

THOSE ANABAPTISTS

By K. D. Oldfield

When a Baptist defends his right to exist amidst the entire current religious melee, by arguing that his church alone has existed since the days of the Saviour, some people who think they know church history smile and say to themselves, "So you're one of those Anabaptists!"

I have had to dig, and I have been blessed by contacts with experts in the field of religious history, and I own and have read enough historical information, that today when I hear the name Anabaptist, my chest expands in pride and my eyes lower in humility to think that I, too, am an Anabaptist, because I possess the same faith that they once possessed.

Oh, but it's not always been thus with me. Even in a Baptist Bible school, the text that I studied pictured the Anabaptists in the gloomiest of light. They were troublemakers; they were church burners; they were killers, thieves and persecutors. "During the noble Protestant Reformation," we have been taught, "while Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were in the midst of their bloodless revolution, the Anabaptists of Munster and Munzer nearly derailed those efforts through their vicious, detestable attacks on the people, parishes and priests of the Pope." (Thomas Munzer led an army of religious zealots in attacks on city and religious governments, destroying religious relics and buildings.)

This has been the message of many less-than-honest Protestant and Catholic historians. Why? To cast mud on the very honourable and ancient name of an exceedingly great group of Christians. As the Presbyterian, Philip Schaff says, "The history of the Anabaptists of the Reformation period has yet to be written from an impartial, unsectarian standpoint." In other words, much of what we have about these people has been written by their enemies and has been biased against them. If these post-New Testament branches of Christendom, Catholic and Protestant, can succeed in having the world believe their slander about Anabaptist corruption and doctrinal error, they themselves are cast in a better light. So what they have done is focus our attentions on people like Thomas Munzer and loudly cry, "Behold, the Anabaptist!" But what are the facts reported by the more honest of the Protestant, Catholic and Baptist historians?

THERE WERE MANY KINDS OF ANABAPTISTS

As the name suggests, most Anabaptists re-baptized their converts, but as Hase says, "They were very unlike each other in morals and religious character. Some of them were persons who renounced the world, and others were slaves of their own lusts; to some of them marriage was only an ideal religious communion of spirit; to others it resolved itself into a general community of wives; some did not differ from the reformers with respect to doctrine, but others denied that we are to be justified by the merits of Christ alone, etc.

“They were called Anabaptists, not because they were the same denomination, but solely because they rejected all baptisms not administered by themselves” (W. A. Jarrel). Dr. Ludwig Keller, the Munster archivist, and a Lutheran, said, “The name Anabaptist, which is used to designate alike all the South German societies, generally awakens the conception of a party homogeneous and of like religious views. The conception, however, is an entirely erroneous one. Among the so-called Anabaptists, retaining here the usual designation, we must distinguish three principle parties which come upon the scene in three epochs, under the preponderating influence of different personalities.” “Anabaptists: The English and Dutch Baptists do not consider the word as applicable to their sect. It is but justice to add that the Baptists of Holland and England and the United States are to be regarded essentially distinct from those seditious and fanatical individuals” (Fessenden’s Encyclopedia). That is, depending on which kind of Anabaptists the historian was studying he could reach all sorts of conclusions as to who and what kind of people they were.

MUNZER WAS NOT AN ANABAPTIST

Thomas Munzer has been called an Anabaptist, but he so widely differed with the mainline Anabaptist and also the Scriptures in general that the name does not fit him (Gieseler). “Munzer was opposed to the Baptists. Differing from them, he practiced infant baptism twice a year, christening all born in his congregation” (Armitage). Dr. Rule says, “He performed a ceremony on baptized persons which they mistook for baptism, and by which his followers received the designation Anabaptist. But...they taught doctrines fraught with important errors, partly founded of Pelagianism, partly Unitarianism, partly Mysticism (he saw visions), and partly impure principles.” Vedder says that the fanatical outbreaks in South Germany were instigated by Thomas Muntzer [sic.] who is invariably called an Anabaptist, but in reality never belonged to that body. It is true that he wrote and spoke against the baptism of infants, but he regularly practiced it, and was therefore a Pedobaptist. The disorders of his leadership cannot be laid to the charge of the Anabaptists. “It is certain that the disturbances in the city of Munster were begun by a Pedobaptist minister of the Lutheran persuasion...that he was assisted in his endeavors by other ministers of the same persuasion” (New American Encyclopedia). Luther, himself, however, divorced himself from Munzer and also from the Anabaptists, whom he considered a different body.

ANABAPTISTS DIDN’T APPROVE OF MUNZER

The ancient and Scriptural Anabaptists did not approve of Thomas Munzer, the Munster insurrection or the Peasant’s War, nor did they as a body participate. Says Jarrel, “One of the Baptist martyrs, Dryzinger, in 1538, only three years after the craze, was examined as to whether he and his brethren approved of these vile proceedings. He answered, ‘They would not be Christians if they did.’ Hans of Overdam, another martyr, complained of these false accusations of violence. He said: ‘We are daily belied by those who say that we defend our faith with the sword, as they of Munster did. The Almighty defend us from such abominations.’

Erasmus said of them in 1529: 'The Anabaptists have seized no churches, have not conspired against the authorities, nor deprived any man of his estate and goods.' Dr. Buckland, of Rochester Theological Seminary quoted Hase, Gerard, Gieseler, Fusslin, Brandt, and Dorner and concluded that the consensus of candid, critical historians clear the Anabaptists of the Munster slander."

Yes, I am not ashamed to be called an Anabaptist. And although, just as there are Baptists today who are only Baptist in name and not doctrine, there were Anabaptists who were heretics; as a whole they were people of God, making up the true New Testament churches of that period. We owe them our respect and our opposition to the slander that they so often receive.

(Originally Published April 1984)