

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, lowercase, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

The Radical Reformation Reassessed

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Wood, A. Skevington
Publisher	Religious & Theological Students Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-06-30 03:33:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/157516

The Radical Reformation Reassessed

A Skevington Wood

Dr Arthur Skevington Wood is Principal of Cliff College Calver. He is the author of a number of books in the area of Church History and is a regular contributor to the pages of this journal.

In the last thirty years there has been a remarkable increase of interest in what we have now come to identify as the radical reformation. The term is employed to distinguish between the three major reformers (Luther, Zwingli and Calvin), representing the magisterial reformation, from such men as Grebel, Hubmaier and Denck and later Hutter, Hoffmann and Simons to say nothing of Karlstadt and Müntzer.

Until comparatively recent times this wing of the Protestant Reformation was little known and often misunderstood. Historians have now largely dispelled such ignorance and presented a much more detailed and sympathetic picture of the radicals on the basis of long neglected source materials. The imbalance of past assessments has been redressed to such an extent that some scholars now wonder whether the interpretative pendulum has not swung too far in a favourable direction. In this article we propose to supply a brief and hopefully objective account of how the radical reformation originated and developed, together with some indication of the way in which it was

regarded by those who might be described as the mainline reformers. This will be undertaken in the light of the most recent investigations and with reference to the relevant literature in the decade from 1970 to 1980. Such a procedure will enable the reader to decide whether or not the time has come to reassess the modern reassessment of the radicals.

Classification

In his lectures on Genesis Chapters 38 to 44, delivered as far as can be ascertained in 1544 (only two years before his death), Martin Luther reported on the situation in the Church as he saw it at that time. 'Today the purified doctrine of the gospel has enlightened many who were oppressed by the tyranny of the Antichrist; but at the same time also there have gone out from us the Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, and other fanatics, who have openly handed down godless teachings about the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. They have not arisen from our midst. Yet for a time they were with us. But they have not sought purity of doctrine. No, they have sought their own glory and fame.'¹

As Mark U. Edwards brings out in his study of *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stamford: Stamford University Press, 1975), Luther first encountered the radical reformation in the persons of Karlstadt and Müntzer with their aberrations and excesses. As a result, he tended throughout his career to assume that other radical leaders were tarred with the same brush. He regarded them as heretical, divisive and even diabolical. As the extract from his lectures on Genesis shows, Luther refused to recognize them as being genuine offspring of the reformation.

Writing in 1530, Sebastian Franck ventured on a classification which sought to distinguish between those radicals who remained within what might conceivably be considered to be the reformation family and those who had taken a less characteristic line. 'In our times, there are already three faiths which have a large following: the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Anabaptist. But a fourth is already on the way to birth, which dispenses with external preaching, ceremonies, sacraments, the ban, and offices as unnecessary, and which seeks to gather only an invisible church in the unity of the Spirit and of faith, governed wholly by the eternal, invisible word of God.'²

The recent upsurge of attention paid to the radical Protestant movement has not only led

investigators to draw a line of demarcation between the magisterial reformation and its counterpart, but also between the variegated strands of radicalism itself. Professor George Huntston Williams has produced a complex analytical classification which identifies three subsidiary groupings—anabaptists, spiritualists and evangelical rationalists.³ The first two of these he further categorizes as evangelical, revolutionary and contemplative anabaptists and revolutionary, evangelical and rational spiritualists. As will quickly be realized, the possible variations are innumerable. Quite obviously, Williams's own primary scheme could be replaced by a rearrangement of types under the alternative though not parallel designation of evangelicals, revolutionaries and rationalists. The radical reformation represents such a labyrinth of ramifications that a point is reached where the attempt to systematize, let alone to synthesize, proves to be counter productive. No wonder Rufus Jones referred to this aspect of the reformation as a veritable banyan tree.⁴

Although Williams preferred the title 'radical' to denote it, and this has been accepted by many, others have resorted to differing captions. 'The left wing reformation' was a term suggested by Roland H. Bainton in an ecclesiastical and theological rather than in a political sense, as applying to all parties whose convictions distanced them from the stance of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin.⁵ Looking at the issue from the viewpoint of these three foremost reformers, some have spoken about radicalism as 'the second front'.⁶ In its infancy, mainstream Protestantism was locked in combat with the papacy, but before it had come of age it found itself fighting on another frontier to resist the radicals. Zwingli went so far as to claim that the struggle against Rome was child's play compared with this more sinister threat.

