

What were those called 'Anabaptists' seeking to affirm? Why were they persecuted?

The term "Anabaptist" was coined by Zwingli which literally means "rebaptises" (McGrath, 2012, p. 9). The Anabaptist title is applied to pockets of people in the mid-sixteenth century who radicalised the Reformation's principal of Sola scriptura. They held that only things explicitly taught in Scripture were to be practiced (McGrath, 2012, p. 10). They read the Bible from the "standpoint of the powerless; a very different perspective from that of the powerful" (Lindberg, 2011, p. 391). This led them to oppose infant baptism as well as a number of other activities that made both Protestants and Catholics suspicious of their beliefs. The Anabaptists questioned whether Zwingli was being faithful to his own Reformation principles (McGrath, 2012, p. 9) and argued that the church under Catholic tradition ceased to be the church. In their eyes, what was needed was a restoration of the church, not a reformation (McGrath, 2012, p. 149). The main divide between the Anabaptists and the Reformers "was whether reform should be coerced or free" (Lindberg, 2011, p. 379). The Reformers sought to work with the civil authorities whereas the Anabaptists thought reform was progressing too slowly and so the church should not be united with the state.

The Anabaptists were not part of one coherent movement (Goertz, 2004, p. 83). They "covered a multitude of opinions" and had "much diversity among doctrine and practices" (Chadwick, 1972, p. 189). There were also varying degrees to how one could be connected with Anabaptism (Hanson, 2009, p. 83). The social interactions between neighbours and family were the primary means by which their teaching spread (Hanson, 2009, p. 100). Many jurisdictions forbade them from holding church services, but they did not need them (Hanson, 2009, p. 96). Members would invite others to their gatherings, which involved reading the Bible, discussion and teaching from it and baptism of new members. Members

were those who had been (re)baptised and could have been active or passive in the movement. Others were associated being those who may have attended a gathering and may have been hostile or sympathetic to their movement (Hanson, 2009, p. 85).

Despite the different level of involvement of the common people, it is generally agreed that Balthasar Hubmaier (c.1480–1528), Pilgram Marbeck (died 1556), and Menno Simons (1496–1561) are the three most significant figures in this movement (McGrath, 2012, p. 10). The only confessional statement that was produced by Anabaptists was the Schleitheim Articles of 1527 (Lindberg, 2011, p. 362). These seven articles functioned as a core of unity amongst the movement which separated them from the Protestants and Catholics (McGrath, 2012, p. 10). These articles covered a rejection of infant baptism, oaths and bearing arms; excommunication by shunning; the pastor's character; that only baptised believers to partake in communion and how they were to separate themselves from the evil world (Wallace, 2012, p. 87; McGrath, 2012, p. 10). Their view of the sacraments, church, their refusal to carry weapons, make oaths, pay taxes and other duties of a citizen were seen as “anti-social and threatening to society as a whole” (Hanson, 2009, p. 81). The outside world viewed the “Anabaptists with horror” (Chadwick, 1972, p. 189). It was because of these views that they were persecuted.

The Anabaptists believed that the Church had been compromised because of its union with the state, stemming back from the time of Constantine (McGrath, 2012, p. 149). They did not merely seek the abolition of the clerical structure, but instead wanted the whole structure of society to be rethought (Goertz, 2004, pp. 80-81). They refused to pay set tithes as it was seen “as an instrument of control by the Zurich government over the parishes within its jurisdiction” (Lindberg, 2011, p. 368). They advocated strong church membership, became “a steeples Christianity” (Lindberg, 2011, p. 364), and dealt with their own disagreements

among themselves rather than in secular courts (Goertz, 2004, p. 81). All this resulted in them being seen as a state within a state (Lindberg, 2011, p. 367).

