones discusses Jakob Boehme as the most important continental forerunner of Quakerism, but classifies him as a "spiritual reformer" while Kuehn rightly calls him a mystic. Whether David Joris with his Messianism was mystic or spiritualistic, or something else, is a debatable question.

The ethical and rational type. Such men as Castellio, Arimnius, and Spener are given as examples and representatives of groups with whom the ethical and rational motives in religion are dominant. This is the "most effective type in the fight for religious freedom, comparable only to the Anabaptists, though their motives for tolerance were different."²⁰

²⁰Ibid., p. 356.

Since Kuehn's special purpose was to show the attitude of various groups toward the toleration issue, his classification is open to several serious criticisms. In the first place, we may point out that these five types by no means exhaust the fullness of religious phenomena of modern times. The main criticism must be directed to the point, however, that no attempt at classification can be satisfactory in the face of historical reality. There are no pure types. It is well known, that practically all these men, eager for true reform, "ran through manifold varieties of religious attitudes--especially in the stirring decade of 1520-1530."²¹

Friedmann advocates another starting-point for classifying the Protestant bodies of the Reformation. This starting-point could supplement the one referred to and might be formulated as a question: "What attitude does one take toward the Holy Bible and especially the New Testament? What does one think of it or which part of it has been chosen as the definite truth and pattern of one's life?"²² It is true, that this attempt at classification also has its limitations and must not be pressed too far; nevertheless it seems to me, that it furnishes a perspective which aims directly at

²¹Ibid., p. 359.²²Loc. cit.

fundamental problems and basic positions. Friedmann presents the summary of his survey on this question in form of a chart which is both interesting and illuminating.²³ A fuller study of the whole range of the Reformation movements from this point of view should yield important information on the formative influences that molded the various conceptions of the Church which originated in that period.

With these preliminary observations and considerations as a general framework, we now turn to the Church concept of the great Reformers.

(c) Luther's Concept of the Church.

Luther's concept of the Church was conditioned on the one hand by his personal experience of salvation, and on the other hand by the social, economic and political factors in Germany. As Emil Brunner reminds us, "We must never forget that their (i.e. the Reformers) knowledge was gained and defined through an historical situation--through, that is, their struggle against Romish error."²⁴ (Motivated by a genuine experience of God's grace and impelled by an inward constraint, Luther becomes the great Reformer. His personal appropriation of the truth "that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28) became the material principle

²³

Ibid., p. 361.

²⁴ Brunner, op. cit., p. 319.

(sola fide); the conviction, that in matters of faith and doctrine the Scriptures should be the only authority becomes the formal principle (sola canonica scriptura) of the evangelical church.²⁵

Luther's concept of the church cannot be understood without an examination of these principles. The meaning that the "Word" had for Luther must be grasped. At the center of Luther's Church concept stands, not predestination, but the word of salvation, as Pauck²⁶ points out in comparing the views of Luther and Butzer. Members of the true Church and of the Kingdom of God are those believers who have received their justification in the Word. The Church, in its invisible character as a *Communio Sanctorum*, cannot exist without the Word. The Word of God, Luther contends, is the personal manifestation to us of our salvation. It is the power of God which enables us to grasp his promises. To Luther this dynamic Word of God was conveyed particularly through Holy Scripture, although he does not identify the two. God spoke through it. It was the channel, the medium, the occasion of God's Word.²⁷ Hence the preaching of this "Word" was for Luther one of the marks of a true

²⁵

Emil Haendiges, "Die Kirchen der Reformation", Mennonitisches Lexikon. Vol. 2. (Frankfurt am Main und Weierhof: Published by Christian Hege and D.Christian Neff, 1937), p. 51.

²⁶

W. Pauck, Luther and Butzer, Journal of Religion. Vol. 9, 1929, p. 89.

²⁷

Richardson, op. cit., p. 148.

Church--the other being the proper administration of the sacraments.

Closely related to this formal principle of the Word is Luther's material principle of faith: Luther identifies the Kingdom of God with the communion of those who have accepted the Word in faith; who have become real children of God through their God-given faith. The constitutive element of the Kingdom of God is faith. The Word of God creates in man faith, the assurance of God's forgiveness, trust in Christ. This faith is a matter of spiritual life or death and concerns man's ultimate salvation. "It is at once the gift of God and man's response to God. By it is the Church created."²⁸

Now just how did Luther conceive of the nature of the Church? In his rather comprehensive treatise Von den Concilien und Kirchen (which he finished in 1539) Luther confesses his faith in the church in the following words: "I believe in a holy, Christian church, the communion of saints. Faith interprets clearly, what is meant by the Church: it is the communion of saints, i.e. a group or gathering of such people who are Christians and holy; in other words, a Christian, holy group or Church."²⁹ (Free translation)

²⁸

Ibid., p. 149.

²⁹

Martin Luther, "Von den Concilien und Kirchen" Luther's Werke, Vol. 2. (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1905) p. 137.

Luther then proceeds to show how the term "Church" (Kirche) has largely lost its original meaning of a "Christian, holy people" and that due to this loss much confusion with regard to the "Church" has arisen in Christendom. The Church has become identified with an institution. Luther saw the Church not as an institution, but as a fellowship of God's people. One of the favorite expressions of Luther's for the Church was "Sanctorum Communio"; a fellowship of the saints. Brunner sees in this new concept of the Church of the Reformers their fundamental task. "The Reformation was basically a protest against this institutionalized Church which had grievously erred from the New Testament concept of revelation, truth, and Church"...."Luther likewise discovered the import of personal fellowship involved in the Church, that is, a fellowship grounded in Christ."³⁰

This high ideal, however, as Brunner also points out, was not realized by Luther. The Reformers were not able to banish entirely the Roman Catholic heritage. They were unable to rid themselves of the representation of the Church as an institution. In their teaching they fully overcame such an impersonal concept, but in the practical life of the Church, and, in what Brunner calls the "instinctive view" of the

30

Emil Brunner, "One Holy Catholic Church", Theology Today, Vol. 4, 1947, p. 321.

Church, this idea has persisted.³¹

There is abundant evidence that although the original goal sought by Luther and Zwingli was an "earnest Christianity" for all, the actual outcome was far less, for the level of Christian living among the Protestant population was frequently lower than it had been before the Reformation under Catholicism. Luther himself was keenly conscious of this deficiency. In April, 1522, he expressed the hope that, "We who at the present are well nigh heathen under a Christian name, may yet organize a Christian assembly." (Taken from an unpublished manuscript in the Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern)³² Between 1522 and 1527 Luther repeatedly mentioned his concern to establish a true Christian church, and his desire to provide for earnest Christians ("Die mit Ernst Christen sein wollen") who would confess the gospel with their lives as well as with their tongues. He seems to have thought of a "gathered" Church at times, entering the names of the "earnest Christians" in a special book and having them meet separately from the mass of nominal christians. But he had to abandon the idea. In his preface to "von der deutschen Messe and Ordnung des Gottesdienstes" he makes this admission: "But I am not able as yet to

³¹

Ibid., p. 322.

³²

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, Church History, Vol. XIII., 1944, p. 12.

organize such a congregation or assembly, because I do not have the people or persons, and can't find very many who would qualify. If the time should ever come, however, when because of my conscience I can't leave the matter, I shall do my part and do the best I can to help." (Free translation)³³ But that time never came for Luther. He was placed in a historical situation which made it impossible to carry out his earlier ideal. Both Luther and Zwingli decided that it was better to include the masses within the fold of the Church than to form a fellowship of true Christians only. Both certainly expected, of course, that the preaching of the Word and the ministration of the sacraments to bear fruit in an earnest Christian life. The Anabaptists felt, that in taking this course, the Reformers were giving up their original purpose, and abandoned the divine intention. Others may claim that this was the only practical and wise course for them to adopt.³⁴

It may be argued that Luther never completely and consistently adopted the concept of "earnest Christians" only, but that along with it he also retained the other concept of the Church as an institution of social control. "It may be

33

Emil Haendiges, "Kirchen der Reformation", Memnonitisches Lexikon, citing M. Luther in his preface to "Von der deutschen Messe und Ordnung des Gottesdienstes". p. 51.

34

Bender, op. cit., p. 12.

agreed" says Bender³⁵ "that Luther held the two concepts for a time and that he finally abandoned the former in favor of the latter, but the fact nevertheless remains that the former was for a time dominant, and that it is the implicit meaning of his whole basic theological position." What caused Luther to modify his concept of the Church? We will find the answer by an examination of social and political conditions in Germany at that time. (The peasants of South Germany had eagerly accepted the message of freedom from Rome as preached by the Reformers. But they were not satisfied with religious liberty merely--many also desired deliverance from economic and political oppression. The Peasant Revolt, with its shocking excesses, fundamentally changed the whole course of the Lutheran Reformation. Although Luther was the son of a peasant, and extremely concerned about the conditions of the peasant class, he was never in favor of the revolt, and did all in his power to stem it by preaching and writing. But in vain. He finally wrote a pamphlet in which he called upon the princes to crush the uprising of the "murdering, thriving hordes of peasants."

In this respect, perhaps, Luther did not really understand the tendency of the religious movement he inaugurated,

35

Loc. cit., (Footnote).

and ere long the movement threatened to go farther and faster than he contemplated--"to develop a more radical, subjective and democratic character".³⁶ The problem was precipitated by certain radical associates and followers of Luther, pre-eminently among whom was Carlstadt, who misinterpreted Luther's teaching concerning the "Word" as meaning a new "law". Though Carlstadt was not an advocate of revolutionary violence and had refused to make common cause with extremists like Muentzer, yet he preached a more radical religious reformation than commended itself to Luther. The result was the "disruption of the Reformation party, and this disruption is of great significance for the connection of the social Revolution with the religious Reformation".³⁷

The Peasant Revolt had far-reaching effects upon the course of the Reformation. It gave to Luther a deep and abiding distrust of the "common man" and he consequently turned to the princes for the support of his reforms. Perhaps Richardson³⁸ is right where he observes that "the alliance of Protestantism with the secular princes was the only practical way of establishing the Evangelical Church in Germany and of

³⁶

James Mackinnon, Luther and the Reformation. Vol. III. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), p. 180.

³⁷

Loc. cit.

³⁸

Richardson, op. cit., p. 153.

defeating the Roman Catholic powers".

This alliance, which proved fatally dangerous to the "prophetic vitality" of the Church, was necessitated by another potent historical factor--the threat of extermination by strong and hostile Catholic powers. Weakened by divisions from within, and threatened by the greatest secular and ecclesiastical powers from without, Luther felt there was no alternative to save the Protestant cause than by accepting the control of the movement by territorial German princes.

These developments had their inevitable consequences. In his doctrine of the Church Luther referred to an "inner" and an "outer" christendom. By the first he meant the true Christian assembly of one accord in faith the world over. By the latter he signified the external manifestation of that community, its organization, the visible local congregation with their rites and buildings and ministry.³⁹ Luther does not, however, distinguish between a "visible" and an "invisible" church. The two aspects mentioned above to Luther represent one entity and stand in a relation comparable to that of body and soul.

Another result of the historical developments in Germany was the creation of the territorial church. The interests of the Church became uniquely allied with those of local

³⁹

Ibid., p. 150.

territories, but often they were also subordinated to them. The only way to realize some kind of social justice was possible in so far as the princes were willing to act in the best interests of the people. But such ideal princes were hard to find and Luther himself admitted, "that princes were most often the greatest fools or the worst knaves on earth".⁴⁰

In his masterful analysis of the Lutheran Reformation, Reinhold Niebuhr⁴¹ points out that Luther's distinction between an "inner" and "outer" kingdom became in effect, a distinction between private and public morality. He places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to realistic, official ethic. He demands that "the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice; yet he asks suffering and nonresistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice".⁴² Luther's disappointment in his later years at the final outcome of the Reformation was no doubt largely due to the defeat of his cause in the field of social and political ethics.

⁴⁰

Ibid., p. 152.

⁴¹

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man. Vol. II. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 194.

⁴²

Ibid., p. 195.

(d) Calvin's Concept of the Church.

Of all the Reformers, Calvin's concept of the Church unquestionably had the profoundest effect on the course of the Protestant Reformation, because the influence of Geneva spread to France, England, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Reformers, who had been disciplined in the thought and churchly practice of Calvin, carried abroad the spirit of Puritanism and democracy, which was so vitally to affect the fortunes of Europe and America. Because we have dealt with the general problems of the Reformers in our study of the Lutheran concept of the Church, we shall confine ourselves now to a description of the more distinctive aspects of Calvin's concept of the Church.

Calvin was the great organizing genius of the Reformation, whereas Luther was its great prophetic spirit. Calvin brought to the Protestant cause exactly what it had so far lacked--discipline and order. He saved the Reformation from the chaos into which the prophetic spirit alone might have led it. He made the Genevan Church a model institution which became the center of the Protestant cause in Europe. Theoretically, the Church was clearly distinct from the secular authority in its rights and organization; practically, however, the strong arm of the State was employed to enforce the observance of the religious and ethical principles of Calvinism. Such a relationship involved the same problem which had

agitated the Middle Ages. Which was the final authority, the Church or the secular power?⁴³

Although Calvin formulates his doctrine on the basis of scriptural authority, (especially the passage in Ephesians 4:11-16) it is now generally admitted, that his concept of the Church was modified greatly through his association with the great Reformer of Strassburg, Martin Butzer. During the years of his stay in that city he became quite "butzerian" in his views on such doctrines as the Lord's Supper, predestination, and the Church. In showing the great influence that Butzer has had in the formative period of Calvin's life, Pauck⁴⁴ makes the following rather bold claim, "The type of Church which we call, in our day, Calvinistic or Reformed, is really a gift of Martin Butzer to the world, through the work of his strong and brilliant executive Calvin." It should not be imagined, however, that Calvin was a mere follower of Butzer. Whatever Calvin accepted from Butzer he transformed, improved, corrected, and made it his very own, so that it became Calvinistic in a very real sense.

Calvin develops his doctrine of the Church in Book IV of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. It is interesting to note how Calvin conceives of the nature and formation

43

Richardson, op. cit., p. 156.

44

Pauck, op. cit., p. 245.

of the Church. In speaking of the necessity of the visible Church, he compares her to a mother in the family. "How useful and necessary it is for us to know her; since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh, 'and become like the angels'."⁴⁵ Because of man's natural ignorance and slothfulness he requires external aids for the generation, progressive advance, and completion of faith in his heart. "God has provided such aids in compassion to our infirmity, and that the preaching of the gospel might be maintained, he has deposited this treasure with the Church."⁴⁶ The practical concern of Calvin as a pastor and churchman is strongly in evidence in the above quotations.

Calvin, however, makes a distinction between the "visible" and the "invisible" Church; in fact, this distinction is one of the controlling thoughts in Calvin's conception of the Church. In reference to the Apostles' Creed he identifies the catholic or universal church with the "communion of Saints" as seen from the following quotations:

45

H. T. Kerr, A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Chr. Education, 1939.), p. 154.

46

Ibid., p. 151.

That article of the Creed, in which we profess to believe the Church, refers not only to the visible church of which we are now speaking, but likewise to all the elect of God, including the dead as well as the living... The Church is called catholic, or universal; because there could not be two or three churches, without Christ being divided, which is impossible. But all the elect of God are so connected with each other in Christ, that as they depend upon one head, so they grow up together in one body....being made truly one, as living by one faith, hope and charity, through the same Divine Spirit, being called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but also to a participation of one God and Christ.⁴⁷

This holy and perfect Church is known to God alone; and although it escapes our observation, Calvin teaches, its existence is real to us as an object of faith.

Although Calvin conceived of both the visible and invisible church as catholic, he refused to identify the transcendent spiritual body with any temporal manifestation in history. Of the latter he says that it is composed of "the whole multitude, dispersed all over the world, who profess to worship one God and Jesus Christ who are initiated into his faith by baptism, who testify their unity in true doctrine and charity by a participation of the sacred supper, who consent to the word of the Lord, and preserve the ministry which Christ has instituted for the purpose of preaching it".⁴⁸ In this visible church are found many hypocrites, who are christian in name only. These however, must be tolerated for a time,

⁴⁷

Ibid., p. 152.

⁴⁸

Ibid., p. 154.

either because they cannot be convicted by a legitimate process, or because discipline is not always maintained with sufficient vigor. He warns specifically against judging others and withdrawing from the communion of the Church as long as it preserves the true ministry of word and sacraments.

"A departure from the Church is a renunciation of God and Christ."⁴⁹

The unity of the temporal church was not Calvin's only concern. As Luther's work centered primarily around the restoration of "pure doctrine", so Calvin's efforts centered around the establishment of a "pure Church" as his ministry in Geneva amply demonstrates. But just what constitutes the true Church in the conception of Calvin? His answer is clear and concise...

Wherever we find the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there, it is not to be doubted, is a Church of God; for his promise can never deceive-- 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them'.⁵⁰

Hence the Church, as an ecclesiastical institution upon the earth, is recognizable by two marks according to Calvin: The true preaching and reverant hearing of the Word, and the right administration of the sacraments. (It should be noted, that

49

Ibid., p. 156.

50

Ibid., p. 155.

the emphasis on proper "hearing" of the Word introduces a subjective element which is not so evident in Luther's criteria of a true church.)