Luther referred to the radicals as enthusiasts. He visualized them as Schwärmer or swarming bees. Gordon Rupp rather impishly defines Schwärmerei as 'too many bees chasing too few bonnets'.⁷ That may have been applicable to some, but certainly not to all. There was a fanatical fringe, to be sure, yet others who were equally if not more genuinely representative of the radical reformation stood much closer to the centre.

³ *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (London: SCM Press, 1957), The Library of Christian Classics Vol. XXV, p. 20.

⁴ *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 20.

⁵ *Journal of Religion*, Vol XX1 (July 1941), pp. 124ff.

⁶ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1964), p. 11.

⁷ Roland H. Bainton, Warren A. Quanbeck and E. Gordon Rupp, *Luther Today* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1957), Martin Luther Lectures Vol. I, p. 147.

¹ *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St Louis: Concordia, 1955), Vol. 7, p. 200.

² *Chronica und Beschreibung der Türkey*, K 3b. (Nürnberg, 1530).

Because of their doctrine of the Church, the radicals have often been dubbed separatists or sectarians. But, as Walter Klaassen has recently shown in a perceptive article, their position was not as unconsidered and theologically naïve as some have supposed.⁸ Leonard Verduin prefers to describe them as the stepchildren of reform, since as the progeny of a second marriage, as it were, they were treated as inferiors.⁹

The name anabaptist has sometimes been applied indiscriminately to the entire spectrum, but not with sufficient accuracy, since by no means all practised rebaptism. In any case, Zwingli saw even the authentic anabaptists rather as what he called catabaptists or antibaptists since at Zurich rebaptism was regarded as invalid. Other reformers dismissed them as scribes or pundits because of their allegedly legalistic approach. They themselves for the most part opted for some unpretentious designation such as brethren or Christian brethren (adopted by the earliest group which was that at Zollikon after the break with Zwingli), evangelicals, or simply Christians.

Germany: Wittenberg and Allstedt

It was while Luther had retreated to the Wartburg Castle in 1521, so as to gain a temporary respite after his condemnation at the Diet of Worms, that the first stirrings of the radical reformation were felt in Wittenberg itself, where he had previously lectured and preached. Ironically, the leader of the revolt was Luther's senior colleague at the University, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, who sought to make a total break with all the liturgical traditions of the Roman Church even to the extent of banning choirs 'with their geese-like shrieking'.¹⁰ Any distinctive form of ministerial dress was repudiated and Karlstadt presided over the Lord's Supper as he wore his outdoor clothes. As Steimle observed, 'without Luther's clearness of vision and aptness of speech, he likewise failed to discern the pitfalls which Luther had so carefully avoided'.¹¹

An eccentric Augustinian monk, Gabriel Zwilling, was hailed as a second Luther and preached on Christmas day wearing what appeared to be a kind of Davy Crockett hat, according to Rupp.¹² Three unwise men from Zwickau, two weavers and a former undergraduate, appeared in Wittenberg claiming to have held 'familiar conversation with God' and inciting the people to overthrow the

Lutheran regime. Eventually Luther himself, at some risk to his person, left the protection of the Wartburg and sought to counsel restraint and restore order. His eight sermons deserve the closest attention. The hub of his argument was that the Word of God alone must be left to bring about further reforms. 'It is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the *ius verbi* (right to speak) but not the *executio* (power to accomplish). We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure. . . . For the Word created heaven and earth and all things (Ps. 33: 6); the Word must do this thing, and not we poor sinners.'¹³

Karlstadt retired to the village of Orlamünde in the Saale valley and there developed his own often bizarre programme of reform. Luther was surely justified in branding him as a fanatic, yet even more seriously as one who had relapsed into a new legalism. Even though Ronald J. Sider, in seeking to vindicate him, denied that he effectively taught works—righteousness and James S. Preus has also leapt to his defence, their pleas have proved less than convincing and we are compelled to conclude with Rupp that Karlstadt's story must be interpreted as a cautionary tale.¹⁴

Thomas Müntzer is regarded by many as the fountain-head of the radical movement. Both Karl Holl and Heinrich Boehmer treated his theology with the utmost seriousness. He was won over to the cause by the Zwickau prophets, although it is unlikely that he accompanied them to Wittenberg as some have surmised. He established himself at Allstedt in Saxony and there initiated liturgical reforms of considerable significance. Finding an incendiary ally in Simon Haferitz, he preached a demagogic sermon calling on the people to revolt against both Church and State. In apocalyptic terms he announced that the day of doom was fast approaching. Eventually he was forced to leave his pastorate and thereupon heaped abuse on Luther in his *Apology*, caricaturing the pioneer reformer as Dr Sit-on-the-Fence, Dr Easy Chair, the Pope of Wittenberg, the Thieving Magpie and the Sly Fox.

