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Tom Wagner, “Anabaptist Origins”

Following a series of recollections about Old Testament heroes of faith, the author of the New Testament Letter to the **Hebrews** summed up the point of his recital at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.*” (vv. 1-2 RSV) It’s a reminder that we are not alone. We have the support of a living community, but also, we have examples of brave people who have confronted empires in the past. The Greek word behind “witnesses” is *martyron* which simply means those who testify or bare witness, as in a court of law. Due to the persecutions of the early Christians, our word *martyr* commonly refers to one who was or is “**faithful unto death**”. The concept looms large among the heirs of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist movement due to the persecutions perpetrated by both Protestant and Catholic authorities during the period. I hold in my hands a massive tome commonly known as the *Martyrs Mirror*, which is still frequently found in Mennonite and Amish homes and occasionally some Dunker households. The story of Dirk Willems told earlier is one of hundreds recorded in the book. There is a dark joke that circulates in the community suggesting, **you’re truly Mennonite “...when you think a book describing 4,000 grisly executions might make a nice wedding gift.”**

As is the case for many groups, the term **Anabaptist** was not chosen by members of the movement, but was a label applied by their opponents. The original Greek simply means to **re-baptize**. The German *Wiedertäufer* was also commonly used in contemporary documents. The word can be traced to heresies listed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century **Theodosian Code**. The **death penalty** was added in the 6<sup>th</sup> century **Justinian Code**. So, it became a convenient charge for 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic and Protestant authorities to use in prosecuting a wide range of Radical Reformers. The label made sense if we remember that nearly all Europeans at the time of the Reformation had been “baptized” as infants. However, the Anabaptists came to believe that the initiation rite must be **maturely and voluntarily chosen** and hence rejected the practice of infant “baptism”. Members of the movement preferred to call each other brothers and sisters, as was the case of the group which began 500 years ago in **Zürich, Switzerland** who called themselves **Swiss Brethren** (Schweizer Brüder). Eventually, major branches of the Anabaptist movement took on names of significant leaders: **Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish**. The Swiss group began identifying itself as Mennonite following the Amish schism of 1693. German Baptist Brethren and its various branches formed as a hybrid of Pietist and Anabaptist thought in 1708 and have often been known as **Dunkers**.

The struggles of the Anabaptists need to be set in the larger context of European history. The **Emperor Constantine** legalized the Christian faith in 313 following his victory at the Milian Bridge. Publicly he credited a vision of the cross for the victory. While some historians believe the decision was inspired by his mother Helena, a Christian convert, others suggest he saw the growing Christian movement as means to unify the Roman Empire. He soon realized Christians themselves were deeply divided and called for **councils** of bishops from around the empire to standardize faith and practice. Those who disagreed with the pronouncements of the councils were considered heretics. Thus began the alliance of **throne and altar** or **church and state**. Later emperors Theodosius II and Justinian I cemented the relationship in their revisions of the Roman Code as noted earlier.

Initially, the **Bishop of Rome** was simply one among many Church leaders. Power and authority gravitated toward the office due to its seat in the imperial capital. As the Roman state faltered, the bishop or Pope and staff began taking **increasing responsibility** for services once provided by the government in the city and surrounding territory. This mix of **temporal and ecclesiastical authority** was further buttressed by a document known as the Donation of Constantine, later proved to be a forgery. Yet much of the Pope’s authority came from the ability to not only excommunicate individuals, but to declare interdicts suspending performance of sacraments in entire realms when in conflict with a particular ruler. Papal power began to falter in the **14<sup>th</sup> century** when Philip IV of France essentially kidnaped Pope Boniface VIII and moved the papal court to France for about 70 years. By the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and early 15<sup>th</sup>, there were three claimants to the papacy

supported by various European constituencies. The divisions were finally resolved during the **Council of Constance in 1417** with the deposition of the three and the election of Martin V. This was the same council which tried and executed **Jan Hus** of Bohemia for heresy in 1415. The papacy never fully recovered its former prestige. Later fund-raising measures to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica would raise questions for an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther.

Despite Catholic dominance of western Europe, there were attempts of church reform throughout the Middle Ages. Numerous religious orders emerged from time to time and were recognized by Rome. One that comes to mind is the **Franciscans** founded by Francis of Assisi in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Waldo, nearly a generation older than Francis, began the **Waldensian** movement in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Though their beliefs and practices were similar to the Franciscans, they were soon declared heretical. The Waldensians manage to survive to this day and had some influence on the 15<sup>th</sup> century **Hussite** movement in Bohemia and Moravia.

**Literacy** during the medieval period was largely limited to clergy and court functionaries. Monasteries and nobles collected libraries, but materials were limited to **Latin** and a few vernacular languages. Much of ancient Greek literature and even biblical and theological documents were unavailable in western Europe. Ancient Greek and some Arabic materials began trickling into the west by way of Spain toward the end of the Middle Ages. This led scholars to scour European libraries for resources they may have neglected in the past. The **fall of the Byzantine Empire** to the Ottoman Turks in **1453** led numerous Greek speaking intellectuals to take refuge in the west. This gave the west access to sacred and secular literature that had been unavailable for centuries and helped bring on a **Renaissance** or rebirth of learning. The intellectual gaze began to focus more on life in this world and less on the heavens. Rather than accept documents on face value, scholars sought out original sources. These **Humanist** scholars used the same techniques in examining scripture and early theological writings. The invention of the movable type and the **printing press** around the same time helped make both literacy and reading material more available.