To these two Calvin adds the discipline by which they are maintained. Calvin's legal training and outlook are manifested in his emphasis on the power of the Church in legislation and jurisdiction. "Discipline is likened to the ligaments, that hold the body together".⁵¹ It was useful to avoid scandal and corruption and to secure the repentance of wrongdoers. This idea of discipline as a mark of the true Church played an important role in the development of the Reformed Churches. Puritan thinking was deeply rooted in this aspect of Calvin's teaching. For Calvin the Church was not only an institution of salvation, but also an institution for the training of the elect in all the details of their religion and moral life. In speaking of this aspect of the work of the Reformers in Geneva Richardson⁵² states; that it "made for an ecclesiastical intolerance and close moral supervision, which surpassed that of the Medieval Church". This tendency towards moralism and legalism is evident not only in Calvin's concept of the Church, but in his whole theology there are evidences of a

51

J. T. McNeill, Books of Faith and Power. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1947), p. 52.

52

Richardson, op. cit., p. 158.

legalistic spirit as pointed out also by Reinhold Niebuhr.⁵³

Calvin's concept of the Church might be described as constituting a theocracy. Although this concept was modified by the historical situation in Geneva, it is rooted in a more basic, underlying conviction. This conviction, it seems to me, was not derived primarily and exclusively from the New Testament concept of the Church, but was rooted in the Old Testament conception of a theocracy as illustrated by the history of Israel. The idea of a theocracy, so prominent in medieval thought, reappears in a modified form in Calvin's concept of the Church. This fact, I believe, explains some of the subordinate principles of Calvin's teaching concerning the Church, ^{such} and as those governing the relation of Church and State, pedobaptism (a rite which replaces circumcision), as an initiation into the fellowship of those regenerated in Christ, etc.

Our criticisms of Calvin's concept do not blind us to the fact, however, that it provided an impetus and a program for the building of a Christian community unparalleled in the annals of church history. The activism of the Puritans can be traced back to this origin; and, in our own day, the ecumenical movement derives some of its inspiration from this

53.

Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 198-204.

source⁵⁴ as expressed by J. T. McNeill, ⁵⁴ "In Calvinism the world society is a definite object of hope and of ameliorative effort."

III. THE ANABAPTIST VISION

Side by side with the Lutheran and Reformed concepts of the Church, there emerged on the continent of Europe a third distinct ideal of the Church which was held by the so-called Anabaptists. The Anabaptist quarrel with the Reformers was basically a conflict of concepts of the Church. It was not, as Social Democrats have claimed, primarily a matter of class alignment and economic interest. Neither was the conflict due to Anabaptist prophetism, revolutionary violence and social disorder, except for certain marginal groups which the "Taeufer" repudiated vigorously and completely.⁵⁵ The essence of Anabaptism was its peculiar concept of the Church which set it apart from Catholicism, Lutheranism and the other movements of the sixteenth century. In describing the Anabaptist vision, Dr. Bender makes the following statements:

54

J. T. McNeill, Christian Hope for World Society. (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Company, 1937), p. 111.

55

F. H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Theology of Missions". The Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol XXI. (Goshen, Indiana: Published by Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College, 1947), p. 8.

(A new concept of the Church was created by the central principle of newness of life and applied Christianity. Voluntary church membership based upon true conversion and involving commitment to holy living and discipleship was the absolutely essential heart of this concept. This vision stands in sharp contrast to the Church concept of the Reformers who retained the medieval idea of a mass Church with membership of the entire population from birth to the grave compulsory by law and force.⁵⁶)

(It is from the standpoint of this new concept of the Church that the various Anabaptist doctrines and practices must be interpreted.) (Their opposition to infant baptism, their insistence on the separation of the Church from the world, their principle of a true brotherhood--all are rooted in this fundamental conception. In this brief pre-view of the Anabaptist concept of the Church we may also point out, that the Anabaptist vision had for its final objective not so much a reformation of the Church, but rather the restoration of primitive Christianity as found in the New Testament.) Kenneth Scott Lataurette,⁵⁷ in describing this feature of the movement makes the following observation, "The radicals endeavored to disregard all that intervened between the first century and their day and to return to what they believed they found in the New Testament and only to that." It is at this point where they differed widely from the Reformers, who still held to much

56

Bender, op. cit., p. 18.

57

Kenneth Scott Lataurette, "The Future of Christianity", Church History, Vol. XV, 1946, p. 13.

which was associated with the historic development of the Church. I think we shall see in our later analysis that in this radicalism can be found both, the strength as well as the weakness of the whole movement.

A careful study and analysis of the Anabaptist concept of the Church becomes increasingly significant in view of present-day trends in Protestantism. Protestantism is becoming more weighted on the left wing, radical phases of the movement. As eminent an authority as Professor Lataurette⁵⁸ points out that "the enlarging prominence of American Christianity means the growing strength of the radical wing of Protestantism." He goes on to state that "in the United States more than half of the Protestant church membership is from those bodies, such as the Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Congregationalists, which are near the extreme left of the movement". "From the radical wing come a majority of the missionaries who are propagating Protestant Christianity in other lands."

The Anabaptist heritage to American Christianity consists of a number of cherished principles, such as separation of Church and State, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, etc. which have found universal acceptance and application only in the Anglo-Saxon world and especially in North America. Perhaps the best characterization of Anabaptism and its

*Anabaptist
influence
on
American
Christianity*

58

Lataurette, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

contribution to our modern Protestant heritage is found in the following words of Rufus M. Jones:

Judged by the reception it met at the hands of those in power, both in Church and State, equally in Roman Catholic and in 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 nonconformist sects have sprung, and it is the first plain announcement in modern history of a programme 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 State in which every man counts as a man, and has his share in shaping both Church and State.)⁵⁹

In our next chapter we shall briefly outline the historical origin and development of the Anabaptist movement.

59

R. M. Jones, as cited by H. S. Bender in "The Anabaptist Vision", Church History, Vol. XIII, 1944, p. 3.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ANABAPTISM (INTRODUCTORY)

The Anabaptists, or Katabaptists (Wiedertaeufer or Taeufer) rose in close connection with the early Reformers at Zuerick, Wittenberg, and possibly elsewhere. They spread swiftly over those parts of Europe affected by the Reformation making a profound impression in the early years of that movement. All the leading Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Butzer, Oecolampadius, Calvin, Knox, and many others) combated their views in one or more publications and disputations. Many of the leading creeds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries condemn their doctrines either explicitly or by implication. Calvin's Institutes were originally written largely to prove to Francis I that not all the Reformers were Anabaptists.¹ They were put under the ban by the Diet of Speier in 1529, and most other civil governments took action against them, including that of England.

It is perhaps essential to begin with a definition of the term "Anabaptist", since the name has come to be used in

¹W. J. M'Glothlin, "Anabaptism", Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings, Vol. I. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 406.

modern historiography to cover a wide variety of Reformation groups, sometimes thought of as the whole "left wing of the Reformation" (Roland Bainton) or, "the Bolsheviks of the Reformation" (Preserved Smith).² The name Anabaptists (meaning "Rebaptizers") was applied rather indiscriminately by their opponents to many radicals among the Protestants in Reformation times, who, although differing in many important doctrines and practices, were one in their opposition to infant baptism, which they held to be unscriptural and therefore not true baptism. They did not regard their baptism as a rebaptism, because they held, in opposition to the Church doctrine, that baptism should be administered only to those who were old enough to express by means of it their acceptance of the Christian faith. The Anabaptists themselves disliked the name foisted on them, because it gave expression to a tenet which they did not regard as the basic distinguishing characteristic of the movement. They preferred to call themselves simply "Brethren". Because of the great diversity of groups in various countries of Europe, and sometimes even within a single state, it is rather difficult to deal with them as a movement or to classify them properly. Much research work has been done in this field in recent years; and although the

2

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, Church History. Vol. XIII, p. 8.

definitive history of Anabaptism has not yet been written, we know enough today to draw a clear line of demarcation between original evangelical and constructive Anabaptism on the one hand, which was born in the bosom of Zwinglianism in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1525, and established in the Low Countries in 1533, and the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, or even Antinomian groups on the other hand. These latter groups, the "pink fringe" of Anabaptism, did not survive the period of storm and stress, and yet their fanaticism and their excesses have been used again and again to stigmatize the whole movement. Anabaptism proper, however, maintained an unbroken course in Switzerland, South Germany, Austria, and Holland throughout the sixteenth century, and has continued until the present day not only in the Mennonite movement, now almost 500,000 baptized members strong in Europe and America, but also (although in a modified form) in the Baptist churches in the various countries in certain other groups.

There is no longer any excuse for permitting our understanding of the distinct character of this genuine Anabaptism to be obscured by Thomas Muentzer and the Peasants War, the Muensterites, or any other aberration of Protestantism in the sixteenth century.³

3

Loc. cit.

In studying this movement the following facts should be borne in mind: (1) The Anabaptists did not invent their rejection of infant baptism, for there have always been parties in the Church which were Antipedobaptists.⁴ (2) There are two kinds of Anabaptists, the "sober" and the "fanatical". Failure to make this distinction has caused much confusion and made a proper study of genuine Anabaptism almost impossible. (3) Until recently, information concerning the Anabaptists was largely derived from prejudiced or deficient sources.⁵

Evangelical and constructive Anabaptism, which is largely responsible for the development of a new Church concept, originated in several geographical areas under somewhat different religious, social, economic, and political conditions. This accounts also for a variation in the emphasis of certain doctrines. The history of the movement can perhaps best be followed by dividing them into Swiss, Moravian, and Dutch Anabaptists.

I. ANABAPTISM IN SWITZERLAND

The natural starting point for a historical study of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement, both from a logical

4

See A. H. Newman, A History of Antipedobaptism. (Philadelphia, 1897).

5

The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. I, (New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls Co.), p. 161.

and chronological point of view, is Switzerland. The story of the early Swiss Anabaptists may be outlined in its main phases under the following heads: (1) The Swiss Brethren movement as the radical wing of Zwinglianism; (2) The Birth of Anabaptism as a distinct and separatist movement; and (3) The expansion and persecution of Swiss Anabaptists.

1. The Swiss Brethren Movement as a Radical Wing of Zwinglianism. Zwingli's early reformatory preaching awakened great interest among the radicals of Switzerland and the neighboring provinces. All classes of social and religious reformers rallied to his support. By 1523 a large proportion of the people were prepared to cast off the papal yoke and to abolish all unscriptural Romish practices. Zwingli's "Sixty-seven Articles" that formed the program of the first disputation (1523) were thorough-going in their evangelical character, making the Scriptures the only rule of faith and practice. In the early period of his reforming career, Zwingli was in many respects a more radical Reformer than Luther. Monasteries were abolished, church property was confiscated and appropriated for education, simple church services were introduced, the mass was abolished and the Lord's Supper celebrated as a memorial of Christ's death.

Zwingli's powerful gospel preaching attracted many able young men to his cause. In 1522 Wilhelm Reublin, driven out

of Basel because of his excessive reforming zeal, joined the Zuerich circle as pastor in the neighboring village of Wytekön. Reublin, who later became one of the early leaders of the Anabaptist movement, was the first of the clergy to take a wife. At the same time Ludwig Hetzer, by birth a South-German, and by training a learned Hebraist, greatly stirred up the populace with a tract against images and pictures used in worship. Just across the border, in Waldshut, a former university rector and famous theologian, Balthasar Hubmaier, was carrying on a successful reforming movement. Hubmaier conferred with Zwingli on infant baptism, and secured from him the confession that children should not be baptized before they are instructed in the faith.⁶ Another zealous co-reformer of Zwingli was Simon Stumpf, who as pastor of a village on the outskirts of Zuerich was preaching against tithes and rents.

Among the most distinguished associates of Zwingli must be named Felix Manz, an accomplished classical and Hebrew scholar, and Conrad Grebel, who must be considered as the founder of Swiss Anabaptism.⁷ Grebel had received a university training under humanistic influences. Like the learned and respected canon, Dr. H. Engelhart, who through Zwingli's preaching

⁶ A. H. Newman, A Manual of Church History, Vol. II., p. 170.

⁷ H. S. Bender, "Conrad Grebel", Church History, Vol. VII., p. 165.

confessed that he was "changed from a doctor of Roman law to a poor scholar of Christ", Grebel was changed from a loose-living humanist university student to a devout and earnest Christian.⁸

Almost at once he was a leader in the devoted group of younger men who stepped to Zwingli's side in the conflict. Zwingli recognized and valued Grebel's support and permitted him to publish a vigorous poetic ode hailing the Reformation. A close and intimate friendship developed between these two men. Zwingli apparently planned to have Grebel appointed to the university or theological school which he expected to establish. The close relationship between Zwingli and Grebel was maintained until the second Zuerich disputation of October, 1523.⁹ Already in January of 1523 Zwingli, desirous of testing out the opinion of the public in matters of reform, arranged for a general debate in Zuerich, in which all parties, Catholics included, were to express themselves freely on the religious questions of the day. Here Zwingli showed himself not only as reformer, but as statesman. He advocated many innovations, but he refused to march ahead of public opinion. His middle position between conservatives and radicals brought him into favor with the city council, which henceforth espoused

⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

the cause of reform in Zuerich. During the latter half of 1523, Grebel, Manz, Stumpf, and other radical leaders had repeated conferences with Zwingli, in which they urged him to take measures for setting up a pure Church, regardless of the attitude of political authorities. Zwingli was conciliatory and promised to proceed as rapidly as he prudently could, but urged them to be patient and pointed out the disastrous consequences of schism. A large group of radicals in the canton of Zuerich kept up a persistent agitation from this time forward and their distrust of Zwingli soon became complete. Beginning with the October (1523) disputation, a cleavage arose between Zwingli and his radical associates which gradually grew wider during the ensuing months until in the fall of 1524 it led to a complete break. It went so far as to cause Zwingli to condemn Grebel and his friends publicly from the pulpit as "Satans going about as angels of light, while Grebel responded by condemning Zwingli and his assistants as false shepherds."¹⁰

2. The Birth of Anabaptism as a Distinct and Separatist Movement. The October disputation was called to discuss the issues that separated the different factions of the Reformed group and for the purpose of putting on pressure on the city council to institute immediate reforms in the Church life of

¹⁰
Loc. cit.

Zuerich by abolishing the mass and doing away with images. Zwingli made valiant speeches during the disputation urging these reforms. But when he saw that the city fathers were not ready for such a radical step, he beat a strategic retreat. Grebel and the other radicals protested and demanded that the city council should not be allowed to decide the matter, since all were agreed on what the Word of God required. But Zwingli would not break with the council, so a break with the "Brethren" became inevitable.

When Zwingli suggested in the course of a controversy that certain irreconcilable differences between the factions should be referred to the Zuerich Council for final decision, Simon Stumpf, the spokesman on this occasion for the radicals declared, "Master Ulrich, you have no right to refer this question to the council; the matter is already settled, the Spirit of God has decided."¹¹ Here then was the issue: (should the civil state continue to dictate the faith and life and worship of the Church or should the pastors and laity themselves carry through the necessary reforms in the life of the Church according to their God-given convictions? (Although the final break came over the question of infant baptism, the real issue was the nature of the Church.)

11

C. H. Smith, The Story of the Mennonites. Berne, Indiana: Mennonite Book Concern, 1941, p. 12.

After the second disputation of Zuerich a growing estrangement took place between Zwingli and the radicals. Grebel and his friends felt they had been betrayed by the leader whom they trusted. Zwingli, on his part, bearing the burden of actual responsibility and aware of the strength of Catholic opposition, could not help but view his critics as irresponsible young radicals who had not yet learned the lesson of patience. Zwingli was in a dilemma. On the one hand he was favorably disposed towards many principles held by the radicals, yet on the other hand he failed to see how they could be realized in the practical situation in which he found himself. According to Zwingli's own testimony, these men repeatedly came to him with the proposal that he set up a new kind of voluntary Christian Church, composed of believers only. The struggle continued for months. It finally became clear, that Zwingli would not follow the new plan. He feared the consequences of such radical changes and reforms. In commenting on Zwingli's decision, Bender has this to say:

Perhaps Zwingli was right, but at any rate the issue was clear between him and Grebel, and the break was inevitable. (Grebel did not believe in considering consequences and trimming sails; he wanted absolute unflinching loyalty to the Word of God regardless of consequences. And he was willing to accept the consequences in his own personal experience.)¹²

¹²

Bender, "Conrad Grebel", Church History. op. cit., p. 169.

Those who held to the views of Grebel, Manz, and the other radical reformers, did not immediately proceed to organize a new Church. They met frequently for fellowship and Bible study. During this period of waiting they tried to find allies outside of Zuerich. Grebel established a contact with Carlstadt who had broken with Luther on similar grounds as Grebel had with Zwingli. But because of the bitter opposition of Zwingli and the weakness of the Grebel group Carlstadt did not enter into closer relations with the latter.

Grebel tried to establish contact with another Lutheran preacher, who had ceased to be a disciple of Luther--Thomas Muentzer. In September of 1524 he wrote to Muentzer in the name of his little group. This letter never reached Muentzer, yet it has been used as evidence by later enemies of the Anabaptist movement to prove a community of faith and practice between Grebel and Muentzer and that Grebel and his friends frequently visited Muentzer during the latter's brief visit to Basel in November, 1524. But there is no evidence of this. The letter itself actually proves the opposite, since Grebel warns Muentzer of several false steps he was making.