Müntzer stretched Karlstadt's distinction between the Spirit and the flesh still further by discarding baptism altogether and by setting aside the Scriptures as in themselves constituting no more than a dead letter. 'Bible, Babel, bubble!' was his

⁸ *Church History* Vol. 46 (December, 1977), pp. 421ff.

⁹ Verduin, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Luther Today*, p. 117.

¹¹ *Works of Martin Luther*, ed. Henry E. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1915), Vol. 2, p. 388.

¹² *Luther Today*, p. 117.

¹³ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, pp. 76f.

¹⁴ Ronald J. Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: the Development of his Thought 1517-25* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); James S. Preus *Karlstadt's Ordinations and Luther's Liberty: A Study of the Wittenberg Movement 1521-2*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

slogan. Luther agreed, of course, that the word of Scripture apart from the Spirit is lifeless, but insisted that the two are no more to be separated from each other than the soul from the body. Müntzer was in danger of lapsing into a lopsided idolatry of the Spirit since 'he had swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all'.¹⁵ Yet with the words 'Spirit, Spirit, Spirit' he kicked away the very ladder by which the Holy Spirit comes to God's people, namely, through the outward ordinances of God, such as baptism and the preached Word of God.

Here, then, were the beginnings of the radical reformation which originated not in Switzerland but in Saxony. It may be legitimate to claim that authentic anabaptism is traceable to Zurich, but if we are to reassess the full scope of radicalism we cannot do other than start with Karlstadt and Müntzer. Admittedly they were extremists and it may be argued that they were unrepresentative. How direct and determinative was their influence on the groups which emerged elsewhere and later is also uncertain. But the attempt of recent researchers, especially those of the Mennonite School, to dissociate them altogether from subsequent developments or to exclude them entirely from the radical scene has proved abortive.

Switzerland: Zurich

Zwingli's reformation in Zurich, though more far-reaching in practice than that of Luther, nevertheless did not satisfy some who looked for a more complete break with tradition on the basis, as they believed, of an appeal to clear New Testament principles. They rejected baptism and adopted an even simpler form of communion service than that of Zwingli. Beyond that, however, they held to a different conception of the church, particularly in its relationship to the State. It was envisaged as a select society, a spiritual élite, separated from the world, composed only of the regenerate and the properly baptized. In short, we are presented with what Ernst Troeltsch was to identify as the sect type of Christian community, isolated from the majority even of evangelical believers as represented by the Lutheran and Zwinglian churches at this stage.

The leader of these Swiss brethren was Conrad Grebel along with Georg Blaurock, the first to be rebaptized in the house of Felix Manz at Zollikon. There can be little doubt that they were in contact with and to a certain extent affected by Karlstadt and Müntzer, as Grebel's correspondence with the latter indicates. But, as James M. Stayer makes

clear in a useful article, they avoided the worst excesses both of their predecessors and some of their successors.¹⁶ They eschewed the chiliasm which ultimately blighted the Dutch and German anabaptists. They displayed few leanings towards extravagant and violent prophecy after the manner of Hutter or Hofmann. They were free from the suffocating mysticism which marked so many of the spiritualist leaders. And there is no disputing the fact that, as Stayer puts it, the Swiss anabaptists originated 'in, with and under the reformation' even though they eventually broke away from the mainstream.¹⁷

Zwingli's reaction to the rise of anabaptism in Zurich is reflected not only in the stance he adopted during a series of public debates, but also in five major treatises produced between 1523 and 1527. In the second of these, entitled *Who Are the Troublemakers?* (1524), he listed four forms under which opposition to the biblical gospel manifested itself, even within the Protestant camp. The last of these includes the idealistic radicals, represented by Grebel, Blaurock, Manz and Hubmaier with their supporters. Although he did not actually label them, Zwingli exposed what he took to be the weaknesses of those who no doubt were more extreme. They were puffed up by their pretended acquaintance with the gospel rather than aflame with the Spirit of charity. They were continually criticizing others, but they failed to consider themselves. Their outlook and practice were alike full of inconsistencies. They believed themselves to be moved by the Holy Spirit when in fact they were controlled by the Saturnian spirit of melancholy. They preferred to submit themselves to such control rather than to place themselves unambiguously under the authority of God's Word.

