

The Radical Reformation

The numerous players in the so-called 'Radical Reformation' have made a significant contribution to the reform of the church, primarily in its order and in its spiritual life. As far as the former is concerned, its concern was to delineate the power of the civil authorities in very different ways from that promoted by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others. As far as the latter is concerned, its concern was to stress that Christian believers had to stand out as being *in* the world but not *of* it. As a result, the 'Radical Reformers' remained on the periphery of the Reformation, rejected and anathematized by Catholics and by fellow Protestants. And yet the movement was not marginal and its influence can be felt down to the present day and not merely among those movements which can trace their ancestry back to the movements of the sixteenth century.

The 'Radical Reformation' was a diverse movement. Timothy George describes its nature and significance in this way:

Embracing both ecumenicity and sectarianism, violent revolution and pacifistic communalism, sublimating ascetical, mystical, and rationalist impulses from the Late Middle Ages, the Radical Reformation considered as an entity posed a thoroughgoing critique of the *corpus christianum* in both its mainline Protestant and Tridentine Catholic mutations.¹

The magisterial reformers opposed and condemned the radicals. In 1531, Heinrich Bullinger referred to them as 'devillish enemies and destroyers of the church of God', while Calvin variously referred to 'fanatics', 'deluded', 'scatterbrains', 'asses', 'scoundrels' and 'mad dogs'.² Yet the radicals claimed to be restoring (even reforming) the church to its apostolic order and thus also to its authentic purity. Balthasar Hubmeier (c.1485-1528, see other document) claimed the desire to move the church away from 'the mud holes and cesspools of human dogma', while the lay-evangelist Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489-1561) questioned the need for the sacraments (of which he only recognized two, namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper) insisting instead that all that was needed by the believer was the guidance of the indwelling Spirit. Neither claim was likely to receive support from the great thinkers of the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, Bucer and so on. Indeed, the 'Radical Reformation' did not produce thinkers of the calibre of those who advocated magisterial reform. Their contribution was made far more by their example, their courageous suffering and their commitment to toleration – not simply for other Christians but for all people – in matters of faith. There were some leaders whose behaviour was hardly exemplary, but there were others who genuinely embodied a peaceful and gentle spirit. Schwenckfeld, for example, had sought what he called a 'royal road', namely a middle way between Protestantism and Catholicism, though he tended towards a spiritual interiority and individualism which brought him some support but left him with little influence.

¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press and

² Quotations from George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 252.

There were early appearances of Anabaptist views at Zurich as outlined in Unit 3. This too was the first instance of Anabaptists being executed by drowning in a calculated perversion of the rite. (See Unit 3 for further details.)

Different groups of the Radical Reformation claimed their authority in different places. The Anabaptists were perhaps closest to the Reformation cry of *sola scriptura*, claiming the Bible as the sole source of authority. The Spiritualists (such as Schwenckfeld) believed truth to be internal and not external, thus they claimed the importance of the experience of the Spirit within. The Evangelical Rationalists began to place significance on human reason, informed by the Spirit and the Scriptures which led them to question the traditional Trinitarian and Christological formulations. It is such questioning which would help to give rise to the Unitarian movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What was nevertheless common to all groups was that they sought to discover and live a new form of Christian life, free from the fetters both of what they considered to be Roman corruption and Protestant enslavement to the will of the civil rulers.

There were many important leaders of the Radical Reformation, each one imposing a particular character on their part of what was a disparate and heterogeneous movement. Some, such as Hans Hut (1490-1527) and Melchior Hofmann (1495-1543) promoted millennialism, a teaching which did not define what it meant to be 'radical' but somehow best suited the radical temperament, especially in its most politically volatile form. Hut, a disciple of Thomas Müntzer, predicted Christ's return for Pentecost Sunday 1528, claiming that the magistracy was unnecessary because the Lord was about to return while he also advocated an 'evangelical communism' among Christians on the pattern of the Jerusalem church of Acts 2.³ At one time, Hut had advocated violence. On 31 May 1525, a mere four days after Müntzer's execution, he had proclaimed to his listeners that 'The subjects should murder all the authorities, for the opportune time has arrived: the power is in their hands'. He was later rebaptized (26 May 1526) and converted to a pacifist position. He died on 7 December 1527 as a result of a fire while imprisoned at Augsburg. Hofmann set 1534 as the date and Strasbourg as the place. Both men abjured violence, believing that the kingdom would be initiated by direct divine intervention, but their rhetoric, vigorously preached against the emperor, the pope and 'bloodsucking anti-Christian Lutheran and Zwinglian preachers' in fact created the kind of environment in which the proclamation and pursuit of violent and bloody revolution could flourish. Hofmann had suggested that Christ's return would be preceded by the purging of the ungodly, a statement which, at the time, appeared threateningly revolutionary.

