



1958

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "5. The Left Wing: The Anabaptists. Pt. VII: The Protestant Movement." *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man* (Gettysburg College, 1958), 55-63.

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5. The Left Wing: The Anabaptists

Abstract

Thus far we have considered the churches of the Protestant Reformation which, in spite of their secession from Rome, nevertheless retained some important elements of the Catholic tradition. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Henry VIII all assumed that the churches which they had established should embrace the entire community, and that ideally everyone would become members of the church through infant baptism. Also, these reformers believed in maintaining close relations with the temporal power which, they asserted, was ordained by God for the benefit of men. Nowhere is this attitude seen more clearly than in the case of Richard Hooker, who maintained that the Church of England and the English state were but two aspects of one and the same thing. Each man was a member of church and state, and had obligations to both. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Anabaptist, Protestant, Protestant Reformation

Disciplines

History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section VII: The Protestant Movement](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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5. The Left Wing: The Anabaptists

Thus far we have considered the churches of the Protestant Reformation which, in spite of their secession from Rome, nevertheless retained some important elements of the Catholic tradition. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Henry VIII all assumed that the churches which they had established should embrace the entire community, and that ideally everyone would become members of the church through infant baptism. Also, these reformers believed in maintaining close relations with the temporal power which, they asserted, was ordained by God for the benefit of men. Nowhere is this attitude seen more clearly than in the case of Richard Hooker, who maintained that the Church of England and the English state were but two aspects of one and the same thing. Each man was a member of church and state, and had obligations to both.

There was another kind of Protestantism which appeared in the sixteenth century. It was based upon an interpretation of the church which had been rejected since the recognition of Christianity by the Roman Empire in the fourth century. In spite of vigorous repression during the Middle Ages, this interpretation of the church, which we might call the sect ideal, had not disappeared completely. The rupture in Christendom opened up the possibility of its being revived again. Those who embraced the sect ideal are sometimes called the Anabaptists.

There are five main principles of the sect ideal which should be mentioned here. First, the true church is the voluntary and gathered company of those who are faithful unto death. Second, the baptism of infants is unscriptural. Baptism is a sign or symbol that the sins of those to whom the gospel has been preached have been washed away. Therefore, baptism can only follow conversion. The term "Anabaptism" developed from the practice of rebaptizing those who had received in infancy what the sectarians regarded as a false sacrament. Third, the true church must restore the piety of the primitive church, in which the teaching of Jesus was the absolute law. This involves strict discipline among the faithful to insure that the law is carried out. Those who disobey the law must be excluded from the church by the ban, which is the only weapon a Christian might properly use. Fourth, the gathered company of brethren must withdraw from the world to prepare for the second coming of Christ (which many sectarians believed was imminent) and for the kingdom which He will then establish on earth. Fifth, there can be no relationship between the true church and the state. The state is necessary because there are sinners who must be restrained. Therefore, the brethren will accord it passive obedience, but they will not make use of its machinery except where such recourse cannot be avoided.

There are several different strands to be traced among the Anabaptists. This is true because they developed within a

There was the principle power of the state. Anabaptists were fighting in armies.
The Gathered Church - view of Christian empire
Church was a gathering of the saints - those who had made the decision for Christ
state is not established by God - no office holding, no waging wars, for was wrong
Some taught Christian communism, some have many wives. went off to the edge of civilization

number of Protestant communities which the sectarians believed had not gone far enough in reforming the church. In general, the sect ideal appealed to simple farmers and artisans. However, their early leaders included humanists, Catholic priests, and men who earlier had been associated with the reforms of Luther and Zwingli. From the point of view of sixteenth century society, Anabaptist principles appeared altogether disruptive of the existing order of things. Both Catholics and other Protestants bitterly condemned the sectarians and turned with a vengeance to persecuting them.

One of the earliest strands of Anabaptism can be traced to Zurich. As early as 1523 several of Zwingli's supporters took issue with him because of what they regarded as the incompleteness of his reform and because he was cooperating closely with the secular authorities. Failing to convince Zwingli to change his pace, they resolved to establish their own church. But the authorities of Zurich were no more able than their contemporaries elsewhere to entertain the possibility that such a church should go unmolested. Accordingly they began to arrest the Anabaptists. Some were banished, others imprisoned, and still others executed.