Having failed to establish any outside contact, the Brethren were forced to rely on their own resources. Through their study of the Scriptures they became convinced that infant baptism lacked a scriptural basis and they began to declare themselves publicly against it. The first refusals to

baptize infants occurred in the spring of 1524 in the parish of W. Reublin. Zwingli became alarmed. He and the council tried to win the objectors to infant baptism by private discussion; but all the devious and spurious arguments which Zwingli and his fellow-pastors used in support of the practice could not convince these simple-minded biblicists.¹³

In order to quell the rebellion (Aufruhr), as Zwingli called it, vigorous action was necessary. On January 17, 1525, another disputation was held between Zwingli and the Anabaptist leaders, in which Zwingli defended infant baptism. The council declared Zwingli victorious (which was really a foregone conclusion) and required that all unbaptized children be baptized within eight days on pain of the banishment of the responsible parties, and ordered immediate cessation of activity by Grebel and Manz and their associates. The Grebel group would not compromise, for their consciences were bound by the Word of God as much as Luther's was at Worms. The final break was at hand. Zwingli had forced the issue in his determination to root out the opposition to his program. In this hour of crisis a new movement was born. Bender thus describes this historic event:

....When the little group of brethren met for counsel to determine their course of action, probably on the evening of the 21st, they had no program of introducing rebaptism. In fact, such a thing had never been mentioned

¹³ Ibid., p. 171.

*Often the very issues
we separate ourselves
from become the cornerstone
and stumbling stone of
our faith - Similarly
Jesus Christ*

in the entire course of the struggle. But in a moment of inspiration by what they confidently believed was divine guidance, adult baptism was introduced in this little meeting, with Grebel performing the first baptism....This was the birthday of Anabaptism.¹⁴

3. Expansion and Persecution. Right from the beginning there was a remarkable growth and expansion. Driven on by the rod of persecution, and urged forward by a burning zeal to share their newfound freedom with their fellows, the leaders soon carried their faith into neighboring territories. Anabaptist centers were soon established in all the important cities of the northern cantons. In Appenzell, according to one authority, a congregation of fifteen hundred was organized in a short time. In St. Gall the new faith almost made a clean sweep, nearly emptying the Catholic churches.¹⁵ In Waldshut Dr. Hubmaier and practically his whole congregation embraced the new faith and submitted to baptism. Under the leadership of such men as Reublin, Hetzer, Hubmaier, and others the movement rapidly flowed over into South Germany, Tyrol, Austria and Moravia. Sebastian Franck, himself an opponent, wrote in 1531, scarcely seven years after the rise of the movement in Zuerich: "The Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered the land as it were. They soon gained a large

¹⁴
Bender, "Conrad Grebel", Church History. op. cit.,
p. 172.

¹⁵
Smith, op. cit., p. 23.

following, and baptized thousands, drawing to themselves many sincere souls who had a zeal for God."¹⁶

The dreadful severity of the persecution of the Anabaptists especially after 1527, also testifies to the power and popularity of the movement. Already as early as November, 1526, the Zuerich council, despairing of lesser measures, established the death penalty by drowning for participation in the new movement. Other cantons and cities soon followed. The first victim was the brilliant young scholar, Felix Manz. Just where the Limmat broadens into beautiful Lake Zuerich, Manz was tossed overboard and disappeared beneath the waves on January 5, 1527. A long line of martyrs followed, who professed to die rather than give up their faith. There was in Switzerland a commendable reluctance to inflict the death penalty for heresy. Manz's execution was justified on the ground that the charges against him were political rather than religious. A casual acquaintance with the facts, however, precludes such an explanation. Zwingli was a child of his age in which religious toleration was unknown. The doctrine of an independent Church, the refusal of the Brethren to take the oath and hold office, or go to war--all were considered dangerously radical in a society where Church and State were

16

Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, Church History, op. cit., p. 5.

two equally all embracing and powerful organizations. Disloyalty to the one was treason, to the other heresy; both punishable by death.

Persecution in a few years robbed the movement of all its able leaders and arrested it in its development. By reason of this persistent persecution on the one hand, and the attractiveness of Moravia as a place for refugees on the other, the movement showed a marked decline in Switzerland before 1529, and by 1535 only a few feeble congregations remained.¹⁷

II. ANABAPTISM IN MORAVIA

Although the Anabaptist movement in Moravia developed along distinct lines, it was generically related to the Swiss Brethren movement. Unlike the latter, it was not an indigenous movement, but received its leadership as well as many of its followers from the Tyrolean and Swiss refugee groups. It cannot be denied, that political, social, and economic factors played a significant role during the formative period of Anabaptism in Moravia. To what extent these factors influenced the conceptions of the Anabaptists in regard to the nature and function of the Church, I shall discuss briefly in the next chapter in connection with the formative influences of the

17

Newman, A Manual of Church History, op. cit., p. 173.

Anabaptist concept of the Church. Space will permit only an outline study of the historic background of the Anabaptists in this region. For convenience, I shall treat the more important developments under two heads: (1) Rise and Growth; (2) Divisions and Persecutions.

1. Rise and Growth.

Moravia had shared with Bohemia in the Hussite revolt against Rome and in the Taborite and Bohemian Brethren movements. A considerable number of nobles and priests who had been under the influence of the older evangelical teaching had declared themselves supporters of Luther. In pleasing contrast to the common experiences of the Anabaptists elsewhere at this time, (1526) was the welcome they received for a short time in Southern Moravia. There were several reasons why Moravia at this particular time could offer an asylum to the persecuted sects from other regions. Although Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was wont to rule his possessions with an iron hand, he made certain concessions in Moravia, because he feared the powerful nobility here. Hence the nobles ruled this principality with a good deal of autonomy. Many of the Moravian nobleman had been sympathetic, for both economic and religious reasons, to dissenting sects. Among the most evangelical of the nobles were Leonhard and Hans von Liechtenstein.

Anabaptist refugees must have come here quite early.

The first great leader, however, of whom we have any definite records, arrived in Nikolsburg (the seat of government of the Barons von Liechtenstein) in July, 1526. This was Balthasar Hubmaier, who among modern Baptist historians is regarded as the greatest of all Anabaptist leaders. The following quotation from A. H. Newman states the significance of Hubmaier for modern Baptists very succinctly:

Hubmaier was almost alone among contemporary Anti-pedobaptists in agreeing with modern Baptists regarding oaths, magistracy, warfare, and the right of Christians to hold private property. Except in his practice of affusion as the act of baptism his position is hardly distinguishable from that of modern Baptists, and few writers of any age have (with this exception) more ably expounded the distinctive principles of the Baptists.¹⁸

According to C. H. Smith¹⁹ Hubmaier can hardly be accorded the distinction of being the greatest of Anabaptists if judged by the prevailing views of the majority of his fellow laborers, and by the influence he exerted upon the further growth of the movement. His type of Anabaptism died with him, soon after disappearing even from Moravia; and that of the Swiss Brethren only survived to later times in the Hutterian Brotherhood. Neither was the rise of the later English Baptist movement in any way to be traced to Hubmaier; the English Baptists at that time had never heard of him.

¹⁸

Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁹

Smith, op. cit., p. 65.

Whether by prearrangement or not, Hubmaier was received by the Liechtenstines with open arms. Within a few months the chief evangelical ministers of this part of Moravia had accepted Hubmaier's leadership. In less than a year from six to twelve thousand had, under Hubmaier's influence submitted to believers baptism.²⁰ Anabaptism was practically made the State church. How much of this growth was due to the efforts of Hubmaier is not known, but it is likely that he was ably assisted by other leaders. The influx of large numbers of refugees must also be taken into account in considering the rapid growth of the movement. Unfortunately, the Anabaptist movement was not permitted to enjoy for very long the peace and unity that the favorable external circumstances seemed to promise. The same spirit of freedom which in the domain of the Liechtenstines guaranteed the greatest degree of toleration, also afforded ample opportunity for the development of factions which found their birth so readily in the extreme individualism of the Anabaptists.

2. Divisions and Persecutions.

The Moravian Brotherhood was finally divided on two issues: (1) Magistracy and warfare, and (2) the community of goods.

The first cleavage appeared between the native Lutheran converts to Anabaptism under the leadership of Hubmaier, and

²⁰ Newman, op. cit., p. 174.

the Swiss and Tyrolean refugees under the leadership of Hans Hut and Jacob Wiedemann. Soon after Hubmaier's arrival a considerable party appeared in the church, led by Wiedemann, who not only denied the Christian's right to participate in warfare, but regarded it as equally un-Christian to pay taxes for the support of war. Hut appeared upon the scene late in 1526, supporting Wiedemann and his party. His attempt, however, to win the latter over to his chiliastic views, was unsuccessful. It was on the issue of magistracy that the views of Hubmaier and Hut came into the sharpest collision. Many were carried away by Hut's enthusiasm. Two disputations failed to secure the desired unity, and Hut's teaching was regarded as so revolutionary in its nature by the Barons von Liechtenstein as to warrant his exclusion from the community. A complete schism in the Moravian Church was stayed for some time by the disappearance of the two principal figures: Hubmaier and Hut. As a result of this controversy, Hut found himself in prison, from whence he soon escaped, however, and went to Augsburg where he met his death in the fall of 1527. In July of the same year, the Austrian authorities seized Hubmaier and on March 10, 1528, he was burned at the stake.

The troubles of the Nikolsburg Church did not cease with the death of Hut and Hubmaier. A new issue arose which threatened to split the church--community of goods. The demand for the community of goods no doubt, resulted from the

necessities of the poverty-stricken refugees who continually found their way into this region. Caring for the refugees from Tyrol became a heavy burden for the native Anabaptists. The numbers of the refugees were so great that to care for them required a practice of near-communism.²¹ Wiedemann complained that the native church "does not give shelter to the pilgrims and refugees of other countries".²² Wiedemann and his party withdrew for separate worship. Within a short time, they were informed by the Liechtensteins that they could not remain at Nikolsburg as a separatist group. In consequence, a company of between two hundred and three hundred persons under the leadership of Wiedemann was obliged to seek a new home where they could practice their principles. At Austerlitz they established their first communal "Households". Under the leadership of Jacob Huter, a Tyrolese hatter, who divided his labors for many years between Tyrol and Moravia, the organization of the communistic party became complete. Soon a large number of households were formed throughout Southern Moravia. The membership of these communities is said to have reached seventy thousand during the period of their greatest prosperity.²³

²¹ John Horsch, The Hutterian Brethren. (Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College) p. 8.

²² Ibid., p. 7.

²³ Newman, A Manual of Church History. op. cit., p. 176.

After 1535 the story of the Moravian Anabaptists is one of incredible sufferings as a result of severe persecutions. They suffered greatly during the Thirty Years' War, but survived with considerable strength. From 1651 onward they were ruined by German, Turkish, and Tartar invasions and by Jesuit persecution. Some fled to Hungary and Siebenbuerger, where they maintained an organized existence till 1762.²⁴ Their children's children in the course of the next century found their way finally to Wallachia and Russia; and ultimately during the latter part of the nineteenth century to the prairies of the Dakotas, and still later to the prairies of Manitoba and Alberta.²⁵

3. Anabaptism in the Netherlands.

There seems to be only a very remote and indirect connection between the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands and similar movements in Switzerland and Austria. A clear distinction between the "fanatical" and the "sober" Anabaptists is necessary to a proper understanding of this movement in the Low Countries. In referring to this distinction

²⁴

For a comprehensive treatment of this rather unique movement I would refer the reader to the book The Hutterian Brethren by John Horsch, published by the Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, 1931.

²⁵

Smith, op. cit., p. 71.

Walker²⁶ states that by far the greater part of the Anabaptists of all these regions were quiet and simply religious people; but intermingled with them were representatives of a fanatic tendency such as had been manifested by Thomas Muentzer, himself hardly to be classed as an Anabaptist, in the Peasants War. Perhaps a difference in the socio-historical background accounts for the emergence of these distinct types. Lindsay²⁷ claims that the roots of Anabaptism can be traced back for some centuries, and that its pedigree has at least two stems which are essentially distinct, and were only occasionally combined. The one stem is the succession of the Brethren, a medieval, anti-clerical body of Christians whose history is written only in the records of Inquisitors of the medieval Church, where they appear under a variety of names, but are universally said to prize the Scriptures and to accept the Apostles' Creed. The other existed in the continuous uprisings of the poor--peasants in rural districts and the lower classes in the towns--against the rich, which were a feature of the later Middle Ages. Although Lindsay's thesis could be challenged on various grounds, it is nevertheless suggestive

²⁶

W. Walker, The Reformation. (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1900), p. 340.

²⁷

T. M. Lindsay, A History of the Reformation. (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1907, Vol. II.) p. 235.

as a partial explanation of the perplexing problem of the social and religious origins of the various types of Anabaptism. The history of Anabaptism in the Netherlands can be divided for convenience into two parts: (1) The Chiliastic Anabaptists up to 1535. (2) The Quiet Anabaptists under Menno Simon's leadership after 1536.

1. The Chiliastic Anabaptists up to the Muenster Tragedy. (1535)

The earlier of these chiliastic Anabaptists appeared in close connection with the Lutheran Reformation, but were, no doubt, in an important sense a result of medieval modes of thought. The Franciscan enthusiasm, with its fondness for biblical types and symbols, its despair of the essential betterment of the world during this present age, and its persistent efforts by the interpretation of prophetic Scriptures to fix the date of the ushering in of millennial glories, was widespread at the beginning of this period.²⁸

Among the most influential leaders of this movement in Northern Germany and in the Netherlands was Melchior Hofmann. Born in Schwabish-Hall about 1490, a leather dresser by trade, with little formal education, but an unusual familiarity with the contents of the Bible, he early embraced Lutheranism and

28

Newman, A Manual of Church History. op. cit., p. 156.

served as its apostle in a stormy evangelism in the Livonian cities of Dorpat, Riga, etc., from 1523 to 1525. For a time he had the approval of Luther himself, but he soon became marked as an extremist, and was driven successively from Livonia, Sweden and Holstein. Embracing Zwingli's views of the Supper, he found refuge in Strassburg in 1529, and here became fully an Anabaptist.²⁹ Hofmann soon entered into relations with the more fanatical Anabaptists, especially with some who claimed to possess prophetic powers. His announcement, that Christ's visible reign was to begin in 1533, induced the Strassburg authorities to oppose him; and from 1530 to 1533, he preached with great popular following in Friesland and Holland. The time was ripe in the Low Countries for an aggressive leader of a new evangelical life. Neither Lutheranism nor Zwinglianism had as yet taken a strong root here. The evangelical movement, influenced somewhat by earlier dissenting groups, remained unorganized, highly individualistic and leaderless.³⁰ It was Hofmann's great opportunity. From Emden as a center, he spent his time in ceaseless missionary activity in behalf of the Anabaptist cause. Through his writings, which were widely dispersed, and through the many missionaries that he sent forth, communities of enthusiasts who

²⁹ Walker, op. cit., p. 341.

³⁰ Smith, op. cit., p. 77.

eagerly awaited the speedy establishment of the kingdom of Christ were organized.

By this time the cause of the Anabaptists had become most desperate. The Edict of Speier (1529) had outlawed them everywhere. Earthly hope for amelioration of their condition there was none. The seeds which Hofmann and his associates had sown found very favorable conditions for germination in the Muenster Tragedy. The story of the Muenster Kingdom is no doubt better known to most Protestants than any other phase of Anabaptist history of the sixteenth century, and for that reason we shall not recount it here.

The results for the Anabaptist cause were disastrous. Anabaptism was made to cover a multitude of sins. After the collapse of Muenster, all such groups as practiced adult baptism, irrespective of any other principles or practices, were subjected to a period of terrible persecution all over Europe which lasted for nearly another full century.³¹

To the unbiased student of the Anabaptist movement it will be quite evident, I am sure, that the misguided, fanatical and violently revolutionary Muensterites differ as night and day from the peaceful, sober, non-resistant Swiss Brethren, and their following in Tyrol, Moravia and South Germany. The

³¹

Ibid., p. 87.

two groups shared but one thing in common: both were separatists, and made rebaptism a symbol of their separation from the prevailing State churches. In spite of the fact that there was no spiritual kinship between these parties, the authorities, both of Church and State, persisted in branding all separatists who practiced rebaptism under one name, the hated name of "Muensterite Anabaptist".

It must not be imagined that all the "Melchiorites" were involved in the revolutionary movement that led to the tragedy of Muenster. There were numerous Melchiorites who were not corrupted by the teachings of such fanatics as Jan von Matthys and Jan von Leyden. The leader of this peaceful group was Obbe Philips, aided later by his younger brother Dirk. They found themselves at variance with the Melchiorite teaching on the early approach of the millennium, and when some of the Melchiorites began to develop decided leanings toward Muenster, they launched a vigorous protest against the whole Muensterite movement. This peaceful wing of Anabaptism in the Netherlands was sometimes called by the name of "Obbenites" after their chief leader; and this was also the group with which Menno Simons later affiliated.

2. The Quiet Anabaptists under Menno Simons' Leadership. (after 1536)

Menno Simon's significance for Dutch Anabaptism can

be compared to that of Calvin for the Reform movement in Geneva. Although not the founder of the movement, Menno Simons became its great organizer, teacher, and pastor. Lindsay describes the life and labors of this apostle of the Anabaptists in his last paragraph on Anabaptism in the following significant statements:

Menno Simons....a man of integrity, mild, accommodating, patient of injuries, and so ardent in his piety as to exemplify in his own life the precepts he gave to others; spent twenty-five laborious years in visiting the scattered Anabaptist communities and uniting them in a simple brotherly association. He purged their minds of the apocalyptic fancies taught by many of their later leaders under the influence of persecution, inculcated the old ideas of non-resistance, of the evils of State control over the Church, of the need of personal conversion, and of adult baptism as its sign and seal. From his labors have come all the modern Baptist churches.³²

Menno Simons, like his contemporary, Martin Luther, was of peasant origin, having been born in 1496 in a little Frisian village called Witmarsum. Evidently he was early destined for the Church, and received an education just sufficient to meet the requirements of a country priest. He knew a little Latin, less Greek, and, according to his own confession, no Scripture. Later in life, however, through wide reading, he acquired not only a minute knowledge of the Bible, but a rather broad acquaintance with the field of church history as well.

