

Globethics Repository

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

Baptists and Germany

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	de Rusett, Alan
Publisher	Baptist Historical Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-08 21:50:58
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/154540

Baptists and Germany.

THE world is again involved in a religious war. Baptists of America and the Empire know that their struggle for civil and religious liberty is being fought with courage by their co-religionists in Germany, and that new names will be added to the long list of martyrs for our faith that that country has produced. It is, therefore, not an inopportune moment to consider our great debt to them.

The history of our Faith on the Continent is not a thing to be ignored or hidden by subtle argument. It is something of which we should be proudly conscious. For it is one that goes back to the cells of heretics in the Medieval Church, that can name more martyrs in one single year than our great Missions can in all their heroic history, and can be a source of endless inspiration.

When Smyth formed the first church of English Baptists in 1608 in Holland, although he baptised himself he recognised that the real apostolic succession is a succession not of outward ordinances and visible organisations, but of true faith and practice. Whoever sought to keep alive a belief in the supremacy of the Scriptures, the church of the regenerate only, and believers' baptism, whatever he might call himself, was a builder of the Baptist Church. For many centuries these beliefs were defended by groups of people all over Europe, sincere and insincere, studious theologians and passionate revivalists. All were grouped under the convenient title of Anabaptist, and successfully covered with calumny by triumphant Lutheranism, until those traditional friends of publicans and sinners, the secular historians, cleared their names of most of the accusations and put their case in a more objective light.

When the dawn of the Reformation broke it revealed Anabaptists almost alone defending its true spirit. Neither Luther nor Zwingli dared face the challenge of genuine civil and religious liberty. They wished to substitute the coercive State Church of the Reformation for the coercive Catholic Church. They feared the existence of a church apart from the State authority, with a responsibility direct to God as revealed by each individual's interpretation of the Scriptures, and they persecuted it on exactly the same principles as the Catholics persecuted them. And with the same diabolic cruelty.

The struggle took place all over Protestant Europe, but it was in Germany that it developed in a manner significant for us to-day. Many responsible Baptists, guided by Professor Vedder, whilst claiming the Anabaptists of Switzerland as their true spiritual forerunners, shrink from any connection with their German brethren. This seems a piece of conjuring that ignores the fundamental difference between the two movements, and exaggerates subsidiary factors. The opposite is really the case.

The Reformation in Switzerland was a religious expression of the fact that the commercial and industrial classes were freeing themselves from the feudal domination of the Hapsburgs, and therefore it heralded a period of great prosperity, and of immense strength for the ruling classes. The Anabaptist movement appealed to the poor and downtrodden by the very nature of its revolutionary religious doctrine, so in this rich country it had no roots in the social fabric. It at once became passive, and by its Confessions of Schleitheim in 1527 it renounced the use of force and participation in civil government. The rulers, who perceived the danger that would arise should economic troubles occur, took their opportunity and drowned Mantz, Faulk, and Rieman, burned Hatzler, Blaurock and Sattler, and murdered the whole movement out of existence.

This could not be done in Germany. Hubmaier (burnt 1528), that great link between the Swiss and German schools of thought, whilst proclaiming that "in matters of faith everything must be left free, willing and unforced" was obliged sincerely to observe social conditions in Germany and to give to the Anabaptism of that country its distinctive feature by rejecting the purely spiritual conception of the church in the Schleitheim Confession. English Baptists, ever since they fought and rose to high positions in Cromwell's army, have fought in every kind of war, imperialist, economic and political, as long as it has seemed to them to further the cause of liberty of thought. They stand, therefore, not by the precedent of the Swiss, but the German Anabaptists, accepting office and taking up the sword as the Zwickau prophets and Munzer did. It is therefore our special duty to see where it led these men.

Hubmaier brought the dangerous doctrine of the liberty of the conscience into a land suffering under as terrible an exploitation as history can record. South-West and Central Germany were about to experience a great rising of the peasants. He saw their suffering and was probably responsible for that fine statement of their moderate and just demands, the peasants' Twelve Articles. When these were rejected by the Princes, and he saw the inevitability of bloody conflict, he left the country unable to take upon himself the burden of solving the truly

tremendous problem of the righteousness of force—so much easier in theory than in practice.

There were two men who did not escape from the problem. One, Luther, went over to the side of the Princes, upon whose survival he staked his church schemes, and went amongst them urging them "to stab, strike, strangle, whoever can," telling them that the head of a prince was of more value than that of a thousand peasants. Taking their cue from him, they slaughtered over a hundred thousand almost unarmed peasants before their blood-lust was quenched. On the other side was the Anabaptist colleague of Hubmaier, Munzer, who saw the inevitability of war, and decided that as their cause was just, God would support them. Taking what seemed a suicidal course, he went amongst them urging them to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, to have all things in common, and run their lives according to the tenets of the New Testament. He saw the barrenness of futile class struggle, and how it could be made glorious if it were made into the preparation for the immediate Second Coming of our Lord. The peasants responded fanatically to his cause. He died trying to give them an ideology worth dying for. But the politician Luther had chosen the winning side, his church went ahead, he had the privilege of writing history from his angle, and is therefore the hero in most books on this period. Baptists need not be ashamed that their name is invariably associated with the "villain."

It is easy to say that Munzer was not an "orthodox" Anabaptist. If that strange word means the body of Anabaptist opinion outside the German school, then that is certainly true. But let us remember that they attacked him because he held the views on force which orthodox Baptists hold to-day, whilst our main doctrinal quarrel with him is over his teaching of the immediate Second Coming of Christ, a heresy implicit in the situation, and so natural that it never seriously worried the consciences of his contemporary Anabaptist critics. It is important to study this belief, which even Luther once held.