In 1527 Michael Sattler (c. 1495-1527), one of the leaders of Swiss Anabaptism, presided over a meeting of his fellow-believers at the small border town of Schleithem. Although the Anabaptists generally regarded creeds and other binding statements undesirable, it was decided to draw up a summary of accepted beliefs. Sattler probably wrote The Schleithem Confession of Faith, an excerpt from which follows, and incorporated it into a pastoral letter. A few months later he was arrested in Wurttemberg and burned at the stake.

Brotherly Union of a Number of Children
of God Concerning Seven Articles

May joy, peace and mercy from our Father through the atonement of the blood of Christ Jesus, together with the gifts of the Spirit -- Who is sent from the Father to all believers for their strength and comfort and for their perseverance in all tribulation until the end, Amen -- be to all those who love God, who are the children of light, and who are scattered everywhere as it has been ordained of God our Father, where they are with one mind assembled together in one God and Father of us all: Grace and peace of heart be with you all, Amen....

Dear brethren and sisters, we who have been assembled in the Lord at Schleithem on the Border, make known in points and articles to all who love God that as concerns us we are of one mind to abide in the Lord as God's obedient children, His sons and daughters, we who have been and shall be separated from the world in everything, and completely at peace. To God alone be praise and glory without the contradiction of any brethren. In this we have perceived the oneness of the Spirit of our Father

and of our common Christ with us. For the Lord is the Lord of peace and not of quarreling, as Paul points out. That you may understand in what articles this has been formulated you should observe and note the following.

A very great offense has been introduced by certain false brethren among us, so that some have turned aside from the faith, in the way they intend to practice and observe the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ. But such have missed the truth and to their condemnation are given over to the lasciviousness and self-indulgence of the flesh. They think faith and love may do and permit everything, and nothing will harm them nor condemn them, since they are believers....

The articles which we discussed and on which we were of one mind are these: 1. Baptism; 2. The Ban (Excommunication); 3. Breaking of Bread; 4. Separation from the Abomination; 5. Pastors in the Church; 6. The Sword; and 7. The Oath.

First. Observe concerning baptism: Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him, and to all those who with this significance request baptism of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the pope. In this you have the foundation and testimony of the apostles. Mt. 28, Mk. 16, Acts 2, 8, 16, 19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with assurance.

Second. We are agreed as follows on the ban: The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves to the Lord, to walk in His commandments, and with all those who are baptized into the one body of Christ and who are called brethren or sisters, and yet who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the command of Christ. Mt. 18. But this shall be done according to the regulation of the Spirit (Mt. 5) before the breaking of bread, so that we may break and eat one bread, with one mind and in one love, and may drink of one cup.

Third. In the breaking of bread we are of one mind and are agreed as follows: All those who wish to break one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ, and all who wish to drink of one drink as a remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, shall be united beforehand by baptism in one body of Christ which is the church of God and whose Head is Christ. For as Paul points out we cannot at the same time be partakers of the Lord's table and the table of devils; we cannot at the same time drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the devil. That is, all those who have fellowship with the dead works of darkness have no part in the light. Therefore all who follow the devil and the world have no part with those who are called unto

ban - put out of the church, not temporal punishment.

God out of the world. All who lie in evil have no part in the good.

Therefore it is and must be thus: Whoever has not been called by one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one Spirit, to one body, with all the children of God's church, cannot be made into one bread with them, as indeed must be done if one is truly to break bread according to the command of Christ.

Fourth. We are agreed as follows on separation: A separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; in this manner, simply that we shall not have fellowship with the wicked and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. This is the way it is: Since all who do not walk in the obedience of faith, and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do His will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who have come out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other.

To us then the command of the Lord is clear when He calls upon us to be separate from the evil and thus He will be our God and we shall be His sons and daughters.

He further admonishes us to withdraw from Babylon and the earthly Egypt that we may not be partakers of the pain and suffering which the Lord will bring upon them.

From this we should learn that everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from. By this is meant all popish and antipopish works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the commitments made in unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God, in accordance with all the unrighteousness which is in the world. From all these things we shall be separated and have no part with them for they are nothing but an abomination, and they are the cause of our being hated before our Christ Jesus, Who has set us free from the slavery of the flesh and fitted us for the service of God through the Spirit Whom He has given us.