In his twenty-eighth year he became a priest of the

³²

Lindsay, op. cit., p. 469.

Roman Church in his native district. His conversion to evangelical views was gradual. The writings of Luther, which were secretly circulated among the Dutch priests, led him to doubt the transubstantiation doctrine of the Roman Church. The execution of Anabaptist Christians led him to investigate the validity of infant baptism. Menno turned to Luther, Zwingli and Bullinger; but their replies did not satisfy him. More and more he turned to the New Testament teachings on these cardinal doctrines. In his search for truth he discovered, that the views of the so-called "Bundgenossen"³³ were much more in accord with scriptural teaching as he understood it, than the views of the other Reformers. It was about this time (1531) that Anabaptists of various types began to appear in the vicinity of Witmarsum, and soon after, disciples of Jan Matthys from Muenster. The parish priest of Witmarsum, who had considerable abilities as a speaker and writer, now began to fight against two evils: Rome and Muenster.³⁴ Among his fellow priests he gained quite a reputation for his ability to refute successfully the false prophets from Muenster. One of his strongest polemics entitled "Gegen die greuliche und

³³

See Krahn C., Menno Simons. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theologie der Taufgesinnten. Published by Heinrich Schneider, Karlsruhe i.B; 1936, pp. 22-24.

³⁴

Ibid., pp. 24-31.

groesste Blasphemie von Jan von Lieden",³⁵ was directed against these fanatic leaders. What troubled him, however, was the fact that his attack on the errors of the Muensterites was interpreted by his friends as a wholehearted endorsement of the entire Catholic system. He began to realize, that his influence on the development of the Anabaptist movement would remain limited as long as he remained a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. The tragedy of Bolsward, in which a number of deluded enthusiasts, who had taken up arms in self defence (including Menno's own brother) were ruthlessly killed, finally induced Menno to renounce the papacy in 1536. He shut the door on a brilliant career, a life of ease and pleasure; and deliberately chose instead a life of uncertainty, misery, and poverty, constantly threatened with imprisonment, persecution, and death; but at the same time a life of loyalty to his convictions and great service to his fellow men.³⁶

Almost immediately he became the recognized leader of such Dutch Antipedobaptists as had not been carried away by the chiliastic enthusiasm of the Muenster fanatics or had been cured of the delusion by the course of events. Closely associated with him in the leadership of the movement were Dirk

35

See Die Vollstaendigen Werke Menno Simons, published by Mennonite Book Concern, Elkhart, Indiana, 1876, pp. 611-629.

36

Smith, op. cit., p. 99.

Philips, Gillis of Aacken, Leonard Bouwens and others. Menno and his associates were so horrified by the atrocities of Muenster that they expelled any members from their fellowship who had Muensterite leanings. The practice of "Avoidance", which forbade all social intercourse with an expelled member, must be interpreted partly against this background.

Emden, in East-Friesland, became the chief center of the Mennonite movement. By 1544 Menno's influence had grown to such an extent, that the Quiet Anabaptists began to be called "Menists", or Mennonites. Menno evangelized widely and successfully, but spent much of his time in literary controversy. The persecution by Roman Catholic authorities and the growing opposition of the Reformed Church checked the growth of the movement in the Netherlands. In the course of the second half of the sixteenth century many families emigrated to Northern Germany and especially to the delta of the Vistula River near Danzig. Menno himself labored with great self-denial successively in Groningen, Emden, Cologne, and Wismar, from where he made extensive tours into the East Sea regions. The last years of Menno's life were beclouded by serious divisions among the Mennonite churches. Differences in doctrine or discipline were the occasion for widespread discussion and schism. The motives to establish a "pure Church" were praiseworthy, but the methods employed betray a strong legalism.

By 1561, the date of Menno's death, there were many thousands of Quiet Anabaptists more or less closely associated with the movement organized by Menno in the Netherlands and throughout western Europe from the Baltic to the Alps.³⁷

During the Inquisition established by Philip II tens of thousands of evangelicals, including many Mennonites suffered martyrdom.³⁸ In the ensuing struggle of the Dutch provinces with Catholic Spain, Calvinism, which represented the most militant type of Protestantism, came to the front. The absolute refusal of the Mennonites to bear arms even in self-defence, in Newman's view,³⁹ disqualified them for leadership in a time like this. The Mennonites were content, however, to be a "Church under the Cross" (a favorite designation) and comforted themselves with the words of their Lord and Master, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me". (Matt. 16:24).

We have briefly traced the rise and development of the three main branches of continental Anabaptism. A more comprehensive study, including various other groups such as the Mystical Anabaptists, the Anti-trinitarian Anabaptists, the Pantheistic Anabaptists, etc., would take us beyond the scope of

³⁷ Newman, Manual of Church History. op. cit., p. 180.

³⁸ Loc. cit.

³⁹ Loc. cit.

our present inquiry. Various German Antipedobaptist parties and leaders made a profound impression on their contemporaries, but their views have not to any appreciable extent contributed to the Anabaptist concept of the Church. The movement in Germany was early discredited by the connection of some of its leaders with the Peasant Revolt. The Mystical Anabaptists, on the other hand, of the type of Hans Deuk, were not so much concerned with questions as to the nature and polity of a visible Church. Those Anabaptists in Germany, which organized churches along congregational lines, were either associated with the Swiss Brethren movement (e.g. Pilgram Marpeck of Strassburg, South Germany) or with the Dutch Anabaptists, (e.g. in the Lower Rhine regions). In describing the situation in Germany in the second half of the sixteenth century, Walker makes this observation, "In the last-named land the Anabaptist movement had ceased to be significant."⁴⁰ The strength and popularity of the Lutheran Reformation in Germany no doubt partly explains the feeble representation of the Anabaptists in that country.

A knowledge of the general character of the Anabaptist movement, as well as an acquaintance with the historical framework within which it arose and developed, should enable us to

⁴⁰Walker, op. cit., p. 346.

select some of the more important formative influences which conditioned and modified the Anabaptist concept of the Church. This we shall attempt in our next chapter.

CHAPTER III

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF THE ANABAPTIST CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

We shall not attempt to state and criticize within the limits of this chapter the various theories of the origin and roots of Anabaptism which modern investigation has suggested. These theories are still in the controversial stage and further research in this field is necessary in order to make sound deductions possible. The difficulty of the task is indicated by Lindsay when he says that "it is neither safe nor easy to make abrupt general statements about the causes or character of great popular movements. The elements which combine to bring them into being and keep them in existence are commonly as innumerable as the hues which blend in the color of a mountain side."¹

In any attempt to discover the antecedents of the basic conceptions of the Anabaptists, certain questions arise. Are Anabaptists sui generis, not comparable at all to any other groups? Or are they to be reduced to the better known groups of earlier times? Robert Friedmann² contends that the answer

¹T.M.Lindsay, A History of the Reformation. Vol.II, p.432.

²Robert Friedmann, Conception of the Anabaptists. Church History. Vol IX, 1940, p. 359 f.

to these questions will depend on which aspect of Anabaptism we look for: "the millenarian (a well known attitude throughout the centuries), or the prophetic (also a rather frequent occurrence in history), or those quiet and evangelical qualities modeled upon the Sermon on the Mount". The various possibilities of approach should warn us against the dangers of oversimplification and generalization in dealing with this complex problem. As we focus our attention, however, on the main stream of the Anabaptist movement as outlined in the previous chapter, I think it will be possible for us to discern some of the outstanding underlying causes and conditions which shaped the Church concept of this "left wing movement".

1. Radical Biblicism.

In our first chapter we have referred to Robert Friedmann's classification of evangelical Protestantism on the basis of the attitude of various groups toward the Bible, and more especially, toward the New Testament. (The attitude of most Anabaptists may be defined as a radical Biblicism.)

In describing the founding of the first Anabaptist church in Switzerland, C. A. Cornelius calls it the "church of radical Bible readers".³ (Undoubtedly, there's was the most radical attempt to establish a church according to the

³ C. A. Cornelius, cited by C. Krahn in Menno Simons. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theologie der Taufgesinnten. p. 104.

Apostolic pattern, completely divorcing themselves from all traditions of the Church and uncompromising in their attitude towards the authorities in Church and State.) They used the "sola scriptura" with regard to the nature of the Church as Luther had used it in connection with the nature of salvation.

In their respect for the Bible, of course, the Anabaptists were not altogether unique among the Reformation parties. Luther and Zwingli also claimed a scriptural basis for their innovations, and Calvin was a "Biblical theologian" of great genius. And yet it must be admitted, as Smith⁴ points out, that the (Anabaptists relied more exclusively and devotedly upon the Bible than did the others in their search after truth.) While Lutherans and Reformed claimed the assistance of governing councils and university faculties in their interpretations, and Catholics of a highly organized hierarchy and the church fathers, (the Anabaptists insisted that each individual must decide the Bible message for himself.⁵) This should not be interpreted to mean that they were religious anarchists and that they were indifferent to essential fundamental beliefs. They soon accumulated a well defined body of principles and practices agreed upon by congregations and conferences to

4

C. H. Smith, The Story of the Mennonites. p. 29.

5

Loc. cit.

which they insisted all members must subscribe, or remove themselves from the fellowship of the body. But they did not believe in the use of physical force to bring about uniformity.

The insistence of the Brethren on the "Schriftprinzip" (Scripture principle) implies and really presupposes a widespread possession and knowledge of the Scriptures. There is ample proof that this was actually the case among the Anabaptists. Dr. Ludwig Keller writes that

"between 1466 and 1518 not less than fourteen complete German Bibles in High German and four in Low German, all together eighteen editions, had been printed by the fore-runners of the Anabaptists. Besides that, the Gospels had been published in twenty-five editions before 1518, and other portions of Scripture in great number."⁶

The first complete German Bible after the Reformation was not produced by Luther, but by the Brethren in 1529--the so-called "Wormser Bible".⁷

The widespread possession of the Bible among the Brethren led monks to complain in 1552, that even tillers of the soil were at home in the New Testament, of which they memorized

6

Ludwig Keller, as cited by J. J. Friesen in An Outline of Mennonite History. (The Herald Publishing Co., Newton, Kansas, 1944), p. 32.

7

Carl Van der Smissen, Kurzgefasste Geschichte und Glaubenslehre. (St. Louis, Missouri: A Wiebusch and Son Printing Co., 1895), p. 4.

large portions.⁸ This would indicate a relatively high percent of literacy among the Anabaptists during the Reformation period. When we consider the teachings of the Church of Rome, which forbade the reading of the Bible, and condemned and persecuted those who did, the astonishing familiarity with the Bible among the Anabaptists presents a striking contrast. (They made it practically a duty for each to turn to the Scriptures in order to assure himself of salvation, and in order that he be able to distinguish between true and false doctrines.) In this Biblicism we must look for the secret of strength which the Anabaptists displayed even in the face of fire and sword. But this same Biblicism also exposed the movement to certain dangers when not backed up by a sane and well balanced world view. Referring to these inherent problems of a radical Biblicism, Harold Schaff makes the following comments:

....each, following the urgings and counsel of his own heart, often in preference to the common counsel, was apt to read into the Scriptures, as the single means of salvation open to him, his own thought to which the wish was often father. The simple minds which reached out for the Bible, were, naturally, affected with the full power and sublimity of expression, and common reality, which surrounded them was, in great measure, forced out of the picture. Small gatherings preferred to meet the problems of salvation without instruction, relying on their own interpretation of the Word.⁹

⁸ J. J. Friesen, An Outline of Mennonite History. p. 33.

⁹ H. H. Schaff, The Anabaptists, the Reformers and the Civil Government. Church History. Vol. I, 1932, p. 29.

This last generalization of Schaff might be true of certain highly individualistic and isolated groups, but it would hardly apply to the main bodies of the Anabaptists that we are considering in this study. Among them instruction in God's Word was deemed highly important. It seems to me, however, that the radical Biblicism of the Anabaptists, and their chief distinction from the Reformers, is not so much a matter of radical interpretation of the Scriptures, (but rather a matter of radical application of God's Word to all phases and relations of the Christian life. The Anabaptist leaders saw everywhere a great disparity between the institutions of Christian lands and what they regarded as the plain teachings of Scripture. For them the Reformation meant not only the substitution of the teachings of the Reformers for the authority of the Roman hierarchy, but a complete return to the uncorrupted simplicity of the Gospel.¹⁰) The principle that every religious and moral decision involves compromise when put into actual practice was unacceptable to them. Hence they regarded the concessions of the Reformers as disloyalty to the teachings of Scripture. The Bible to these prophets of a new world order was the sole source of spiritual authority; the Apostolic church, their model; and the Sermon on the Mount

10

Loc. cit.

quite literally interpreted, their social and religious program.¹¹

Before we define the real essence of this radical Biblicalism of the Anabaptists more closely, we must briefly discuss the misconception which is still found among students of church history that the Anabaptists were without exception the spiritual children of Thomas Muentzer and the Zwickau Prophets. Quite generally the views of these fanatics on the "inner word" or the "inner light" have been attributed to all Anabaptists. Now just what were the views of Muentzer? Muentzer taught that the Spirit, instead of Scripture, is the final religious authority, and that new revelation beside and above Scripture are needed. Thus he opened the way for radical individualism and fanaticism. He believed that the Holy Spirit worked independently of Scripture, and of the preaching of the Word, and that the spiritually enlightened Christian can dispense with the Bible.¹² The fanatics emphasized revelations through visions and ecstasies, independent of the biblical basis. Muentzer claims, "One can arrive at faith also without Scripture".¹³ It was above all this particular claim of

¹¹ Smith, op. cit., p. 29.

¹² John Horsch, The Hutterian Brethren, p. 119.

¹³ Robert Friedmann, citing Thomas Muentzer in Mennonite Piety through the Centuries. (Goshen, Indiana: Goshen College, The Mennonite Historical Society, 1949), p. 79.

Muentzer, as Friedmann suggests, which seemed to Luther to be so dangerous that he condemned the so-called "Schwaermer" (with whom he included erroneously all Anabaptists) most severely. Actually the really fanatical groups were small, insignificant, and without essential influence in later history. And what is still more important, "they had nothing to do with Anabaptism, for never did the Anabaptists substitute the "Spirit of revelation" (Eingebungsgeist) for the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ Let us turn to the testimony of several Anabaptist leaders. Riedemann, one of the outstanding leaders of Moravian Anabaptism, has this to say with regard to the authority of the Scriptures:

When the Word is heard and received in faith, the faith is sealed by the power of God, the Holy Spirit, who then regenerates and quickens the believer who had been dead in sin.--But this faith comes from hearing the preaching of the Gospel. (Rom. 10:17). Therefore by diligently hearing and accepting the preaching of the Gospel we become partakers of the fellowship of Christ.--Through his Word God calls men to salvation and through it he reveals himself and makes himself known.¹⁵

The similarity between this view and that of the great Reformers is striking and there is certainly no justification for assuming that the Anabaptists gave an inferior place to the Scriptures compared with men like Luther and Calvin. In

¹⁴

Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁵

John Horsch, citing Riedemann in his book, The Hutterian Brethren. p. 120.

reply to a certain booklet, in which they were accused of giving a secondary place to the Bible, a representative of the Hutterian Brethren gives this answer:

....We do not hold that God makes himself known without the hearing of the preached Word; this would be a detraction from and a disgrace to the predetermined order of God.--Therefore, (to speak with Paul, I Thess. 2:13), the Church of the Lord gives thanks to God without ceasing when it receives the divine Word in preaching, and receives it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God which effectually worketh a holy life in the believer.¹⁶

In general, it might be said, that the Anabaptists came closer to the Reformed conception of the Word than to the Lutheran view in that they stressed the "reverent hearing" of it. (It may be further claimed, that they emphasized spiritual illumination more than the Reformers did.) This latter, however, should not be confused with a prophetic spiritualism against which they took a very determined stand. This is especially true of Menno Simons in the Netherlands, who had to contend with the fanatical remnants of the Melchiorites. Menno's two greatest opponents are the Roman Catholic Church, in which the tradition of the Church has been substituted for God's Word, and the chiliastic prophetism and spiritualism, in which the Scriptures are also relegated to a secondary place. He complains, that the whole world is founding its

16

Ibid., p. 121f.