Hofmann took Anabaptism to the Netherlands, convinced that his was the role of Elijah declaring the imminent return of Christ. He baptized and commissioned followers, including Jan Mattijs (c.1500-34), a baker from Haarlem who became his 'Enoch' and led the movement following Hofmann's imprisonment at Strasbourg in 1533. Among the 'prophet' Mattijs's disciples was Jan Beckels of

³ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 236.

Leyden. These men were to lead a fateful and ultimately futile revolution in the city of Münster where Bernard Rothmann (c.1495-1535) had become Protestant pastor of the city's main church of St Lambert in 1532. Rothmann had defied all attempts by the church and civil authorities to displace him. He began to advocate adult baptism and, due to his conviction that property and possessions should be shared with the poor, he gained a certain popularity in the district. By January 1534 Rothmann virtually controlled the city.

At this point, following other emissaries from the Netherlands, Mattijs and Beckels arrived in Münster and instigated a radical programme of reform, intending to establish the city as a New Jerusalem. All possessions and food were declared to belong to the whole community, while those who refused rebaptism were expelled. Mattijs was killed in a sortie from Munster on Easter Sunday, 4 April 1534. Beckels then took control. R. Tudur Jones notes:

The traditional government of the town was replaced by a group of twelve elders and they published a body of laws which expressed the unity of church, society, state and army in the new theocracy. It was an extremely harsh regime. Death was the penalty for a long list of offences including complaining, talking scandal and disobeying masters. But the most offensive element in the new system was felt to be the introduction of polygamy. It became an offence not to be married.⁴

Some historians have questioned the truth of these latter claims as the only source we have for them is that of the army that ultimately crushed the revolt. A reason was required for the bloody reprisals that occurred and painting a harsh and apparently unethical picture of the regime might well have appeared to be the best thing to do (as it would often be in the case of other, often less dangerous, religious nonconformists). Others have suggested that Jan of Leiden legalized polygamy in order to take Mattijs's widow as his own wife. Nevertheless, the millennialism of the Münster movement, and the willingness to use violence in order to secure its goals, made this a dangerous development and one which has ever since marred the name of Anabaptism – and this despite the fact that it represents only one historical aspect of the movement.

'Jan of Leyden' took on the characteristics of the 'king of righteousness' and preached three times a week in the market place at Münster, wearing royal robes and demanding that his 'subjects' pay him homage. Meanwhile Münster was besieged by the Catholic prince bishop and his forces. They broke through on 25 June 1535 and massacred virtually all the citizens. Jan of Leyden was captured and with two of his associates – Bernhard Krechting (before 1500-36) and Bernhard Knipperdolling (c.1495-1536) – was publically tortured to death with red-hot tongs on 22 January 1536. All three bodies were displayed from the tower of the Church of Saint Lambert and the corpses remained there to rot for several decades. The cages used to display their bodies still hang on the church tower. This was the violent and revolutionary side of the Radical Reformation,

⁴ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 96.

whose success and continued existence was cast into doubt when otherwise opposing parties joined forces in order to eradicate them.

There was, however, another side to the Radical Reformation, one which was pacifistic and which proclaimed the need for followers of the Prince of Peace to suffer as indeed their master had. One of the most significant leaders of this side of the movement – one whose influence ensured that the debacle at Münster would not define the Anabaptist legacy – was Menno Simons (1496-1561). Simons trained as a priest and was ordained in March 1524 but he was soon expressing doubts about certain Catholic dogmas, especially that of transubstantiation. In 1525 he wrote:

It occurred to me, as often as I handled the bread and wine in the mass, that they were not the flesh and blood of the Lord. I thought that the devil was suggesting this, that he might separate me from my faith. I confessed it often, sighed and prayed; yet I could not come clear of the idea.⁵