As Dr G. W. Bromiley rightly reminds us, behind both the theology and ecclesiastical activity of Zwingli at Zurich there stood two great doctrines round which his entire thought ultimately revolved: the supremacy of the divine revelation in Holy Scripture, and the sovereignty of God in election and grace.¹⁸ It was on the basis of these twin principles that he resisted the teachings of Rome, and it was from the same premises that he argued against the radicals. Like Luther, he found himself waging war on two fronts. Recent attempts to present the anabaptists in a more favourable light,

¹⁶ *Church History*, Vol. 47 (June 1978), p. 174.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: SCM Press, 1953). The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XXIV, p. 31.

¹⁵ *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kristische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. F. K. Knaake, et al. (Weimar, 1883-), XVII.i.560.

like that for example of Peter J. Klassen, claim that Zwingli contributed to the invention of a myth which has persisted for more than four centuries.¹⁹ Professor G. R. Potter, however, believes that, while on the one hand no historian nowadays can write off the anabaptist phenomenon with the prejudice and ignorance which prevailed until within the last fifty years, neither is it possible on the other hand to dismiss Zwingli's strictures as carrying little or no weight. It is at such a point that the previously redressed balance needs yet again to be redressed.²⁰

Holland: Amsterdam

If the radical reformation began in Germany and then in Switzerland, the third area to see its emergence was Holland. Wittenberg and Allstedt were the original centres, followed by Zurich. Amsterdam later developed as a focal point of Dutch anabaptism as well as that of the low countries and lower Germany, as Cornelius Krahn has shown.²¹ After 1520 sixteen students went to Wittenberg from West Friesland and the North Netherlands. Most of them returned to disseminate the views of Karlstadt and Müntzer. Before long books by Luther and Lutherans were confiscated in the parsonage at Witmansun—the birthplace of Menno Simons who was destined to become the leader of Dutch radicals, although he disapproved of its militant wing. In East Friesland, as well as in Holland proper, anabaptist doctrines were advocated by Melchior Hofmann, the Protestant apostle of the Baltic who had turned from Lutheranism on the issue of free will. He preached in a fiery apocalyptic fashion before returning to Strassburg in 1533 to await the end of the world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in that favoured city. Here, as Professor Williams puts it, 'we sense the intense heat and, as it were, the chthonic pressures beneath the crust of the magisterial reformation and peer into the molten hearth from which the anabaptist volcanoes burst forth in Münster and Amsterdam'.²² In the Dutch centre David Joris was to emerge as the preponderant influence and afterwards, of course, Menno Simons himself. Although the latter falls into a different category from his less restrained predecessors, we cannot detach the chiliastic and revolu-

tionary elements from the purer anabaptist stream as conveniently or distinctly as most Mennonite historians imagine.

Germany: Nuremberg, Strassburg, Münster

Our survey must conclude with a glance at the development of the radical reformation in Germany after Karlstadt and Müntzer. Nuremberg had been the first notable imperial city to accept the teachings of Luther but a ferment of radicalism was brewing from 1523 onwards. There were visits from Müntzer and Hutter. The preaching of a layman, Bauer von Worth, influenced Hans Denck, a schoolmaster at St Sebald's. He, like Hofmann, rejected Luther's insistence on the bondage of the human will and questioned not only the need for the sacraments and the ministry, but also, in effect, the forensic nature of justification and the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. In October 1525 Denck was compelled to leave Nuremberg.

He was received at Augsburg where he was re-baptized by Hubmaier. Augsburg and Strassburg developed into centres where upper German (Denck) and Swiss (Gebel and others expelled from Zurich) anabaptists were to mingle. In a comprehensive treatment, Miriam Usher Christman, dealing with *Strassbourg and Reform: A Study in the Process of Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), shows how Martin Bucer aided by Heido, Capito and Sturm was able to hold his own against the radical threat, partly because of dissension in the ranks of those who were opposed to Lutheranism. In 1529 a group of anabaptists appeared in Moravia and were reorganized by Hutter in 1533 to form the sect associated with his name. After leaving Zurich, Hübmaier also ministered in Moravia. In Franconia the anabaptists grew in strength under the influence of Hans Huth, whom Rupp describes as a Pied Piper at whose winning words men left goods, honour, fortune, wife.²³ Königsberg was the headquarters and, as Günther Bauer has shown, the leaders there were in touch with sympathizers in Passau, Nikolburg and Rothenburg as well as in Augsburg.