Christianity on popes, councils, doctors, traditions of men, and false prophets, whereas it should be founded on the cornerstone Jesus Christ in "conformity with the Word."¹⁷ Menno's controversies and conflicts with the chiliastic enthusiasts developed along lines similar to those of Luther in his struggle with the "Schwaermer". In his first writing, which is directed against the Muensterites, he refers to his call as not being a result of revelation or heavenly vision, but rather that it is based upon the "explicit and literal Word of the Lord".¹⁸ The evil effects of an arbitrary treatment of the Scriptures he had witnessed so frequently, that he becomes almost over anxious in his references to the "clearly expressed commands of Christ". He is uncompromising in his rejection of the allegorical method of Scripture interpretation, as advocated by Hofmann, because he had seen how "wild prophecy" was the direct offspring of such interpretation. To Menno, primarily, must go the credit for eliminating both, the allegorical interpretation as well as chiliastic prophecy, from the Anabaptist churches in the Netherlands and Northern Germany. His constant polemic against allegorical Scripture interpretation, prophetism, spiritualism, etc., forced him

¹⁷C. Krahn, Menno Simons. p. 104.¹⁸Ibid., p. 105.

more and more to emphasize the letter of the Scripture which in turn created a tendency towards legalism. This legalism was modified, however, by his Christ-centered understanding of the Scriptures.¹⁹

The real essence and the distinctive character of the Biblicism of Anabaptists is found in their emphasis on New Testament finality. (Anabaptists regarded the entire Bible as God's holy Word, "inspired and profitable". But they held that Jesus Christ and his redemption stand at the center of time. All of God's dealings with man before Christ were in preparation for his redemption.) The Old Covenant stood until the death of the One who instituted the New Covenant, until "the death of the Testator" (Heb. 9:16). The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the New Covenant with its deeper blessings, the New Covenant being less nationalistic and external, and more personal and spiritual in character. With this general interpretation the leading Reformers of the sixteenth century were in basic agreement. They too believed that there was a difference between the Old Covenant and the New; indeed John Calvin wrote an excellent discussion of the matter (Institutes, II., 11.) The Reformers also believed that Jesus had established the New Covenant and that he had given to his disciples an authoritative interpretation of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

God's moral law. But at that point, according to Wenger,²⁰ the agreement ceases. The Anabaptist stress fell on the fulfillment of the Old Covenant by the New, while the Reformers emphasized the essential unity of the two covenants.²¹ In the Old Testament they found abundant authorization to suppress deviation from the faith of the covenant people. Since wars and oaths were freely engaged in by Israel of old, even with divine sanction, they justified the Christian's engagement in these things on that basis. With Israel as a pattern for God's people in the new age, "it was natural for the Reformers to think in terms of a national church with all children of the citizen-members being baptized as infants quite as Israelitish children were circumcised from Abraham to Jesus".²²

Little wonder then that the Anabaptists were regarded as heretics when they stated that the Old Testament was done away and when they demanded New Testament backing for every church ordinance and for the entire ethic of the Christian. Here are a few testimonies to their conception of New Testament finality. In the preface to his book, Of Spiritual Resitution Dirk Philips states that he had written

²⁰

J. C. Wenger, Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine. (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1947), pp. 163-165.

²¹

Ibid., p. 164.

²²

Loc. Cit.

....to the end that simple minds may be thereby instructed and that they may not be deceived by the false prophets who embellish and disguise their deceptive doctrine with the old leaven of the letter as shadows and figures; for whatever of the New Testament they cannot defend they try to prove with the Old Testament and with the letter of the prophecies. From this fallacy many sects have come, many false forms of worship have been established...²³

Menno Simons made numerous remarks regarding the necessity of having New Testament support for one's ethic and practice. This is evident from the following quotation:

....Even though an Elias himself were to come, he dare not teach anything against the foundation and doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, but he must, if he would preach aright, teach and preach conformably to the same, for by the spirit, word, actions and example of Christ all must be judged and receive the last sentence; otherwise the whole Scriptures are false.²⁴

In the course of a discussion on baptism he wrote:

(It is our determination in this matter as in all other matters of conscience....that we will not be influenced by lords and princes, nor by doctors and teachers of schools, nor by the influence of the fathers, and long established customs....We dare not be bound to any person, power, wisdom or times, but we must be governed alone by the expressed and positive commands of Christ, and pure doctrines and practices of his holy apostles.²⁵

It is in this exclusive reliance on New Testament authority for all doctrines and practices that one must look for

²³

J. C. Wenger, citing Dirk Philips in Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine, p. 165.

²⁴

Loc. cit.

²⁵

Menno Simons, Die Vollstaendigen Werke, I, p. 45.

the strongest formative influence of the Anabaptist concept of the Church. In their absolute uncompromising idealism they practically ignored the historical developments of fifteen hundred years of church life and practice. Johann Loserth expresses this tendency in the following sentence:

(More radically than any other party for church reformation the Anabaptists strove to follow the footsteps of the church of the first century and to renew unadulterated original Christianity.²⁶)

This view as to the nature of the Biblicism of the Anabaptists, however, is not shared by many church historians.²⁷

26

H. S. Bender, citing Loserth in The Anabaptist vision, Vol. XIII, 1944, p. 10.

27

In discussing this matter with Professor H. G. Harland, United College, Winnipeg, he made the following comments: "I do not think the difference between the Reformers' and Anabaptist views of the authority of the Bible rested upon any difference in degree of devotion to it. Rather, the difference in their use of the Bible stemmed from a difference in their understanding of the meaning of Christianity. The Anabaptists regarded Christianity as a new law; and because they viewed Christianity as a new law they sought to apply it as such in their attempts to re-pristenate first century Christianity. The Reformers--particularly Luther--resisted this understanding. This conception violated his historical sense and his knowledge that everything human and Christian was set in an historical continuity. Of even more importance, Luther felt that this betrayed a legalism which denied the real force and significance of the gospel. In short, Luther opposed what you call the radical Biblicism of the Anabaptists because he felt that it obscured the biblical understanding of the relationship between law and gospel". (Private letter).

There are other important formative influences which have molded and modified the Anabaptist concept of the Church. Among these, their eschatological expectations are significant.

2. Eschatological Views.

The whole Reformation movement was more or less influenced by eschatological hopes and expectations. Even Luther believed that the end of the age was approaching--a conviction which was reinforced by the constant menace of the Turks to the peace and security of Central Europe. (The hope of Christ's return, which would usher in a new golden age, was a very lively expectation among the Anabaptists. On the one hand their eschatological views were rooted in their Biblicism. The apocalyptic pictures and passages of Scripture strongly influenced their conceptions. The oppressive social, economic and political conditions of the lower classes, to which many Anabaptists belonged provided, on the other hand, a fertile soil for these views. The incredible suffering of large numbers because) of severe persecutions only intensified these expectations. In their emphasis and interpretation of this eschatological hope, however, the Anabaptist parties differed widely among themselves. In fact, this difference in their eschatological understanding is the basic distinction between the "fanatical" and "sober" Anabaptists. This is very clearly shown by Krahn²⁸ in his

²⁸C. Krahn, Menno Simons. p. 110.

discussion of the eschatological expectations of the Anabaptists. The concept of judgment plays a very significant role in the eschatology of Anabaptism. According to Krahn, the attitude of Anabaptists towards this concept divided them into biblical-eschatological and enthusiastic-chilias-tical movements. Among the former, cross and persecution for the Church are expected until the imminent return of Christ. The coming judgment is executed by Christ himself. The chiliastic movement, on the contrary, sets specific dates for this cataclysmic event and under the pretext, that the kingdom of God has actually come, takes the judgment into its own hands. To be sure, this distinction is not very marked in the incipient stages of the movement, but it becomes quite obvious in its later development. In the first instance, all help is expected from God, both in times of persecution and in the final deliverance. In the second, the judgment of God as well as the rule of God are realized through the instrumentality of the "saints".²⁹ It was precisely against this danger that Grebel warned Muentzer in a letter written in 1524.³⁰ Nothing grieved Menno Simons so much as the pretensions and claims of the Muensterites that they were dispensing

²⁹

Ibid., p. 111.

³⁰

H. S. Bender, on "Conrad Grebel", Church History, Vol. VII, 1938, pp. 169-170.

divine justice by the extermination of their enemies. The contemporary chroniclers of the Hutterian Brethren speak of the Muensterite movement only in terms of severest condemnation and denunciation.³¹

In his very illuminating discussion of the eschatological sects of the Protestant Reformation, Reinhold Niebuhr adopts Troeltsch's distinction of "suffering" and "fighting" sects.³² The former, in his opinion, were the more purely apocalyptic, waiting upon God to usher in the "Kingdom of Christ", which the latter were ready to engage the enemy in order to bring in the Kingdom of God upon earth. Niebuhr goes on to say that the eschatological sects in general conceived of the historical process as moving towards a critical conflict between Christ and Antichrist rather than as a gradual process of the triumph of good over evil.³³ I find that this last observation is very relevant to the eschatology of the Anabaptists.

When Niebuhr speaks, however, of the impulse among the eschatological sects towards the fulfillment of life and history, I think he should have pointed out the differences

³¹

John Horsch, The Hutterian Brethren, pp. 15-16.

³²

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II; p. 176.

³³

Ibid., p. 177.

in the conceptions of the "suffering" and the "fighting" sects. The following quotation could hardly be applied to the former without important reservations:

Thus while Biblical eschatology was responsible for their view of history, as moving towards a final crisis, the general mood of historical optimism prompted them to seek for the Kingdom of God, without reservation, in history. They disregarded the Biblical idea of a "final" judgment and a "final" fulfillment beyond all possible historical realizations.³⁴

It is true, that also the suffering Anabaptists sought earnestly to build Christ's kingdom here and now. But their concept of the Church determines their views as to how and where a relative fulfillment of life and history are to take place. In dealing with this problem, Wenger points out the distinctive aspects of the Anabaptist conception:

(The Anabaptists with their conception of separation of Church and State agreed with the Lutherans that the social order could not be Christianized, and they agreed with the Reformed in desiring to create a Christian society--but they sought to do this only in the Church. This involved a certain 'withdrawal' from one sector of the life of society, not a physical withdrawal into monasteries, but a certain 'abandonment' of non-Christian society to its own management and a concentration on the evangelization of individuals from that non-Christian society.³⁵)

From their various writings it is evident, however, that they regarded all their achievements even within the

³⁴

Ibid., p. 178.

³⁵

J. C. Wenger, Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine. p. 170.

Church not as a complete fulfillment of life and history. The "pure Church" was never an attainment, but remained an ideal for which the Anabaptists strove with great earnestness.

That the eschatological views of the Anabaptists were a decisive influence in their conception of the Church can be seen from the above analysis. The historical situation, as they experienced it, confirmed them in their convictions. Relentless persecution by political as well as ecclesiastical authorities and the utter hopelessness of changing their lot, had the effect of focusing their hopes on the imminent coming of Christ. (The concept of the Church as a suffering body as well as their understanding of the relations of the Church to society are closely related to their eschatological views.) To what extent the "community of goods" practice among certain groups can be attributed to these views is rather difficult to determine, but the idea of the imminent end of the age doubtless had some influence on this practice in its origination as well as later.

That the Anabaptists also believed in a "final" fulfillment of life and history and that they did not identify any historical achievement with the Kingdom of God in its final realization can be seen from the following confession of Menno Simons:

We acknowledge, teach and seek no other kingdom than that of Christ which shall endure for ever, in which there

is no pomp, splendor, gold, silver, meat and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost; we confess with Christ that our kingdom is not of this world.³⁶

Menno's allusion to Christ's words in John 18:36 suggest to us the meaning of the "Kingdom of Christ" for him: (The ultimate triumph of the power of love and of the cross over all forces of evil and violence. That this view of Christ's kingdom was a basic formative influence in the Anabaptist concept of the Church will be evident from our discussion of the "theology of martyrdom" to which we now proceed.)

III. THEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

Any attempt to discover the formative influences of the Anabaptist concept of the Church would be incomplete without a proper consideration of the so-called "theology of martyrdom" of the Anabaptists. Ethelbert Stauffer, who was formerly on the theological faculty of the University of Bonn, Germany, has done extensive research in this field. A translation of his study, Taeufertum und Maertyrer-theologie has been published in the Mennonite Quarterly Review, Goshen College, in the July issue, 1945. To Stauffer, primarily, I am indebted for the views presented here.

³⁶ Menno Simons, as cited by Wenger in Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine. p. 171.

(The true Church of God has been a suffering Church (Maertyrergemeinde) at all times; this is the basic conception of the Anabaptist theology of history. The path of the people of God through history is a path of passion: that is proven by the Bible itself.) "All of the Holy Scriptures seem to be nothing but a book of martyrdom".³⁷ The church father Eusebius and the entire history of the Church are witnesses thereof. During the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists felt that they were the ones who were the true successors of these earlier martyrs. The Hutterite Chronicle reports for 1540 already more than fifteen hundred Anabaptist martyrs, and erects to them a modest monument in the form of the old martyr's lists (therewith using such texts as Mt. 10:16; 24:9; John 16:2; Romans 8:36, etc.).³⁸

It should be noted here, that this theology of martyrdom was not confined to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. The early years of the Reformation seem loaded almost to the point of explosion with this idea. Luther himself is taken hold of by these ideas and moods in the first years of the struggle for his Church reforms. In the summer of 1523,

37

J. Thielemann Van Bracht, Martyrs Mirror. (Excerpts) (Elmira, Ontario: Published by Menno Sander, 1944), p. 17.

38

Ethelbert Stauffer, Theology of Martyrdom. (Menno-nite Quarterly Review, July, 1945), p. 188.

when he learned of the burning at the stake of two young Augustinian monks in Brussels, he exclaimed; "I thought I myself should be the very first one who should be martyred for the sake of the Holy Gospel; but apparently I was not worthy of that".³⁹ The loyalty of those young confessors meant to him a victory of God over Satan. Under the impact of that event he composed a martyr hymn. He develops his ideas on the subject most fully in the book on the history of Bruder Henricus yn Diedmar Verbrandt, published in 1525.

However, after 1525 things changed with Luther when he began to establish a State church which, as in the days of Constantine, ceased to be martyr's church. Although still opposed to the persecution of Anabaptists in Catholic countries, he gradually changes in his attitude towards martyrs in Protestant countries, speaking disparagingly of their suffering as a "false" martyrdom.⁴⁰

The earliest principal statement of an Anabaptist leader on this subject seems to be a passage in the noted letter of Conrad Grebel to Thomas Muentzer, Sept. 5, 1524. "True Christian believers are sheep among wolves.....and must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution,

³⁹

Ibid., p. 183.

⁴⁰

Ibid., p. 184.

suffering and death".⁴¹ The most concise formulation of the basic idea of the theology of martyrdom was coined by Hubmaier in his famous motto: Truth is immortal.

Again we meet it in the writings of Menno Simons. Considering the increasing number of martyrs in his brotherhood he saw the imminence of the day of vengeance and glorification. In this frame of mind he wrote his significant tract "Of the Cross of Christ".⁴² Other sources for a study of the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom besides the doctrinal teachings of Anabaptist leaders are the collections of hymns and the chronicles. In all these writings one senses the essential dualism of the Anabaptist theology of history. History is the contest between the people of God and the powers of this world, a contest which presses to a final decision through the suffering of the martyrs. It is the old antithesis between the "Civitas Dei" and the "Civitas Diaboli" which we meet here again with certain modifications.⁴³

(The Anabaptists felt themselves as heirs of a very old martyr tradition, and for that reason collected all available martyrs' stories of the past, using them for the purpose of

⁴¹ Loc. cit.

⁴² See Die Vollstaendigen Werke Menno Simons', I, pp. 257-297.

⁴³ Ethelbert Stauffer, Theology of Martyrdom, Review, July, 1945, p. 189.

uplift in days of affliction.) (I might interpolate here, that this tradition is still quite alive among the spiritual children of the Anabaptists--the Mennonites. The writer's father is publishing a book on "Mennonite Martyrs of the Recent Past" at the present time--1950). Old Testament martyrs from Abel to Zechariah are presented alongside of the New Testament saints who were giving the (supreme sacrifice) in these lists of martyrs. (The martyrs' history does not narrate only the fight and victory of the witnesses but tells also of the miraculous saving interference of God ever since the days of Joseph.)

It is necessary, however, in order to get a proper view of this truth, which made such a profound impact on the whole world view of the Anabaptists, that we call attention to its central proposition. (The Anabaptist theology of history is from the very outset centered on Christ; that is, the Son who in obedience to his Father takes the cross upon himself, is the very hub of the world and of history.⁴⁴ The Cross, therefore, is the measure and center of all Anabaptist theology of martyrdom. Christ is called the captain of the hosts of martyrs. The new age which started with Christ stands altogether under the sign of the cross, because the

44

Ethelbert, Stauffer, Theology of Martyrdom, Review. July, 1945, p. 190.

old enemy who once had brought Christ into disgrace and anguish, now directs all his wrath upon the confessors of Christ. This hostility of the world, far from lessening under the impact of Christian preaching, becomes "the longer the worse".⁴⁵ Stephen's heroic death is taken as an example of how martyrs can and should die. Such death is the "baptism of fire" which proves the genuineness of their faith. Nonresistance to evil by force, as held by the Anabaptists, must be interpreted against this background. Readiness for martyrdom and defencelessness were almost identical concepts for them--merely two expressions for the demands of the Sermon on the Mount.⁴⁶ The great majority of the Brethren went one step further and demanded conscientious objection to war. Conrad Grebel was very explicit on this matter, "True Christian believers....neither use worldly sword nor war, since all killing has ceased with them altogether".⁴⁷

From this brief analysis of the martyrs theology of the Anabaptists it should be obvious, that these ideas would vitally affect and influence their conceptions as to the nature of the Church. (Only "earnest Christians" would qualify as members for such a Church in which suffering and martyrdom

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 192.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁷ Conrad Grebel, as cited by Stauffer, op. cit., p.213.

were viewed as "natural" experiences of the disciples of Christ. In referring to this attitude of mind of the Anabaptists Bender comments thus:

The Anabaptist was realistic...He anticipated a long and grievous conflict between the Church and the world. Neither did he anticipate the time when the Church would rule the world; the Church would always be a suffering Church....If this prospect should seem too discouraging, the Anabaptist would reply that the life within the Christian brotherhood is satisfyingly full of love and joy.⁴⁸

4. Heritage from Medieval Evangelical Sects.

The question of the relation of the Anabaptists to Medieval parties and sects has lately received considerable attention by students of the Reformation. The solution to this perplexing problem has been sought along various lines, depending upon the personal bias of the researcher in many instances. Some would virtually deny the existence of any connection between the Anabaptists and earlier sects. To them the Anabaptists are "sui generis", not comparable at all to any other groups. After referring to some similarities between the Medieval separatist groups and the emergent Baptist movement Ernst Troeltsch in his great book The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches concludes with these observations:

48

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, Church History, Vol. XIII, 1944, p. 23.