Therefore there will also unquestionably fall from us the unchristian, devilish weapons of force -- such as sword, armor and the like, and all their use either for friends or against one's enemies -- by virtue of the word of Christ, Resist not him that is evil.

Fifth. We are agreed as follows on pastors in the church of God: The pastor in the church of God shall, as Paul has prescribed, be one who out-and-out has a good report of those who are outside the faith. This office shall be to read, to admonish and teach, to warn, to discipline, to ban in the church, to lead out in prayer for

Stay away from anything which will cause you hurt.

the advancement of all the brethren and sisters, to lift up the bread when it is to be broken, and in all things to see to the care of the body of Christ, in order that it may be built up and developed, and the mouth of the slanderer be stopped.

This one moreover shall be supported of the church which has chosen him, wherein he may be in need, so that he who serves the Gospel may live of the Gospel as the Lord has ordained. But if a pastor should do something requiring discipline, he shall not be dealt with except on the testimony of two or three witnesses. And when they sin they shall be disciplined before all in order that the others may fear.

But should it happen that through the cross this pastor should be banished or led to the Lord through martyrdom another shall be ordained in his place in the same hour so that God's little flock and people may not be destroyed.

Sixth. We are agreed as follows concerning the sword: The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same sword is now ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates.

In the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without putting the flesh to death, -- simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

Now it will be asked by many who do not recognize this as the will of Christ for us, whether a Christian may or should employ the sword against the wicked for the defence and protection of the good, or for the sake of love.

Our reply is unanimously as follows: Christ teaches and commands us to learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly in heart and so shall we find rest to our souls. Also Christ says to the heathenish woman who was taken in adultery, not that one should stone her according to the law of His Father (and yet He says, As the Father has commanded me, thus I do), but in mercy and forgiveness and warning, to sin no more. Such an attitude we also ought to take completely according to the rule of the ban.

Secondly, it will be asked concerning the sword, whether a Christian shall pass sentence in worldly disputes and strife such as unbelievers have with one another. This is our united answer: Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother in the case of the inheritance, but refused to do so. Therefore we should do likewise.

Thirdly, it will be asked concerning the sword, Shall one be a magistrate if one should be chosen as such? The answer is as follows: They wished to make Christ king, but He fled and did not view it as the arrangement of His Father. Thus shall we do as He did, and follow Him, and so shall we not walk in darkness. For He Himself says, He who wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take

up his cross and follow me. Also, He Himself forbids the employment of the force of the sword saying, The worldly princes lord it over them, etc., but not so shall it be with you. Further, Paul says, Whom God did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, etc. Also Peter says, Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow His steps.

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians' are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christians' weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as is the mind of Christ toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed. For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed. Now since Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same, that His body may remain complete and united to its own advancement and upbuilding.

Seventh. We are agreed as follows concerning the oath: The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God's Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to His followers, whether true or false, -- neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by our head, -- and that for the reason which He shortly thereafter gives, For you are not able to make one hair white or black. So you see it is for this reason that all swearing is forbidden: we cannot fulfill that which we promise when we swear, for we cannot change even the very least thing on us.

Now there are some who do not give credence to the simple command of God, but object with this question: Well now, did not God swear to Abraham by Himself (since He was God) when He promised him that He would be with him and that He would be his God if he would keep His commandments, -- why then should I not also swear when I promise to someone? Answer: Hear what the Scripture says: God, since He wished more abundantly to show unto the heirs the immutability of His counsel, inserted an oath, that by two immutable things (in which it is impossible for God to lie) we might have a strong consolation. Observe the meaning of this Scripture: What God forbids you to do, He has power to do, for everything is possible

for Him. God swore an oath to Abraham, says the Scripture, so that He might show that His counsel is immutable. That is, no one can withstand nor thwart His will; therefore He can keep His oath. But we can do nothing, as is said above by Christ, to keep or perform our oaths: therefore we shall not swear at all.... *