The less said about the events in Münster the better. It represents the most unfortunate of all radical expressions and goes far to account for the disrepute into which the movement not unnaturally fell. In January 1534 at the invitation of Bernhard Rothmann, the Lutheran pastor, two radical apostles made their dramatic appearance in the Westphalian city of Münster. They both came from Holland where, as we have seen, the anabaptists

²³ Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), p. 333.

¹⁹ Peter J. Klassen, *The Economics of Anabaptism 1525-60* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 13.

²⁰ George R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 169.

²¹ Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life and Thought 1450-1600* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), pp. 71ff.

²² *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 182.

were already represented. One was Jan Beukels, a tailor from Leiden, and the other was Jan Matthijsz, a baker from Haarlem. The latter assumed that he was the patriarch Enoch while the former claimed to be the ruler of all the world. Through the 'limping prophet', Johann Duschentschür, a goldsmith from Warendorf, he proclaimed Jan of Leyden as King of the New Jerusalem in Münster, adding that he 'should occupy the throne of David until the Father should claim the kingdom from him'.²⁴ The outcome was that the Bishop, assisted by other Catholic princes, brought the recalcitrant city under control, executed the radical rebels and re-established Roman worship. 'God had chased out the devil,' Luther commented, 'but the devil's grandmother had come in.'²⁵

It is to be noticed that Luther himself had warned the people of Münster about this very danger, urging them not to be deceived by heresy. He named the anabaptists and other sectarians, including the followers of Zwingli whom he regarded with almost equal suspicion though with considerably less justification. Luther seems to have anticipated the defection of Rothmann, whom he praised as an excellent preacher. 'Nevertheless, it is needful to admonish him and all other preachers to watch and pray diligently that they and their people may be preserved from false teachers. The devil is a sly rogue and able to seduce fine, pious and learned preachers; we have, alas! before our eyes the example of many who have fallen away from the pure word and have become followers of Zwingli, Müntzer, and the anabaptists; such have also become disturbers of the public peace, and once and again have laid hands on the reins of the secular government.'²⁶ Luther had actually sent a similar letter to Rothmann himself, urging him to be on his guard against such inroads.

Calvin

John Calvin's comments on the radical reformation came, of course, at a later stage of its development than those of Luther and Zwingli. For this reason they have sometimes been discounted as if they were less relevant or reliable. Indeed, Peter Klassen went so far as to claim that Calvin knew less of the

movement than any of the leading reformers.²⁷ Willem Balke, however, demonstrates the fact that Calvin had considerable first-hand acquaintance with the radicals as a result of his encounters with them both in Geneva and Strassburg.²⁸ He was sufficiently aware of their various groupings to be able to distinguish between one and another. He was less suspicious of the anabaptists proper than of the spiritual libertines. Calvin was, as always, concerned about doctrinal purity and he tended to assume that all radicals held Hofmann's docetic view of the incarnation since many of those he had met had come from the low countries.

In *Psychopannychia* (The Watchfulness of the Soul), an early work written before the *Institutes* (though not published until 1542), Calvin resisted dubious anabaptist theories about the sleep of the soul in the intermediate state. He strongly felt that any denial of scriptural teaching called in question the truth of eternal life generally.²⁹ He preferred to confine the analogy of sleep to the resting of the body in the grave until the day of resurrection.

In 1544 Calvin produced his *Brief Instruction against the errors of the Anabaptists*, which was a rebuttal of a French translation of the Scheitheim Confession (1527) then being circulated in the vicinity of Neuchâtel. Balke thinks that the *Institutes* aimed to clear French Protestantism of the change of radicalism.³⁰ Although they are not often actually mentioned by name in the text, Balke believes that Calvin often had the anabaptists in mind. This is apparent, for example, in Calvin's fear of schism, his defence of infant baptism, his emphasis on the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and his reluctance to perpetuate the prophetic office.

The debate about the radical reformation still continues and will do so as more evidence comes to light. We are wise to avoid any simplistic conclusions which dismiss the left wing altogether as of minimal importance but, on the other hand, its contribution needs to be critically assessed with particular attention paid to the comments of the major reformers.

²⁷ Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁸ Willem Balke, *Calvijn en de doperse radikalen* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1973); review in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. XXV (October 1974), pp. 420f.

²⁹ Cf. Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things* (London: Lutterworth Press, ET, 1955), p. 56.

³⁰ Balke, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Karl Rudolf Hagenbach, *History of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Clark ET 1878-9), Vol. II, p. 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.