Thus we can understand why some thinkers have even suggested that perhaps these Baptist sects were merely a sign of the reappearance of the medieval Waldensian sect, made possible by the Reformation. To that we must reply: (1) that we have no conclusive proof of the continued existence of any sect of this kind as a uniform international organization, and (2) that there is no evidence that the Baptist leaders came from these sectarian circles. They were all the product of the religious movements of the time; some were originally Lutheran, others Zwinglian or Humanist, while some came from the ranks of the laity whose main interest was in the Bible.⁴⁹

This view of Troeltsch is now favored by many scholars and according to Bender, this view is probably destined to dominate the field.⁵⁰ This line of interpretation is followed by such church historians as Max Goebel, C. A. Cornelius, Johann Loserth, John Horsch, Ernst Correll and others. According to the conception of these scholars, Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Zwingli and Luther, and thus makes it a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament Church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.⁵¹

Although there is much that commends itself in this

49

Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931, Vol. II), p. 696.

50

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, Church History, Vol. XIII, 1944, p. 9.

51

Loc. cit.

view, I cannot accept it without reservations. The truth very often is found between two extremes. It is of course possible, as Newman⁵² also admits, that most of the phenomena of the Anabaptist movement would be accounted for without the supposition of the persistence in it of medieval types of evangelical life and thought; but, as the same another contends, it seems more reasonable to postulate the perpetuity of the older types than to suppose that so many varieties of teaching had independent origin in the two periods and that the older types that can be traced to the Reformation time should have suddenly become extinct to give place to similar parties newly originated. This line of interpretation is also supported by various scholars.

Ludwig Keller,⁵³ for instance, finds Anabaptists throughout the pre-Reformation period in the guise of Waldenses and other similar groups whom he chooses to designate as "the old-evangelical brotherhood", and for whom he posits a continuity from earliest times. Related to Keller are earlier Baptist and Mennonite historians "who rejoice to find in the Anabaptists the missing link which keeps them in the apostolic

⁵²

A. H. Newman, A Manual of Church History, Vol. II. p. 151.

⁵³

Ludwig Keller, as cited by Bender in the Anabaptist Vision. p. 9.

succession of the true Church back through the Waldenses, Bogomiles, Cathari, Paulicians, and Donatists, to Pentecost".⁵⁴ This is not surprising in view of the fact that Menno Simons and his associates, horrified by the atrocities of Muenster, laid more and more stress, as time went on, upon their relation to the Waldenses, whose principles of nonresistance, rejection of oaths, magistracy, warfare, capital punishment, etc., they certainly perpetuated.⁵⁵ They did probably go to an unwarrantable length in claiming an unbroken succession of church life for themselves, but this was due to their strong desire to use every legitimate means to ward off from themselves the odium of the Muenster fanaticism.

The famous historian of Pietism, Albrecht Ritschl,⁵⁶ discovered in his studies a striking likeness between the Franciscan Tertiarii, the Anabaptists, and the Pietists of the seventeenth century. While Keller sought the ideological roots of Anabaptism in the Waldensian movement, Ritschl looked for the same roots in medieval Franciscanism of about the same historical period. He starts with a glimpse of what he

⁵⁴

Loc. cit.

⁵⁵

A. H. Newman, A Manual of Church History, Vol. II, p. 178.

⁵⁶

Albrecht Ritschl, as cited by Friedmann in Conception of the Anabaptists, op. cit., pp. 351, 352.

calls the Franciscan idea of Church reform: restitution of the early form of Christianity by renunciation of the world, personal purity, poverty and, finally, expectation of the Kingdom of God. The practice of brotherly love, so evident among Anabaptist groups, certainly was a main feature of the Franciscan order. Anabaptism appears to Ritschl, as a revival of the Franciscan reformation, a worldly monasticism.⁵⁷ Since a direct derivation of the Anabaptists from the Franciscans could not be traced, he attempts to prove his thesis by a number of interesting parallels. Because the dominant idea of the Kingdom of Christ is understood by both groups as a feasible way of Christian life, under scoring the importance of work, Ritschl calls the Anabaptists (from his Lutheran point of view) "medieval" and "Catholic".⁵⁸ This view is almost diametrically opposed to that of Troeltsch already referred to. Ritschl's thesis is a suggestive one and, although it is open to many criticisms, it merits some consideration by those who would discover all the historical roots of Anabaptism.

A compromise between the two extreme points of view here presented is suggested by Walker⁵⁹ in his discussion of

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 351.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 352.

⁵⁹ W. Walker, The Reformation. pp. 335-337.

the origin of the radical reform groups. According to him, the truth seems probably to be, that the original motive cause of the more extreme Reformation movements came from the great leaders of the Saxon and the Swiss revolts; but that in many quarters more or less latent anti-Roman beliefs inherited from an earlier time modified the views of those thus stirred to active reform. They read their German Testament and interpreted the new evangelical preaching in the light that came from the "old evangelical brotherhoods", from mystic indifference to formal dogma, and from separatist ideals of the Christian life born in an older day. But though in many things thus representative of earlier tendencies, Walker rightly suggests, these radical movements were even more the children of the sixteenth century Reformation.

They were called into being by it. They were not demonstrably in organic continuity with the medieval anti-Roman sects. They sought an individualism in the interpretation of truth and a spiritual freedom of which the Middle Ages had little conception.⁶⁰

With these modifications and restrictions, I believe it will be generally admitted, that the spiritual heritage of older evangelical sects constitutes a strong formative influence in giving direction to the Anabaptists in the development of their Church concept. Their concept of the

60

Ibid., p. 337.

Church as a "pure Church", as a brotherhood, as a separatist body, etc.--all have their roots to a very great extent in the teachings and practices of these medieval sects. This will become more evident as we analyze the cardinal elements of the Anabaptist concept of the Church.

A brief mention should be made yet of the many attempts in recent years to explain the origin of religious denominations as a product of non-religious causes. There are, for instance, the socialist writers, led by Kautsky, who would make Anabaptism either "the forerunner of the modern socialism" or "the culminating effort of medieval communism", and who in reality see it only as the external religious shell of a class movement.⁶¹

Now it must be admitted that Protestantism was by no means a purely religious movement and that not all its origins can be traced to the impulse given by Jesus. Latourette draws our attention to these contributory causes in his History of the Expansion of Christianity.⁶² Into the Reformation movement entered what in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be called nationalism--such as the resentment

⁶¹

H. S. Bender, the Anabaptist Vision. p. 8.

⁶²

K. S. Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1939, Vol. III.), pp. 13-14.

of Germans against ecclesiastical taxation for the benefit of Italian Rome and the particularist feelings which had long been present in England. Probably the Anabaptists were only slightly affected by this patriotic movement. Economic unrest had a share in the Protestant revolt as a whole and some Antipedobaptists certainly were motivated by economic conditions. In some regions, too, Protestantism was particularly strong in the cities and was to a certain extent a product of urban life. Among the Anabaptists of South Germany and Switzerland, for instance, were large numbers of artisans who lived in the larger cities. (e.g. Strassburg, Zurich, Basel, etc.). The real formative influences of Anabaptism, however, cannot be found in this realm. What Latourette claims for Protestantism in general, is also true for Anabaptism in particular. Here are his concluding remarks on this issue:

Yet when all these non-religious causes are mentioned, the fact remains that Protestantism was in its origin primarily a group of religious movements. It was religious conviction which made it possible. Fresh religious experiences lay back of it. The most stirring of these centered about Jesus. In Protestantism the impulse which came from Jesus was breaking out afresh and more vigorously than ever before.⁶³

⁶³

Ibid., p. 14.

CHAPTER IV

CARDINAL ELEMENTS OF THE ANABAPTIST CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

Introductory. In practically every treatise on the Anabaptists one usually finds a strong emphasis on those issues which differentiated and divided them from the great Reformers. When we however consider the fact that Anabaptism was in many ways simply a radical form of Protestantism, it is not surprising that the Anabaptists were in agreement with the Lutherans and the Reformed on many of the so-called fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures. This basic unity on the major doctrines of the Christian faith has often been overlooked by writers on the Anabaptists. On the great doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, depravity and sin, regeneration, holiness of life, grace, and eschatology, the Brethren held common views with the Protestant bodies.¹ The paucity of theological treatises from the leaders of the Anabaptist movement, however, constitutes a serious handicap in any attempt to reconstruct their doctrinal conceptions. Two reasons might be suggested for this scarcity

¹ Wenger, op. cit., p. 145.

of theological writings: the Anabaptist leaders wrote primarily on practical questions of Christian living, or matters of church discipline, or isolated doctrinal points; the other reason may be found in the fundamental fact that Anabaptists did not share the concern to produce a systematic theology.² Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to corroborate the claim that on all cardinal points of Christian theology, the Anabaptists were in essential agreement with Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. In his Commentary on True and False Religion written in 1525, Zwingli says,

"But that no one may suppose that the dissension is in regard to doctrines which concern the inner man, let it be said that the Anabaptists make us difficulty only because of unimportant outward things, such as these: whether infants or adults should be baptized and whether a Christian may be a magistrate."³

In this significant utterance of Zwingli we have a reference to both, the essential agreement in doctrine as well as the "unimportant" minor points of disagreement.

Zwingli was probably wrong in his judgment that the issues on which the Anabaptists differed from him concerned only unimportant things. If we take at face value his statement that baptism and magistracy were the chief points at issue, we see that the deeper issues involved were those of

²

Ibid., p. 137.

³

Zwingli, as quoted by Bender in Conrad Grebel, Church History, Vol. VII; 1938, p. 174.

the nature of the Church and the relation of the Christian to the world.⁴ Since the question concerning the nature of the Church constituted the chief issue between the Anabaptists and the Reformers, it is important that we define and analyze more fully the Anabaptist concept of the Church.

I. THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH AS AN "ECCLESIA".

The ideal of a "gathered" Church, called out from among the nations, rather than a national territorial church, was fundamental in the Anabaptist concept of the Church. Menno, for whom the establishment of the "pure Church" was the primary concern in all his labors, describes the nature of the Church in these words:

In the first place, it should be taken into consideration that the community of God, or the Church of Christ, is an assembly of the pious and a community of the saints as is represented by the Nicene symbol; who, from the beginning have firmly trusted and believed in the promised Seed of the woman, which is the promised Prophet, Messiah, Shiloh, King, Prince, Emmanuel and Christ; who accepted His word in sincerity of heart, follow his example, are led by His Spirit, and who trust in His promise in the Scriptures.⁵

(The concept of the "ecclesia" is evident here in the use of such terms as the "assembly of the pious" and the "Community of saints".) This historic concept is well expressed

4

Ibid., p. 175.

5 Menno Simons, Vollstaendigen Werke, II; p. 113.

by the Swiss, German and Dutch Anabaptists' refusal to use the term "church" or "Kirche" in referring to the brotherhood; they insisted on the use of the term "Gemeinde", the term used in the German Bible. "Kirche" they used when they referred to the great State churches whether Protestant or Catholic. ("Gemeinde" (there is no good English equivalent) was the proper name for the fellowship of true believers.) The German Bible, in fact, never uses the word "Kirche" to apply to the community of saints, but always "Gemeinde". (The force of "Gemeinde" is exactly that of body or community, a group of people who share a common life.⁶)

Grebel, the founder of Anabaptism in Switzerland, was substantially in agreement with Menno in his doctrine of the Church. (According to Grebel, the Church as a local body comes into existence through the preaching of the Word, and through the consequent renewal of life of individual believers. By faith the individual members are united together and incorporated into the body of Christ. This Church is in truth a fellowship of brethren in life and suffering, a) *communio sanctorum*, (which is maintained by the inward bond of faith

6

H. S. Bender, Conception of the Church. (Mennonite Quarterly Review, April, 1945. p. 94.

and the outward bond of love.⁷)

In one important respect the Anabaptists, and particularly Menno, agreed with Luther and Calvin also on the doctrine of the Church. This agreement is found in their common emphasis that the true Church is the "mother of the saints". Of course the Anabaptists, as well as the Reformers, rejected the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation of this famous dictum of Cyprian.⁸ In their rejection of the Roman Church and its pretensions, then, the Lutherans, Reformed and Anabaptists were agreed. In regard to the question, however, as to how the true Christian Church as the mother of believers can be practically realized, they differed considerably. This difference of approach, according to Krahn,⁹ is rooted in their different motives in leaving and renouncing the Old Church. He points out, that for Luther as well as Calvin, a new understanding of the gospel, especially of justification by grace through faith, is the basic truth which leads them to a new concept of the Church. For Luther this meant a renunciation of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution of salvation by works and putting

⁷
H. S. Bender, Conrad Grebel, Church History, Vol. VII, 1938, p. 175.

⁸
See Krahn, Menno Simons, pp. 113, 114.

⁹
C. Krahn, op. cit., p. 115.

in its place the "Church of the Word" into which one entered by the way of "sola fide".¹⁰ I think Krahn is right in his analysis, that the Church concept for the Reformers was not so much the "starting point" in their establishment of the new Church as this was the case with Menno, Grebel and other Anabaptists. The concept of the true Church occupies a central place in the whole theology of Menno, and it is from this perspective that he views and evaluates all principles and practices of the Christian life. Anabaptist theology might be described as ecclesi-centric. In many of his writings Menno differentiates between the true and the false Church--the Church of Christ, and the Church of Antichrist, respectively. He lists six earmarks by which the true Church of Christ may be known:

(1) An unadulterated, pure doctrine....(2) A scriptural use of the sacramental signs....(3) Obedience to the Word....(4) Unfeigned brotherly love....(5) An unreserved confession of God and Christ....(6) Oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord's Word....¹¹)

When we compare these marks of a true Church with those of Luther, for instance (it is evident that there is here a greater emphasis on man's response to God's grace--an emphasis on the walk as well as on the faith of the Church.)

¹⁰

Loc. cit.

¹¹

Menno Simons, II; op. cit., pp. 122, 123.

The "pure Church" concept is closely related to certain principles which we shall now discuss briefly.

1. Only Professed Believers Admitted to Membership.

The Anabaptists insisted upon churches composed exclusively of professed believers. That the ungodly should participate in Christian ordinances and in church privileges in general was to them an abomination.¹² In a rather interesting document entitled the "Confession of the Swiss Brethren in Hesse" (1578), which has only recently been made available to students of church history, we find the following article on the nature of the Church:

We believe, acknowledge and confess one Holy Catholic Church, a community of saints, who are all believing, regenerated Christians and children of God, born from above through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. (translation)¹³

This emphasis on personal experience of salvation is substantiated by the following quotation from Max Goebel:

(The essential and distinguishing characteristic of this church (i.e. the Anabaptist) is its great emphasis upon the actual personal conversion and regeneration of every Christian through the Holy Spirit.... They aimed with special emphasis at carrying out and realizing the Christian doctrine and faith in the heart and life of every Christian in the whole Christian Church.¹⁴)

¹² Newman, op. cit., p. 153.

¹³ See Confession of Swiss Brethren in Hesse, edited by Theodor Sippell. (Mennonite Quarterly Review, Jan. 1949), p. 30.

¹⁴ Max Goebel, as quoted by Bender in The Anabaptist Vision, Church History, Vol. XIII; 1944, p. 9.

It is for these reasons that it was impossible for the Anabaptists to accept the idea of a provincial church which embraced the entire population of the land, reckoning them all as Christians because they were christened as babes. The only people the Anabaptists could consider members of the Church were those who had made a personal commitment to Christ.¹⁵ It was because of this conception of church membership as a commitment to an earnest Christian life that the Brethren insisted on "believer's baptism". They claimed that an infant could not make a personal commitment to Christ nor assume the obligations of church membership. Their objections to infant baptism are usually based on this principle.) Hubmaier, who wrote perhaps more on this subject than any other Anabaptist leader, says this in a controversy with Oecolampadius:

"The significance of this sign and symbol, (i.e. baptism) the obligation of fidelity even unto death in hope of a resurrection to a future life, is moreover of greater moment than the sign itself. But these significant things can have no applicability to infants. Therefore the baptism of infants is foliage without vintage."¹⁶

It does not follow, however, that the Anabaptists regarded infants as lost. Menno raised the following questions in connection with infant salvation:.... "Who has the strongest

15

J. C. Wenger, op. cit., p.167.

16

Newman, quoting Hubmaier in A History of Antipedobaptism. p. 125.

ground and hope of the salvation of their children? Is it he who places his hopes upon an outward sign (infant baptism)? or is it he who bases his hopes upon the promise of grace given and promised of Christ Jesus?"¹⁷

The whole question as to the nature and function of the Church was involved in this controversy between the Anabaptists and the Reformers. Roland H. Bainton brings these issues into sharp focus in his very stimulating discussion of "the left wing of the Reformation" by raising the following questions: ("Should the Church be thought of primarily in terms of leaven or of light? Should it think of itself as a body commissioned to permeate all society even at the risk of losing its own purity, or rather as a light set upon a hill to influence the world by example rather than by participation?"¹⁸) According to Bainton, the one tends to be Augustinian, the other Pelagian. The one is commonly sacramental, the other moral. The one believes in the Church catholic and the other in the Church holy.¹⁹

For the Anabaptists, however, there was no alternative;

17

Wenger, quoting Menno Simons in Glimpses of Menno-nite History and Doctrine. p. 167.

18

R. H. Bainton, The Left Wing of the Reformation. (The Journal of Religion, Vol. 21, 1941), p. 127.

19

Loc. cit.

in loyalty to their deepest convictions, they sincerely attempted to realize the latter--the establishment of a "pure Church".