Perhaps the most consequential of these Humanist scholars was **Erasmus of Rotterdam**. Among his many works he published a **Greek New Testament** with numerous scholarly notes in **1516**. It allowed scholars to compare the standard Vulgate Latin translation with the original Greek and in turn create vernacular translations making scripture available to a wide lay audience. The Greek text and later revisions would serve as the basis for both Martin Luther's and Ulrich Zwingli's 16<sup>th</sup> century German translations and many other languages down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Erasmus remained a Catholic in good standing but influenced many who became Protestants and even Anabaptists.

The **Protestant Reformation** is usually dated from **October 31, 1517**, when Martin Luther nailed his objections to selling indulgences to the door of Wittenberg's All Saints Church. Other than debates with representatives of Rome and publications of Luther's ideas, few concrete reforms took place in church life before the mid-1520s. He was **excommunicated** in 1520 and the following year placed under **protective custody** by Frederick III of Saxony at Wartburg Castle. There Luther used his seclusion writing, including a German translation of the **New Testament**. He began rethinking the theology of the Mass. Though he no longer believed in the miracle transubstantiation, he still held on to a mystical sense of the **real presence** of Christ in the Eucharist elements. He also relied on the protection of powerful princes to maintain his personal safety and secure his reforms. So, he moved cautiously and was quite unnerved by the actions of Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants Rebellion.

Meanwhile in **Zürich**, Switzerland another branch of Protestantism was forming under the leadership of **Ulrich Zwingli**. He was already known as a good preacher and was a friend of Erasmus when he was called as people's priest at Grossmünster Cathedral in January **1519**. Rather than following the lectionary readings, Zwingli began **preaching his way through the New Testament**. He began to question practices such as the veneration of saints, excommunication, tithes and indulgences based on his reading of scripture. The true break with Rome took place when he supported a group who **broke the Lenten fast in 1522 by eating sausages**. This began the Reformed tradition in Switzerland (Jean Calvin did not join the movement until the mid-1530s.) Later that year Zwingli and friends requested that the bishop abolish the celibacy requirement for clergy. At the time he

had already married in secret. When it became clear that no ecclesiastical authority would support his reforms, Zwingli **resigned** in November as a Roman Catholic priest. He was immediately **rehired** by the Zürich council. It was also during 1522 that Zwingli began to gather **cadre of young men in biblical studies** in the original languages. He was grooming them for leadership positions in this new Reformed Church. Among his students were **Conrad Grebel** and **Felix Mantz**.

The **city council** willingly took responsibility for decisions concerning faith but decided that the best way to resolve conflicts on various issues was to hold disputations or debates where the council would determine the best argument. The **first disputation in January 1523**, setting the authority of the Catholic hierarchy against **biblical authority**, was easily won by Zwingli and his allies, since the Bishop of Constance did not bother to send a representative.

The council scheduled a **second disputation in October** of that year. The original topics were **images/statues**, and the nature of **the Mass**. Some of Zwingli's students wanted to add baptism as well. (Zwingli had questioned infant baptism and use of the sword in their study group, but was unwilling bring up those issues in public at the time.) The council was cautious about making changes. A compromise was accepted to have pastors speak on the topic of images and gradually remove them from the church buildings once laypeople were persuaded to follow through. The council also accepted Zwingli's view that Eucharist or communion was simply a symbolic **memorial** meal but refused to grant the proposed ceremonial changes. Though Zwingli announced a Reformed Eucharist in December, he quickly backed down due to continued council opposition. A Reformed Eucharist was held on Maundy Thursday 1524. Yet it was becoming clear to Zwingli's students that he was **only willing to make reforms at the pace set by the council**. Zwingli felt the need to maintain the social **unity** of Zürich, while his more radical students believed quite fervently in promoting the **truth** as they understood it from scripture and implementing their conclusions. No one had truly questioned the alliance of church and state for nearly 1,200 years. Even Grebel and Mantz approached Zwingli at one point to elect friends of the Reformation to the council in order to move reforms more quickly. But Zwingli thought the plan was too divisive.