On the sacraments, the Anabaptist rejected the traditional rite of infant baptism because of a lack of biblical warrant (McGrath, 2012, p. 183). Instead they saw baptism as a rite of entry into their Christian community and a statement that the person was a follower of Jesus was willing to become a martyr (Goertz, 2004, p. 78). This position was deemed heretical by the “traditional Catholic Church and by virtually all evangelical reformers” (Hanson, 2009, p. 81). To reject infant baptism was a capital offence according to an old Roman law from emperors Theodosius and Justinian (Lindberg, 2011, p. 385). Rejecting infant baptism was interpreted as the Anabaptists severing their “ties with the rest of the Christian community” (Hanson, 2009, p. 81).

Like baptism, the Anabaptists thought that the Eucharist was only for believers, or more specifically, members of their community. The Anabaptists mostly agreed with Zwingli on the Eucharist. The idea that the bread and the wine became identical with Christ’s body and blood “was rejected as contrary to reason, nature, and Scripture” (McGrath, 2012, p. 184). The Anabaptists placed “more emphasis on the communal character of the meal” (Goertz, 2004, p. 78) than Zwingli and it became the central element of their spiritual community where “the unity of the body of Christ on earth was realised” (Goertz, 2004, p. 78).

Another aspect of the Anabaptist separation with society was their pacifism. They believed that a true Christian would not bear the sword (Lindberg, 2011, p. 383). During the sixteenth-century Switzerland did not have a standing army. Instead it was expected that males would take up arms if called on by their government and military preparation was the norm (Lindberg, 2011, p. 367). The Turks were seen as an invading threat to Austria (Lindberg, 2011, p. 394), so the Anabaptists’ refusal to pick up a weapon left citizens questioning their

loyalties to their country. Some wondered whether they would be a liability if they were invaded. It was in effect a renouncement of citizenship to refuse military service (Lindberg, 2011, p. 368).

The Anabaptists refused to make oaths because it was explicitly forbidden in Scripture (Jam 5:12, Mat 5:37). Verbal agreement in the form of oaths was common practice and was “a major part of the ‘glue’ that held society together” (Lindberg, 2011, p. 367). This led others to be suspicious of them since they would not conform to the social norms.

The Anabaptist “critique of the clergy was transferred to critique of secular authorities” (Goertz, 2004, p. 81). The government could no longer have ignored them when they criticised and sought reform to the whole authoritative structure. Along with their anti-social behaviour, those in power “perceived the Anabaptise as seditionists, undermines of social order” (Lindberg, 2011, p. 389). This lead to Anabaptism being outlawed and the members being periodically arrested and punished (Hanson, 2009, p. 104). In Zurich, the city council in 1526 ordered that the Anabaptists be drowned (Chadwick, 1972, p. 192). In Augsburg, the city council decreed that it was illegal to withhold their child from baptism, attend an Anabaptist gathering or to have anything to do with Anabaptism (Hanson, 2009, p. 101). In England, Thomas Cranmer denounced Anabaptism stronger than he did Catholicism, fearing they gave Protestantism a bad reputation (Dickens, 1989, p. 262). In a “kind of perverse early ecumenism” one of the few things which there was agreement on between Protestant and Roman Catholic authorities was that the Anabaptists should be persecuted (Lindberg, 2011, p. 386; Hanson, 2009, p. 80).

While there was a spectrum of beliefs within the Anabaptist movement their attempt to create a pure church by separating from the current church and social order was a step too far for the Reformers and civil authorities. The Anabaptists saw clear Bible rejections of contemporary

practices such as oaths, warfare and infant baptism and thought the Reformers were not going far enough in changing the church's teaching and practices. The wider community saw their rejection of civil duties and retreat into their own sub-community as a threat to them. The authorities also saw their disruption to the social, clerical and governmental structure of everyday life as seditious, needing to be stopped at all cost. There were some very radical ideas within the Anabaptists camp, especially under Jan Matthijs and Jan of Leiden in Münster from 1534-1535 (Wallace, 2012, p. 88). However, their more moderate views on the separation of church and state, infant baptism, strong church membership and their pacifism has influenced the Quakers, Baptists and Brethren churches today.

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