2. A Strong Emphasis on New Testament Discipleship.

(Closely related to the Anabaptist concept of a "pure Church" was their conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was not "faith" as it was with the Reformers, but "following") (Nachfolge Christi). In practically all their writings this "Nachfolge" or discipleship is referred (to as a fundamental requirement of the new life.) Hans Denk, one of the noblest and most refined and educated leaders of the Anabaptists in South Germany has coined this expression: ("Christ cannot be truly known by anyone, except he follow Him in life".²⁰) According to Denk, only those can teach the way of salvation, who actually walk on the pathway of virtue, on the way of self-denial and self-sacrifice as Christ himself has done. For the Anabaptists (this concept meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ. The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect,

20

Samuel Geiser, quoting Denk in Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden. (Karlsruhe, Germany: Published by H. Schneider, 1931), p. 359.

of doctrinal belief, or of subjective "experience", rather than one of the transformation of life. "The forces of the Christian life was to be not so much the inward experience of the grace of God, as it was for Luther, but the outward application of that grace to all human conduct and the consequent christianization of all human relationships."²¹ Discipleship was for them the true test of faith.

Pilgram Marpeck complains about the preaching of a one-sided gospel among the Protestants. He admonishes his readers to accept the whole gospel truth which implies the putting off of the "old man" and the putting on of the "new man".²²

Menno wrote to his fellow believers thus: "...You must be conformed unto Christ in mind, spirit, courage and will, both in doctrine and life, as Christ Jesus is conformed unto the nature and image of his blessed heavenly Father"²³

That the Anabaptists realized these objectives at least in part in their every-day life is a fact well attested by their opponents. In Zwingli's last book against the Swiss Brethren (1527), for instance, the following is found:

²¹

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision. p. 14.

²²

S. Geiser, quoting Marpeck in Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinde. p. 359.

²³

J. C. Wenger, quoting Menno. op. cit., p. 107.

If you investigate their life and conduct, it seems at first contact irreproachable, pious, unassuming, attractive, yea, above this world. Even those who are inclined to be critical will say that their lives are excellent.²⁴

This emphasis on discipleship is partly due to a different religious orientation in the fundamentals as Friedmann²⁵ suggests. Every Christian refers to the New Testament as his proper basis, but mostly chooses only one part of it as decisive for his life. According to Friedmann's classification of groups on this basis, the Anabaptists are one with the Reformation churches in finding their "theology of salvation" in the Pauline Epistles; but they differ from the latter in stressing the Synoptics, and more particularly, the Sermon on the Mount, as being of equal importance. Samuel Geiser makes a similar distinction in his discussion of "Die Nachfolge Christi".²⁶

The Anabaptist critique of the Reformation was most severe on this point. The Lutheran Reformation had not produced an adequate transformation of life. The Lutheran was not distinguishable from the Catholic at the point of conduct. The fault, according to these radicals, ("lay rather in the

²⁴

H. S. Bender, citing Zwingli, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁵ See Friedmann, Conception of the Anabaptists. pp. 360, 361.

²⁶

S. Geiser, Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden. p. 360.

theory of the Church, as including all members of the community by virtue of infant baptism, rather than on the basis of inner conviction and moral fruits.²⁷⁾

This viewpoint of the Anabaptists also accounts for the fact that they are critical of Catholicism for reasons which are in almost complete contrast to those of the Reformation. They do not protest against the claims of perfection which Catholicism makes, as Reinhold Niebuhr²⁸ shows in his penetrating analysis of motives for reform. They are, themselves, usually strongly perfectionist. Their primary quarrel with Catholicism is that they suspect sacramentalism of achieving a false perfection and of infusing grace too painlessly into the soul of the sinner and thus failing to induce a genuine change towards a new life.²⁹

That this high ideal of ethical perfectionism can easily degenerate into an unevangelical legalism and moralism should be obvious. The Anabaptists were also not immune to these weaknesses. In their attitude towards other groups they occasionally manifested a spirit of self-righteousness and severe criticism which are not consistent with their

27

R. H. Bainton, op. cit., p. 126.

28

R. Niebuhr, II, op. cit., p. 169.

29

Loc. cit.

high ideal. (Still, it is praiseworthy, that in an age of low moral standards they attempted to bring the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ in a "covenant of discipleship".)

3. Strict Church Discipline.

Closely related to the demand for a "pure Church" was (the demand for church discipline, and the authority to excommunicate. The necessity of Church discipline was the negative counterpart of the high calling of the Church for the Anabaptists. If the Church is composed of true followers of Christ, then any who grow cold and revert to a life of sin must be regarded as in need of restoration. That the Anabaptists were fairly well agreed on the principle of church discipline (although not on the degree of its application) can be seen from the fact that practically all "Confessions of Faith" deal with this issue in an explicit manner.) In the "Confession of the Swiss Brethren of Hesse", already referred to, it is expressed thus:

We believe, acknowledge and confess, that believing, new-born Christians and elect Children of God should use the Christian ban in their midst against those who teach, live or walk unrighteously or offensively, which is not according to the gospel of Christ.³⁰

In the comprehensive "Dordrecht Confession of Faith"

30

See "The Confession of the Swiss Brethren of Hesse, (Mennonite Quarterly Review, January, 1949), p. 34.

(1632) Articles XVI and XVII deal with the "Ecclesiastical Ban" and "Avoidance" respectively.³¹ That church discipline was to be exercised in a spirit of brotherly love and that it was to serve as a corrective, rather than as a punishment, is clearly shown in these "Confessions of Faith" as well as in many of their writings. Menno Simons also made it quite clear that church discipline did not apply to every kind of transgression; only open transgressions are to be dealt with by the Church. To Menno, who said that there was nothing on earth, that he loved so much as the Church, the ban was a "work of love".³² A few quotations from his writings will show this:

Not the weak, but the corrupt members are cut off lest they corrupt the others.....I desire that excommunication be practiced in a sincere, paternal spirit, in faithful love, according to the doctrine of Christ and his Apostles.

None is cut off by us or ejected from the communion of the brethren....but those who have already ejected themselves either by false doctrine or by a blamable life from Christ and His communion. For we do not wish to eject any, but to accept them; not to cut them off but to restore them; not to reject but to win them back;not to condemn but to save them.³³

In the practical application and exercise of church

31

See Appendix in Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine.

32

Cf. Krahn, op. cit., pp. 151-154.

33

Menno Simons, cited by Wenger, op. cit., p. 169.

discipline the Anabaptists encountered many difficulties. It soon became apparent that the various leaders and groups differed widely in their views as to the scope and severity of church discipline. (The practice of "avoidance" --(the withdrawal from an expelled member in all social intercourse) especially, gave rise to different interpretations and finally was the occasion for unfortunate schisms and divisions.) The Anabaptists of the Netherlands belonged largely to the party which might be designated as "the hard banners" whereas those in South Germany and Switzerland belonged to the "mild banners". Menno Simons attempted to mediate between these two parties, but his efforts were not successful. One reason for the strictness in applying the ban in the Netherlands is to be found in the greatest problem that the Anabaptist movement faced here in its formative period--the separation from and complete break with the Muensterites. It may also be suggested, that the Anabaptist leaders of the South had been much more under the influence of humanism than those in the North. Certain elements in the conception of Menno and his associates on the question of the ban and excommunication can be traced back, I believe, to their Roman Catholic heritage.

It should be noted, before leaving this subject, that the Anabaptists did not consider themselves an assembly of

perfect Christians--a charge often brought against them by their opponents. A strong "sin-consciousness" is everywhere in evidence in their writings. Yet, they followed after holiness. In referring to this aspect of the movement, Troeltsch comments: "Their real strength lay in the emphasis which they gave to their desire to be a "holy community", "holy" in the sense of the Sermon on the Mount, and implying a voluntary community composed of mature Christians." ³⁴

II. THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH AS A BROTHERHOOD

The Anabaptists conceived of the Church as a Brotherhood in which there are no classes, no clergy and laity, no artificial distinctions, but a fellowship of equals. The New Testament designations of "Brother" and "Sister" were revived and given a new and deeper meaning. These terms indicated to them, that the members of the Church were closely bound together by ties of love and mutual concern and that they should act toward each other as members of a great family of whom God is the father. This concept of the Church as a brotherhood finds its pattern in the Apostolic Church, and I think Bainton is right when he claims that "the restoration of primitive Christianity and the spiritual new birth were practically

34

Troeltsch, op. cit., p. 696.

synonymous for the Anabaptists".³⁵ This concept is evidenced primarily in two important ways: (1) by the principle of church polity and, (2) by the principle of mutual responsibility.)

1. The Principle of Church Polity: Congregational.

On the basis of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers, the Anabaptists did not regard the "ministry of the Word" as belonging to a special ecclesiastical profession, but considered and acknowledged those as their ministers who had been duly called to this office by the church, even if they lacked a special training.³⁶ The emphasis on the congregational base of the Church is already seen in a paper of directions which Melchior Hofmann sent to Emden to assist in the organization of an Anabaptist congregation there. In this letter, cited by Lindsay, he speaks thus of church polity:

God's community knows no head but Christ. No other can be endured, for it is a brother and sisterhood. The teachers have none who rule them spiritually but Christ. Teachers and ministers are not lords. The pastors have no authority except to preach God's Word and punish sins. A bishop must be elected out of his community. Where a pastor has thus been taken, and the guidance committed to him and to his deacon, a community should provide properly for those who help to build the Lord's house.³⁷

³⁵

R. H. Bainton, op. cit., p. 129.

³⁶

See Haendiges on Gemeinde, Menn. Lexikon, Vol. II, p. 54.

³⁷

T. M. Lindsay, citing Hofmann, op. cit., p. 237.

The Anabaptists held that all the government, ordinances, and activities of the Church must be based solely upon the express teaching of the Word of God or the example of Christ and the Apostles, with the rigid exclusion of the "opinions of men", (by which is meant a complete break with medieval tradition and a return to the apostolic pattern of the New Testament).³⁸ This complete break with all historical tradition, as we have seen before, is very marked in the whole movement. (In an important sense their efforts were directed towards the restitution of the primitive Apostolic Church rather than at the reformation of the Church of the sixteenth century.) In his Kirchengeschichte Baur states that "nothing is more characteristic of the Anabaptist than his complete lack of historical consciousness....He makes a breach with history and turns to religious and political radicalism."³⁹ In church polity this radicalism expressed itself in the emphasis of the absolute equality of all members and a certain suspicion and contempt of a professional class of clergy, theologians and administrators, as found in the great State churches. In theory, if not in practice, (the church government of the Anabaptists was thoroughly democratic and congregational.) In speaking of Hubmaier's position on this question

³⁸H. S. Bender, Conrad Grebel, op. cit., 175.

³⁹Baur, cited by Johnson in Balthasar Hubmaier Journal of Religion, Vol. 9, 1929, p. 35.

in relation to modern Baptist commitments, Johnson says this:

"The genius of Baptists is faith, freedom, and fraternity. These concepts cover their spiritual releasement, their intellectual liberty, and their ecclesiastical democratic polity".⁴⁰

This "genius" of the Anabaptist movement exposed it to the dangers inherent in subjectivism and individualism. The early history of the movement, which is characterized by many serious divisions, bears witness to these dangers. A reaction to this extreme individualism therefore, is soon apparent in the Anabaptist churches, especially in the Netherlands. Although the ministers and elders received their calling through the Church, it does not follow that they were mere representatives of the congregation. The need for strict discipline, especially in dealing with dangerous false teachers like the revolutionary chiliasts, early led to a concentration of authority in the hands of a "Board of Elders".⁴¹ The complete autonomy of the local church is also hardly in evidence in the early history of Anabaptism. This can be seen, for instance, in the Conference of Wismar (1554) where only the elders of the various Anabaptist or Mennonite congregations

⁴⁰

J. W. Johnson, "Balthasar Hubmaier", op. cit., p. 63.

⁴¹Cf. Krahn's Analysis of the historical influences in the development of church polity. op. cit., pp. 143-147.

met for a discussion of important ecclesiastical questions. Thus we find that, although in theory the congregational base of the Church was always stressed, in actual practice it was frequently "presbyterian". Perhaps Troeltsch⁴² is right in observing that the Anabaptist movement was unable to create a uniform church organization. The emphasis on independent autonomous churches, as well as differences in religions and social conditions in various parts of Europe, made complete uniformity of church polity impossible.

With this very inadequate treatment we must leave this important subject. A study of the Anabaptist attitude towards a theologically trained as well as a salaried ministry cannot be undertaken within the limits of this chapter. It may be suggested, however, that this attitude was a reaction against certain corruptions of the clergy in the State churches and also a result of their conception as to the equality of all members of the brotherhood.

2. The Principle of Mutual Responsibility.

(Basic to the Anabaptist concept of the Church was the insistence on the practice of true brotherhood and love among the members of the Church. This principle was understood to mean not merely as a fellowship in spiritual things, but the

42

Troeltsch, E., op. cit., p. 706.

actual practice of sharing possessions to meet the needs of others in the spirit of true mutual aid.) In discussing the principles which were common to nearly all Anabaptists, Newman⁴³ refers first of all to this general tendency towards communism. One group, the Hutterian Brethren, insisted upon absolute community of goods, while others were content with regarding their possessions as at all times subject to the demands of Christian charity. Among the Hutterian Brethren, each distinct congregation lived as a social and economic unit as well as a religious unit. For more than four centuries they have practiced community of goods as an expression of the principle of brotherhood.⁴⁴ The Hutterites held that private property was the greatest enemy of Christian love. An early Hutterian book states that one of the questions addressed by the Swiss brethren to applicants for baptism was: "Whether they would consecrate themselves with all their temporal possessions to the service of God and His people."⁴⁵

Most Anabaptists did not go so far as to practice complete economic community, yet all of them believed in the

⁴³

A. H. Newman, A Manual of Church History, Vol. II, p. 153.

⁴⁴

For comprehensive study of Hutterian communism, see Horsch. op. cit., p. 6f and p. 131f.

⁴⁵

Cited by Bender in the Anabaptist Vision. p. 20.

practice of brotherhood in the economic life. Heinrich Seiler, a Swiss Brethren martyr of 1535, said: "I do not believe it wrong that a Christian has property of his own, but yet he is nothing more than a steward."⁴⁶ This principle was rooted partly in their heritage from the old evangelical medieval brotherhoods, but it received a new impetus among the Anabaptists by their emphasis on the New Testament principle of self-denial and brotherhood. In following, as they supposed, the example of the Apostolic churches, they insisted that in a true Christian brotherhood all the resources of every member should be enlisted for the common work of the Church and to meet the several needs of all. It was undoubtedly the strong emphasis placed upon this principle that made the Anabaptist teaching so popular among the common people. Troeltsch states that the desire of the Anabaptists to be a "holy community" found practical expression in this intimate social relationship of the members with each other "through care for the poor and the provision of relief funds, so that within these groups no one was allowed to beg or starve".⁴⁷ Economic sharing, not a forced and mechanical equalizing of possessions, but a general equality on a modest level which allows for natural variations within limits

⁴⁶Seiler, cited by Bender, op. cit., p. 20.⁴⁷E. Troeltsch, op. cit., p. 696.

according to personal abilities, has been a cherished principle in the Mennonite brotherhood.⁴⁸ Although economic individualism has made considerable inroads upon the Mennonite practice of Christian community, it has in the last thirty years found a new and unique expression in the world-wide relief program of the Mennonite Central Committee (M.C.C.) in which all Mennonite churches of North America cooperate.

III. THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH AS A MISSIONARY BODY

We have already referred to Latourette's significant analysis of the "future of Christianity in the light of its past" in which he points out that the expansion of the Christian faith is coming to be more and more a function of the "left wing" of Protestantism. From the radical wing come a majority of the missionaries who are propagating Christianity in other lands. This means that the world-wide Protestantism of the future will depart further from the Christianity of pre-Reformation days than has that of Western Europe and the British Isles.⁴⁹

48

Cf. Yoder, Edward, Mennonites and Their Heritage, Number III. (Akron, Pennsylvania: Published by the Mennonite Central Committee, 1942), pp. 23-27.

49

K. S. Latourette, A Historian Looks Ahead: The Future of Christianity in the Light of its Past. Church History, Vol. XV., 1946. p. 14.

This leads us to conclude, Littell remarks, that the maintenance and implementation of a missionary world-view are more a mark of the voluntary religious associations than of the ancient geographical centers of "Christian civilization", where congregational life is less mobile by intimate collaboration with political and social centers of power.⁵⁰

It might be added here, that the economic resources necessary for such a world-wide missionary endeavor are also centered in America where "left wing Protestantism" and the "voluntary" church associations have conquered.

Both Rome and dominant Protestantism were committed to the medieval parish pattern, and determined to suppress the independent congregational movements such as the Anabaptists represented. In a certain sense it was a continuation of the use of coercion as a method of evangelization, a method in high standing in the Church from the time of Constantine until the emergence of the modern idea of religious liberty.⁵¹ The traditional Lutheran position is stated very clearly in the following words of Karl Hall:

Therein our German interpretation is sharply different from the sect-influenced English-American. For us, cohesion in the State, the furthering and deepening of the national community, count for more than the free movement of individuals.⁵²

50

F.H. Littell, The Anabaptist Theology of Missions.p.7.

51

Littell, op. cit., p. 8.

52

Karl Hall, cited by Littell, op. cit., p. 9.

The Anabaptist church polity and theology of missions assume a proper significance against this background. Their congregations were, as they said, "cut loose from the world". At a time when dominant Protestantism was willing to commit three hundred little states to a territorial determination of religion (Augsburg, 1555--"cuius regio, eius religio") the Anabaptists were sending their missionaries wherever they could get a hearing.⁵³ Their concept of the Church in relation to world missions was a "concept of mobility". Felbinger, a Hutterian evangelist, wrote in 1560, that they went into all lands, as far as their language extended. Wherever God opened the door they entered in with God's message and in this endeavor, he claims, they have "scriptural ground".⁵⁴

(This "scriptural ground" the Anabaptists found in the so-called "Great Commission", (Matthew 28:18-20). No words of the Master were given more serious attention by His Anabaptist followers, than His final command. Christ's life and teaching, his death and resurrection, found their culmination in a glorious program comprehending the world. The pilgrim, familiar figure of the Middle Ages, was "transformed in the fiery experience of the Anabaptists into an effective evangelist

53

Ibid., p. 10.