He certainly read some of Luther's work and later confessed that Luther had helped him to see that refusal to believe in human dogmas could not lead to eternal damnation. This, alongside the growing Anabaptist movement, led to a revolution in Simons's thought. The execution of the evangelist Sicke Freerks at Leeuwarden, Friesland, on 20 March 1531 for being rebaptized (the Emperor Charles V having decreed in 1529 that rebaptizers should face the death penalty) was probably one of the catalysts which caused Simons to question the validity of infant baptism and he later referred to Freerks as 'a devout, pious hero', concluding that 'all were deceived about infant baptism'. Having consulted the scriptures in order to resolve the issue, Simons from this point became an evangelical preacher, yet he did not break with Rome until after the revolution at Münster and the death of his own brother, Peter, who had been rebaptized and had accompanied a group of Anabaptists as they took control of the Old Cloister near Bolsward. That group died brutally at the hands of the authorities which regained control of the Cloister on 7 April 1535. Both events affected him deeply. Over the next year he tried to instigate reforms as the parish priest of Witmarsum, and at this time he began to develop a philosophy of nonresistance, abjuring physical weapons and asking fellow believers whether they were baptized 'on the sword or on the cross'.

Simons left the parish for a life of itinerancy until he was invited to become pastor to a group of Anabaptists near Gröningen. He was ordained to this service, probably by Obbe Phillips (c.1500-68) who, with his brother Dirk (1504-68), was one of the early leaders of the Anabaptist movement in Holland, and thus he became not only a 'rebaptizer' but a 'reordainer'.⁶ Phillips later became disillusioned with the Anabaptist movement and left it which was one of the reasons why Simons was able to become its leader and why subsequent followers bore the name of Mennonites. For the rest of his life, Simons exercised

⁵ Quoted in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 259.

⁶ George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (3rd ed. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), pp. 392-3.

an influential itinerant but underground ministry, constantly hunted and in danger of capture. Yet he eluded this and died a natural death in 1561 at the age of 66. Perhaps his most significant teaching involved the conviction that the Christian could not avoid the cross and this suffering: 'If the Head had to suffer such torture, anguish, misery and pain, how shall his servants, children and members expect peace and freedom as to their flesh?' It is reasonable to assume that Simons knew of physical suffering. Early representations of him reveal him to have used crutches, suggesting that he was crippled in old age. He called for toleration based on a common humanity and he rejected the violence of the Münsterite Anabaptists as unscriptural. Indeed, Anabaptists of similar persuasion to Simons would speak of three baptisms – that of the Holy Spirit, that of water and that of blood (i.e., suffering).

For the Anabaptists, faith was a matter of personal and individual experience. Their support for adult baptism seems to have been the result of viewing it as the culmination of a conversion experience. Menno Simons emphasized the need for the new birth far more than other Reformers, though others – even Luther and Calvin – spoke of being 'born again' and made reference to the story of Nicodemus. This was partly because he believed in a two-stage process of conversion where 'faith' made the gospel inwardly real to the believer because, in casting themselves on God's grace, believers were genuinely changed, 'the heart is renewed, converted, justified, becomes pious, peaceable and joyous, is born a child of God, approaches with full confidence the throne of grace, and so becomes a joint heir of Christ and a possessor of eternal life'.⁷ But faith (as the positive response to God's grace) was dependent on the believer's prior repentance (i.e., true penitence, *ware penitencie*). This was the commitment to a changed life which involved emotions and motivations as well as eschewing wickedness. This, not conformity to outward rituals and ceremonies, was what marked the converted life.

Simons identified four types of sin. The first was 'original sin', imputed into humanity through the fall of Adam and Eve. Unlike other Reformers, Simons suggested that the cross brings forgiveness to all for their sin, thus they are not guilty until they reach an age where they can differentiate between right and wrong. Thus infants did not require baptism, because they were in a 'state of grace'. Original sin led to 'actual sin', such as adultery fornication, avarice, hatred, envy, theft, murder and idolatry. By the new birth (faith and repentance), believers could enter a state of grace where they were able to withstand temptation, though Simons denied that this meant they could live in sinless perfection. There remain 'human frailties', which constitute his third category of sin. Believers continually struggle to live holy lives. When they fall short, they do not fall from grace and sin is not counted against them providing they recognize their weakness. The final category was 'fall from grace by willfulness and wickedness', which meant apostasy and sin against the Holy Spirit.