While the Anabaptists in Switzerland and elsewhere upheld the doctrines of pacifism and nonresistance, their principles were seized upon by revolutionary agitators who sought to force their own interpretations of the kingdom of God upon whole cities or states. Early in the sixteenth century, the peasants of Germany nursed many grievances against their landlords. They resented the enclosing of land long held in common; their exclusion from woodland, game preserves, and streams; and the increasing services arbitrarily demanded of them. Without a doubt, the explosive atmosphere which accompanied the Protestant movement helped nerve the peasants to revolt in 1524 and 1525. In defending them against the charge that "the fruit of the new teaching was that no one should obey but that all should everywhere rise in revolt," one of the numerous spokesmen of the peasants in explaining their grievances concluded:

...if any one or more of the articles here set forth should not be in agreement with the Word of God, as we think they are, such article we will willingly retract if it is proved really to be against the Word of God by a clear explanation of the Scripture. Or if articles should now be conceded to us that are hereafter discovered to be unjust, from that hour they shall be void and null and without force. Likewise, if more complaints should be discovered which are based upon truth and the Scriptures and relate to offenses against God and our neighbor, we are determined to reserve the right to present these also, and to exercise ourselves in all Christian teaching. **

Thomas Munzer (c. 1489-1525), a disgruntled Lutheran clergyman who had been driven from several places because of his revolutionary views, urged on the Thuringian peasants. He told them that to erect God's kingdom required "the sword to wipe out the godless." He pilloried Luther as "brother fat hog and plush liver" for what seemed to Munzer his selfish refusal to take sides with the peasants. Munzer also suggested the establishment of a primitive communism in all states. He gathered together a peasant army, participated in the uprising of 1524-1525, and helped bring upon his followers ruthless suppression by the political authorities. Munzer himself was executed.

* Reprinted from John Christian Wenger, Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine (Scottsdale, Penna., 1949), pp. 207-212. Used with permission.

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A second example of revolutionary Anabaptism appeared in the 1530's. A group of fanatics seized control of the city of Münster and determined to make of it "the New Jerusalem where the saints would reign." The rules devised for this new society included community of property, polygamy, and intolerance of all opposition. Thoroughly aroused by this development, Lutheran princes cooperated with the Roman Catholic bishop in conquering the city and executing its leaders.

After Münster the principle of revolution was thoroughly repudiated and Anabaptism returned once more to principles expressed by its early Swiss leaders. The sectarians believed that one of the marks of their church was persecution, and such indeed continued to be their lot, whether in Switzerland, Germany, or the Low Countries. Eventually, many of them left this part of Europe, some finding their way into Russia and others to America. The intense individualism of the Anabaptist expression produced a divisiveness which in turn gave rise to many separate sects, such as the Mennonites, the Hutterites, the Dunkers, and the Dukabors. Of these the Mennonites were the most important. To Menno Simons (1496-1561) belongs the credit for the organization and development of the Mennonite movement. He was a Dutch priest who left the Roman Catholic church in 1536 and shortly thereafter became a sect clergyman. He traveled widely in western Germany and the Low Countries, preaching the simple and separatist piety that distinguished later Anabaptism. The sect ideal in England was represented by Quakerism and the Baptist movement.

Besides the diverse groups already discussed, the left wing of the Reformation was represented by individual rationalists who pushed the sect ideal to the solitary extreme. These individuals, much influenced by the humanists, came into contact with Calvin more than any other reformer. We have already discussed Servetus. Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563) was expelled from his post as schoolmaster in Geneva for his unorthodox interpretation of the Song of Solomon. Later, as a professor at the University of Basle, he became the most distinguished of the few sixteenth century voices raised for religious toleration. It was also at Basle that Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), formerly a prominent Italian official, became an outspoken advocate of radical Protestantism. By his efforts in Poland and Transylvania he became the outstanding figure among antitrinitarian sects emerging there. These Socinians, as they were called, made an appeal to reason in support of their convictions. Seeking religious liberty for themselves, because of the bitter persecutions which they too endured, they avoided restraining the religious convictions of others. The Socinians were the predecessors of the modern Unitarians.

The Anabaptists and the rationalist reformers have left some important legacies to subsequent eras. The idea of the separation of church and state was a cardinal Anabaptist doctrine, although its acceptance in the Western World owes a great deal to the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The idea of

pacifism in modern times can be traced to the sect ideal on the Continent and in English Quakerism. The concept of toleration and religious liberty advocated by the rationalist reformers was to be reformulated by the Enlightenment and pass into the program of the political liberal of the nineteenth century.