54

John Horsch, op. cit., p. 29.

and martyr".⁵⁵ In no small measure their martyrdom was a result of their missionary zeal. The Reformers, as well as the authorities, were evidently well aware of the Anabaptist missionary world-view. The practice of "adult" or "believer's baptism" was regarded by the Anabaptists as the logical culmination of their missionary activity, but this practice also made them a ready mark for persecution.) A suspension of this rite would no doubt have lessened the pressure from their opponents; this, however, they would not do, because "standing still" was a sign of cowardice in the opinion of the chief leaders of the Anabaptist movement.⁵⁶

The Anabaptist missionary impulse was crippled by persecution among the South German and Swiss churches and by prosperity among the Dutch Mennonites. Their missionary vision, however, has not been completely lost in later years. In the "Great Century" their vision has been recaptured by many Protestant bodies; especially those of the "left wing".

IV. THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH AS A BODY SEPARATED FROM THE WORLD.

(A necessary corollary of the Anabaptist concept of the "pure Church" was their teaching on the separation of

⁵⁵Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14.

Christians from the world. They held that between the Church of Jesus Christ and the general society of mankind, often spoken of as the "World", there was an inescapable antagonism. "The Church against the World",⁵⁷ to use a modern phrase was the Anabaptist conception of the relation between Church and world. Even when the Church is not openly persecuted and violently opposed, they believed that a certain degree of tension and misunderstanding is bound to exist between the two, if the Church is a true representative on earth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Between the "Civitas Dei" and the "Civitas Diaboli" (there can never be complete peace and harmony. The Anabaptists expected opposition and persecution from the world. They spoke much of bearing "the cross", of being faithful unto death. In general, this principle of separation from the world was operative in two spheres: the social, and the political.

1. The Church Separated from a Non-Christian Society.

Anabaptists generally took for granted that the tension between the Church and a non-Christian society, which Jesus spoke about (cf. John 7:7; 15:18-21; 17:14) would always continue in some form or other. (Identification or compromise with a sinful world, they believed, would destroy the

57

Cf. H.R. Niebuhr, The Church Against the World. (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Company, 1935), esp. pp. 123-128.

effectiveness of their testimony, both individually and collectively. Hence they have generally taught and practiced complete separation from the evil and selfish practices of the godless society of the world. Although in the world, they aspired to live on higher levels and not be of the world. This doctrine of "non-conformity" to the world is found already in one of their earliest confessions of faith--the so-called "Seven Articles" which were composed by Michael Sattler of Strassburg. This Confession, which was accepted by the Anabaptist leaders at the "Synod of Schleithem" in 1527, deals with the question of "Absonderung" (separation) in article IV. Here are some excerpts of this article:

....This (i.e. separation) shall be from all that is evil and wicked which has been planted in the world by the devil. (We must not have fellowship with them, nor run with them in their many abominations. It is thus: All those who have not been saved by the obedience of faith and have not been reconciled to God to do his will, are an abomination in God's sight; what else can one expect of such as the practice of abominable things.... However, the command of the Lord to us is clear. He exhorts us to separate ourselves from evil, and then he will be our God and we shall be his sons and daughters. Further, he admonishes us to go out from Babylon and earthly Egypt, in order to escape from the plagues and sufferings which he will bring upon them. (Free translation)⁵⁸

In order to make this separation practically effective, the Anabaptists built up a group solidarity among the brotherhood, thereby making the group testimony the more impressive;

⁵⁸ Article IV. of Schleithem Confession, as cited by Geiser, op. cit., p. 314.

this would also serve to guard members against conforming carelessly to the popular and selfish ways of the world and thereby failing to take up Christ's way of life. All "entangling associations" with the world were to be avoided, and Paul's teaching concerning the "unequal yoke" was to be applied to all relations of life. (Marriage, for instance, they taught, should be only within the brotherhood. Close social and business ties between members of the Church and those who are not Christians were generally discouraged or forbidden.) Certain professions are to be avoided. According to Menno, the profession of a trader is of a questionable nature.⁵⁹ Grebel's views on the question of nonconformity are thus described by Bender:

He would separate the true Christians from the ungodly world order and its institutions, and resolutely abandon the use of the civil state even in its theocratic form to promote the Christianization of society, rather making the Church a light to the world and a salt to the earth. The Church should overcome the world by winning members from the ungodly society of the world to the godly society of the Church.⁶⁰

This emphasis on separation from the world among the Anabaptists should not lead us to the erroneous conclusion, however, that Anabaptism in its early history formed a quiet "conventicle-Christianity". This is shown very clearly by

⁵⁹

See Krahn, op. cit., p. 176.

⁶⁰

H. S. Bender, Conrad Grebel, op. cit., p. 176.

Friedmann⁶¹ in his comparative study of Anabaptism and Pietism. He points out that Anabaptism practically everywhere made its greatest inroads into that portion of the population which was most active religiously. At least this was the case among the Swiss and the Hutterian Brethren. It was the active peasant groups which were ready to follow this road, and which had the strength to resist any moderation of their principles. (This, of course, also implied a readiness to suffer in conflict with an evil world order. Anabaptism was a great and powerful movement just so long as this willingness to suffer as an expression of deepest faith, was a living reality. Wherever and as soon as these inner forces declined and consequently the readiness to suffer or to migrate to distant lands ceased to exist (and this is to be noted among the Anabaptists after 1600 in practically all of Central Europe) the situation changed completely.⁶² There were still numerous groups of Anabaptists in existence, but they degenerated into a quiet "conventicle-Christianity". Certain groups, however, retained their original vision and endeavored to work out their salvation in a radical following of Christ and to shine as lights in the "midst of a

⁶¹
R. Friedmann, Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries. p. 10.

⁶²
Ibid., p. 11.

crooked and perverse generation". (Phil. 2:15).

2. The Church Separated from the State.

In their views on magistracy and in their demand for the separation of Church and State the Anabaptists were practically all united. (Hubmaier was an exception, holding different views on magistracy.) (Government was ruled out of the sphere of religion.⁶³ The exclusion of the magistrate from the sphere of religion, however, did not determine the extent of his right within his own domain. Here the problem was to reconcile the teaching that the "powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1) and "resist not evil" (Matt. 5:39). Just at what points the line may be drawn between these two principles of Scripture is not always clear. (Some said that they would support only the magistrate who obeyed the Bible: to put down evil and aid the good. Others, and they were the larger number, claimed that the magistrate was given for the sins of the world and should be obeyed in all things not offensive to conscience.) The Swiss Brethren refused to bear arms but paid all taxes, for which the Hutterites criticized them on the war tax.⁶⁴ Holding the magistrate's office

⁶³ Bainton, op. cit., p. 132.

⁶⁴ F. H. Littell, The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the True Church. (Mennonite Quarterly Review, January, 1950), p. 50.

was generally enough to ban a person from the congregation, but Menno permitted such to remain members.⁶⁵ Except among the revolutionary groups there seemed to be no general social concern, no mind for questions of public policy. The attitude of restraint among the Anabaptists toward the magistrate's calling and various functions related to it is based upon the thought that there are two different worlds involved, and the things pertaining to life in one are not proper to the other. (The vocation of the Church was incompatible with magistracy and, although recognizing government as ordained of God; they felt they had no right to participate in it. The duty of the Christian community was the vocation of spiritual perfection.) "In order not to participate in "strange sins", Riedemann said, "we don't carry sword, nor lance, nor guns, nor any kind of arms or weapons".⁶⁶ It should be noted here, that the objection of the Brethren to war was not humanitarian or cultural; their attitude was primarily one of "defenselessness" and not "pacifism".)

The relation of the Anabaptists to the magistrate (obrigkeit) is a most difficult question, one about which there is still much dispute. It was the custom of the Reformers

⁶⁵

Loc. cit.

⁶⁶

Littell quoting Riedemann, op. cit., p. 49.

and the civil authorities generally to lay against all who came under the name "Anabaptists" the charge of organized resistance to all civil authority. But, as Schaff⁶⁷ is careful to point out, no such blanket charge could with justice be made. Government documents, except when dealing with isolated cases, are almost invariably without specific evidence to support their accusations. This is true, for instance, of Heinrich Bullinger's charges against the Anabaptists. His evidence is biased, and taken, apparently, only from the example of a few radicals.

The Reformers were concerned for the unity of their new Church. They looked upon the Anabaptist movement as a potential disrupting force and, as Schaff observes, it was perhaps natural under the circumstances that they opposed them as they did. Schaff, however, takes the position that "what the Anabaptists, taken generally, demanded was not the abolition of government, but freedom to worship as they pleased, insisting that the government had no right to coerce them in matters of faith".⁶⁸ It would therefore appear, according to the same writer, that the Reformers gravely misjudged and misrepresented them. In fact, there is much similarity between

⁶⁷ H. H. Schaff, The Anabaptists, the Reformers and the Civil Government. esp. pp. 29-31

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

the views of some of the Reformers on civil government and those of the Anabaptists, as an unbiased survey will reveal.⁶⁹ For a scholarly discussion of this rather perplexing problem I would refer the reader to the article by Schaff already cited.

In reducing the various tendencies to a scheme of logical emphasis, Littell notes three prominent accents in the Anabaptist view of magistracy: first, their opposition to compulsion in religion; second, their opposition to revolution; third, their sense of destiny as the Church of the Martyrs.⁷⁰

Their opposition to compulsion in religion grew out of their sense of the incongruity between early Church pattern and the established State church. When they were persecuted, this conviction became more rugged and fixed. Persecution of the faithful was a mark of the Beast, and proved that the established Church was not the "true Church". The Anabaptists demanded freedom of conscience and voluntarism in religion. According to Bullinger, the Swiss Brethern taught that:

One cannot and should not use force to compel anyone to accept the faith; for faith is a free gift of God. It is wrong to compel anyone by force or coercion to embrace the faith, or to put to death anyone for his erring faith
.....⁷¹

⁶⁹

Ibid., p. 31.

⁷⁰

Littell, op. cit., p. 50.

⁷¹

H. S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, p. 4.

The Anabaptist opposition to revolution grew out of their pessimism concerning the possibilities of social betterment and their conviction, that carnal force cannot effect such changes for betterment even if they were possible. After the Muenster episode, all branches of the "Stille" reacted strongly against ethical crusades outside the "True Church" and vigorously asserted the authority of the magistrate.⁷²

The Anabaptist sense of destiny as the Church of the Martyrs constitutes another prominent accent in the Anabaptist view of the magistracy. (The Church of the Good Shepherd is compared to the flock--the sheep--which are sent into the midst of wolves, and which must be prepared to lay down their lives. We have already seen this emphasis in the "theology of martyrdom" of the Anabaptists.)

In their demand for the separation of Church and State the Anabaptists were pioneers. (They believed that only by this separation could the salt be restored to the Church with which to savor society. Their principles of love and non-resistance must be applied to all human relationships. This meant that the Christians may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ and his Apostles. They

⁷²Littell, op. cit., p. 51.

must consequently withdraw from the worldly system and create a Christian social order within the Church brotherhood. Extension of this Christian order by winning individuals to Christ and His Church, they believed, was the only way by which progress can be made in Christianizing the social order.⁷³

CONCLUSION

We have made an attempt to reconstruct the Anabaptist concept of the Church in the general context of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, in the light of the historical background of this movement, and in consideration of the formative influences which modified and molded that concept. The question may well be raised whether the Anabaptist vision has any significance for American Christianity of our present day. Have the Anabaptists made a distinct contribution to the spiritual heritage of American Protestantism? In closing, a brief answer to this question may be in place.

In general it may be stated that the spiritual descendants of the "left wing movement" have had a determining influence in fashioning the religious temper of America, even more so, than the established Church.⁷⁴ The principle of

⁷³ Bender, op. cit., p. 23.

⁷⁴ Bainton, op. cit., p. 134.

voluntarism in religion was, perhaps for the first time, clearly enunciated by them. In England, and especially in America, this new type of Christian society has been gradually realized, and the voluntary church association has become the dominant form. The great principles of religious liberty, freedom of conscience, separation of Church and State, so basic in American Protestantism, and so essential to democracy, can be traced back to the Anabaptists of the Reformation period.⁷⁵ The line of descent through the centuries since that time may not always be clear, but the debt to original Anabaptism seems to be well established. The individualism so characteristic of American religious life may also be designated, at least partly, as an Anabaptist heritage. A leading Protestant historian, Wilkelm Pauck, quotes a distinguished Catholic historian, C. J. H. Hays, as follows:

In the long run the radical sects proved to be more characteristic of Protestantism than Henry VIII or Calvin, or even Luther. And however transitory the tenets and practices of particular radical sects may have been, there can be no doubt that it was the succession of such sects which conferred upon Protestant Christendom the distinction of substituting individualist for collective Christianity. This was really a revolutionary attitude toward Christianity.⁷⁶

75

Cf. Littell, F. H., the Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the True Church. op. cit., p. 33.

76

W. Pauck, Historiography of German Reformation. Church History, Vol. IX, Dec. 1940, pp. 335-336.

Although this seems to me^a somewhat biased viewpoint, it doubtless contains a significant emphasis from the perspective of American church history where sectarianism has won such sweeping and decisive victories, even though, to be sure, it has become modified in this process. This modification is probably due to the fact that in America there has been a unique synthesis of the faith of the three great Christian traditions--the Lutheran, the Calvinist, and the Anabaptist--which was impossible under the conditions obtaining on the European continent. It is the opinion of this writer that all three traditions need one another, and that all can benefit by an appreciation of each other's heritage and by holding one another in fraternal esteem.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the words of Don. E. Smucker who has made a review of Anabaptist theology in the light of modern theological trends. In this review he also describes the impact of the Anabaptist vision on other churches. Here are his concluding remarks in which he refers to the probable influence of these conceptions in the future:

"While rejoicing in some of the larger victories of the church in our time, while admitting the richness of the Christian fellowship, the Anabaptist vision will continue to live in the modern world as a Christ-centered, Biblical Gospel based on a realistic view of man as sinner, a glorious

vision of a missionary brotherhood, a warm love-conquered yearning to meet human need and to deny the rightness of carnal strife, a strong emphasis on vigorous congregational life, a lofty affirmation of religious liberty through a free church in a free society, a clear, simple Biblical theology climaxed by a balanced eschatology which sees Jesus Christ as Lord of the kingdom above history, within history, and at the end of history."⁷⁷

77

Don. E. Smucker, Anabaptist Theology in the Light of Modern Theological Trends. (Mennonite Quarterly Review, January, 1950), p. 87.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amsterdam Assembly Series, Man's Disorder and God's Design. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1948.

P. Friedmann, R., Conception of the Anabaptists. Church History. Vol. 9, 1940. Church History, Vol. 5, 1936. p. 227; Reformed Church. Church History, Vol. 12, 1943.

Friesen, J. J., An Outline of Mennonite History. Newton, Kansas: Herald Publishing Co., 1944.

Geiser, Samuel, Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden. Karlsruhe, Germany: Published by Heinrich Schrieider, 1931.

Horsch, John, The Hutterian Brethren. Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1931.

Kerr, H. T., A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin. Philadelphia : Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1939.

Krahn, C., Menno Simons, Ein Bietrag Zur Geschichte und Theologi der Taufgessinnten. Published by Heinrich Schneider, Karlsruhe i.B; 1936.

P. Latourette, Kenneth Scott, A Historian Looks Ahead; the Future of Christianity in the Light of its Past. Church History, XV (1946) pp. 12, 14.

Lindsay, Thomas, M., A History of the Reformation, Vol. II. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1907.

Mackinnon, James, Luther and the Reformation, Vol. III. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.

McNeill, J. T., Books of Faith and Power. Harper, 1947, (p. 51) 261 Ma. 169.

Menno Simons, Vollstaendigen Werke, Eckhart, Indiana: Mennonite Publishing House, 1876.

- Newman, A. H., A Manual of Church History, Vol. II, The Anti-Pedobaptist Reformation. p. 148-200.
- Newman, A. H., History of Anti-Pedobaptism. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1897.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold, The Nature and Destiny of Man. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.
- Richardson, C. C., The Church Through the Centuries. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.
- Troeltsch, Ernst, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches. New York: The MacMillan Company, Vol. II, 1931.
- Van Bracht, Thielemann, J., Martyrs Mirror. Elmira, Ont.: Second Edition Published by Menno Sander, 1944.
- Van der Smissen, Carl, Kurzgefasste Geschichte und Glaubenslehre der Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten. St. Louis, Mo.: A Wiebusch and Son Printing Co., 1895.
- Walker, Williston, The Reformation. T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1900.
- Wenger, John C., Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine. Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1947.
- Yoder, Edward, Mennonites and Their Heritage. No. III. Akron, Penn.: Published by Mennonite Central Committee, 1942.

PERIODICALS

- Bainton, R. H., The Left Wing of the Reformation. Journal of Religion, Vol. XXI, 1941.
- Bender, H. S., The Mennonite Conception of the Church. Mennonite Quarterly Review, April, 1945.
- Bender, H. S., Conrad Grebel; the Founder of Swiss Anabaptism. Church History, Vol. 7, 1938.
- Bender, H. S., The Anabaptist Vision, Church History. Vol. XIII, 1944