Although Simons emphasized the internal conviction of and commitment to the new birth, his was not an entirely interiorized faith. He accepted the authority of

⁷ Quoted in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 266.

Scripture and included the apocryphal books within the canon. Though forced to interpret much of the Old Testament allegorically, largely in order to distance himself from the Münsterian Anabaptists and millenialists, he was also able to give a literal account of some passages. He was Trinitarian in belief, but adopted a strange Christology which accounted for Christ's sinlessness by positing a new creation by the Holy Spirit within the Virgin Mary's womb in order that the incarnate Lord could avoid inheriting anything of his mother's human sinfulness.

Simons's legacy was extensive. As Timothy George says: 'Through the ministry of Menno and his fellow workers, Dutch Anabaptism recovered from its disillusionment at Münster to become the most enduring expression of the Radical Reformation'.⁸ He opposed the association of the church with the state and the idea that the church was made up of any but those who had been born again: '... they are the true congregation of Christ who are truly converted, who are born from above of God, who are of a regenerate mind by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the divine Word, and have become the children of God, have entered into obedience to him, and live unblamably in his holy commandments, and according to his holy will with all their days, or from the moment of their call'.⁹ While other Reformers, Luther and Zwingli in particular, but in some ways Calvin also, accepted that the State could use its coercive powers in support of the Church, Simons and the Anabaptists rejected such a teaching. The Magistrate was ordained of God to maintain law and order, but their authority did not extend to matters of faith. At one point, Simons listed the following six characteristics of the church: (1) an unadulterated, pure doctrine; (2) scriptural use of the sacramental signs; (3) obedience to the Word; (4) unfeigned, brotherly love; (5) a bold confession of God and Christ; (6) oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord's Word.¹⁰

For Simons, baptism followed faith and held no sacramental significance. It was instead 'an outward sign consequent to the inward experience of faith'.¹¹ Indeed, 'where there is no renewing, regenerating faith leading to obedience, there is no baptism'. To see the water of baptism rather than the blood of Christ as the means of forgiving sin was no more than idolatry. But to accept this baptism was not merely a sign of the new birth, it was also to enter into fellowship with Christ in his suffering, and the Anabaptists were deprived of homes and possessions, tortured and sometimes put to death.

Like Zwingli and Calvin, Simons believed that Christ had ascended to the right hand of the father where he was bodily present. As such, he could not be physically in the Lord's Supper. His understanding of the meal was that it constituted an 'admonishing sign and memorial' to Christ's sacrifice, the pledge of Christ's love for his people, the bond of Christian unity and communion with the body and blood of Christ.

⁸ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 285.

⁹ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 285.

¹⁰ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 287.

¹¹ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 288.

Alongside these dominical sacraments, Anabaptists also practised foot-washing, though Simons said little about this. They also practised discipline and became known for excommunicating members as a means to encourage their repentance for sins committed and then their reinstatement.

Menno Simons outlined his vision in these words:

This is my only joy and heart's desire: to extend the kingdom of God, reveal the truth, reprove sin, teach righteousness, feed hungry souls with the Word of the Lord, lead the straying sheep into the right path, and gain many souls to the Lord through his Spirit, power and grace. So would I carry on in my weakness as he has taught me who has purchased me, a miserable sinner, with his crimson blood, and has given me this mind by the gospel of his grace, namely Jesus Christ.¹²

Scholars have suggested that the Anabaptist vision can be identified with three particular things: (1) a new conception of Christianity as discipleship; (2) a new conception of the church as brotherhood; (3) a new ethic of love and nonresistance. Following was more important than faith, and 'the literal imitation of Christ was reflected in the practice of adult, believer's baptism, the ordinance of footwashing, the refusal to swear an oath or to bear arms, and the willingness to embrace suffering and martyrdom'.¹³ The gospel was to be preached to all, but no one should be compelled to accept it. As such the Anabaptists, especially under Simons, did not merely protest against the corruption of the Roman church, they sought to establish a new way of being Christian in the world, authentically rooted in what they saw as the New Testament church. Their legacy lives on among the Mennonite communities.

¹² George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 303.

¹³ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 304.