Throughout **1524** the radicals began to distance themselves from Zwingli and met in small groups for Bible study and discussion. It was in this context that they developed the practice of doing **biblical interpretation as a communal exercise**, rather rely on authorized leaders. **Infant baptism** became the next issue to widen that gap. Already in the rural villages under Zürich's jurisdiction, preachers were speaking against infant baptism and refusing to perform the rite. Even in the city some parents refused to baptize their newborns. The concern came to a head in December, when the council instructed Zwingli to meet on a weekly basis with parents who had rejected baptizing their babies to get them to reconsider. Zwingli broke off the discussions after two weeks. Felix Mantz then submitted a request to the council to continue conversations before the council since Zwingli was unwilling to work with them. In response the council called for a **disputation on January 17, 1525**. However, it was clear from the start that the council supported Zwingli's position on the matter. The **decision** given the following day required parents to baptize their children, and that parents who refused would be deported from the canton. A week was given for compliance. A few days later a group met on **January 21st at Felix Mantz's home** to discuss what to do. It was during that gathering that a former priest known as **Georg Blaurock** asked **Conrad Grebel to baptize him**. Then in turn Blaurock baptized others on their request.

During the next few months, the threesome and others went into the rural villages preaching and rebaptizing at times whole villages. The mass movement phase would not last long in the face of persecution. They were arrested in October but participated in a fourth disputation in November on baptism in which the council ruled in favor of Zwingli. They were tried and sentenced on November 18<sup>th</sup> to prison for an undetermined length. At a second trial the following March the sentence was extended to life, but soon escaped. **Grebel** died of plague a few months later. **Mantz** return to Zürich several times and was arrested. In January 1527 he was sentenced to drowning, a macabre play on rebaptism. **Blaurock** traveled east, eventually arriving in the Austrian Tyrol becoming a major influence on the development of Anabaptism in that region before Catholic authorities arrested him and burned him at the stake.

Another early influence in Swiss and south German Anabaptism was a former monk name **Michael Sattler**. At the time he joined the movement there was much variation of thought in the group. In addition to connection with the Zürich radicals he went to Strasbourg in 1526 to persuade key reformers of the city to tolerate Anabaptists. In February 1527 he met with other Anabaptist leaders in the village of **Scheitheim** to create an agreement about their common beliefs. They agreed that **baptism** was reserved for those old enough to make a voluntary decision. Civil oaths were rejected. Lethal force or “**the sword**” while granted to civil authorities to protect the good and punish the evil remained “outside the perfection of Christ, raising the question whether civil officials could be Christian. Church discipline was limited to **the ban**. Practical concerns that alarmed magistrates were that baptism records were used to create tax rolls. Oaths were the glue that had kept feudal society together. The refusal to bear arms threatened the security of principalities and city-states. In spite of the Scheitheim Confession. The question of nonviolence was not completely settled. The author would be burned at the stake in a few months and his wife drowned.

At this point I will briefly discuss the origins of the major branches of Anabaptism.

The **Hutterites** trace their origins to an Anabaptist community that formed under official tolerance in Moravia, part of today's Czech Republic. Some of the very early leaders had ties to Zürich. They were even able to convert one of the local nobles. A controversy arose over pacifist principles in **1528**. A small group from the nonviolent party left the area and while on the road pooled their resources. This was the beginning of the **community of goods** which would become the distinguishing tenant of the group. In the mid-1530s Jacob Hutter led a group of Anabaptists out of the Austrian Tyrol to join the Moravian group. Due to his leadership skills the entire group took on his name. Hutter communities populated Moravia and Slovakia until the Counter Reformation, then moved to **Transylvania** and later to the **Ukraine** in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century along with Prussian Mennonites. Eventually they made their way to the **northern plains of the U.S. and Canada**, where they remain today.

Anabaptist ideas followed the Rhine River north first to the Alsace and from there to the Low Countries ruled by the Hapsburgs. A Catholic priest named **Menno Simmons** from the Friesland area of Netherlands had been questioning some Catholic teachings based on his own Bible studies. He was sympathetic with refugees from the siege of the city of Münster and locally the victims of Old Cloister. He joined the Anabaptists in the mid-1530s (roughly contemporary with Jean Calvin of the Reformed movement). His wise counsel, writings and unusual longevity made him a major force among Anabaptists in the Netherlands, Flanders and northern Germany. Hence his flock became known as **Mennonites**. He was one of very few Anabaptist leaders to die of old age.

In **1693** a leader among Swiss and **Alsatian** Anabaptists **Jacob Ammon** began promoting a stricter use of the ban in church discipline. At the time it was quite common to simply ban members from communion for breaches of community standards, but not completely shun them. Ammon advocated a greater ban which would completely cut them off from the community, including family relationships until they repented. In many ways the Amish did not stand out from other plain people groups until the technological innovations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20th centuries.

Brethren or Dunkers originally separated from the established German and Swiss Protestant denominations as Radical Pietists. As refugees from their home areas due to their decision, they met others of like mind in more tolerant regions of German. As they studied scripture and church history together they became enamored with Mennonite thought. They came to believe they could not live as Christian by themselves. They needed the mutual aid of brothers and sisters to live faithfully.

### **The Teaching of the Martyrs** by Tom Wagner (1996)

We not so much foul cry  
as victims of oppression.  
Forewarned of cost were we  
in Jesus' invitation.

We sought less liberty  
 than fidelity to truth.  
 To live a faith dared we  
 worth blending our dust with earth.

We retold love's story  
 first in flesh and blood transcribed.  
 Childlike trust found we  
 vindicated at Son rise.

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