That most dangerous and magnificent achievement had taken place, the Bible was in the hands of the common people. Immediately they were struck by two things—the clear references to Christ coming again to establish His Kingdom over all the earth, and the glaring fact that He was a friend of the poor and weak, an inveterate enemy of the powerful, rich and strong, both clerical and secular. The latter idea gave them great faith that Jesus Christ was on their side; and that as they were ranged against such impossible odds, against power, privilege and prestige, the only possible explanation was that Christ would come in His glory and deliver them. Thus they tried to bring

an element of idealism and goodness into a very sordid and murderous class struggle, in a way Luther never dreamt of doing. But a civil war is no time to build a Kingdom of Heaven. It leaves little time for prayer and less for clear thinking. But it was a noble effort, it strengthened the pitiful ranks of the oppressed and exposed the real criminals. These in their turn accused the Anabaptists of starting the revolution because they had linked the name of Christ with the oppressed and not, as Luther, with the Princes. This accusation need not worry us to-day. Experience of too many revolutions emphasises that individuals and ideas can mould and guide, but not create the revolution.

The teaching of the immediate Second Coming is an example of too great a faith. We to-day are certainly not suffering from that. It is an example of incredible naïveté. The church to-day is nearer to rationalist sophistication. Faith can become superstition, naïveté become mere idiocy, if pressure becomes too great, but if allowed to develop over many generations of careful thinkers, it can become something magnificent and firm, a great foundation to a church. Unfortunately the second test of the Anabaptists in Germany was more fearful than the first; the pressure from their enemies was full on. The story of Munster must be read in the spirit of understanding, or not read at all.

In the cities of Northern Germany the commercial classes were fighting for their freedom from the economic stranglehold of feudal lords, and when in 1529 one city, Munster, was stricken by famine, the Prince-Bishop was forced to compromise and recognise the city as Lutheran. To an Anabaptist this was the substitution of one religious dictatorship for another; to the poor, that of one class for another. The two parties came together. Once the former preached the spirit of liberty the people, seeing hope at last, democratically elected an Anabaptist Council, proclaimed all goods in common, and cleared the Dom of all images. They were immediately besieged by the Prince-Bishop, helped by the ruling class on all sides, for never had there been such a fearful menace to their social system. A thrill of terror went through the propertied world, which was responsible for the ferocity of all persecutions of the Anabaptists in these days—a ferocity incomprehensible to anyone attempting a theological explanation.

Under the horrors of a terrible siege, which they stood with stubborn heroism, faith became superstition, the individual's contact through prayer with God became a confused affair of mystical visions. When months passed and Christ did not come, they plunged deeper into the Old Testament to find precepts for perfecting their Kingdom of Heaven on earth, and their

spiritual promptings became more and more subjective, obliterating all objective standards of judgment, ending in a final catastrophe of wishful thinking and pseudo-spiritualism.

With six times as many women as men near the end of siege, it was found expedient to introduce polygamy. Lutherans, who were to recognise the bigamy of Philip of Hesse, were the first to cast the stone. It must be remembered when considering these and the innumerable kindred accusations made during and after these events, that whenever Anabaptists could gather together and express their beliefs, all over Germany they repudiated the extremist doctrines asserted to have been proclaimed in the last months of the Munster siege. The danger of the doctrine of immediate revelation, if not truly examined and understood, is well known to us to-day, and we need not go into the details of this controversy. It is clear that the Munsterites made a virtue of necessity, proclaimed a doctrine of an expediency, and had they been victorious would have rejected or modified their pronouncements. Their behaviour should not absolve us from studying their fundamental principles of religious belief.

Even the Roman Catholic historian, Cornelius, records that after the fall of the city and torture of its Anabaptists, throughout Germany "hundreds of them, of all ages and both sexes, suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyful and singing psalms." This is not the behaviour of a sensuous and depraved people.

The true faith lived on. Through the brave witness of a poor tailor, Snijder, broken on the wheel for Anabaptist beliefs, Menno Simons was led to their study, and was persuaded. He developed great powers to teach, organise and to win, even if with a discipline too vigorous for all. In the pages of Motley we may read how many and how patient were the Mennonite Anabaptists. In the next century the Englishman, John Smyth, who had independently come to a similar position, was asked why he did not join them; and on a comparison of their respective teachings most of his followers did so, although others under his friend, Helwys, returned to England in 1612 as the first church of English Baptists.

To-day's war and incipient revolution will leave no body of Christian men unchallenged. Throughout history impotence or disappearance has befallen every church that has not spoken with a clear and authoritative voice when the world is shaken by social upheaval and men are crying for guidance. On the other hand, it is difficult for any church to give that undivided counsel which wins the confidence of men, if it has not first

fearlessly recognised its mission as expressed in its own true history.

The least we can do to honour these German martyrs is to cut away all that was false and transitory in their Anabaptism, and bring into the active life of our church the wealth of inspiring ideas and principles that formed its very core. They knew that persecution and death must not turn one from the path of true faith. But they also knew the more terrible truth that if a whole church, the sole guardian of a truth, is threatened with death, it is better that it goes ahead clean out of the pages of history than that it leaves this truth behind it perverted by compromise with authority, a constant deception to others.

We can thank their clarity of vision that they did not put their trust in princes and leave our church tied to mortal institutions and rulers, ever condemned to explain away their crimes against God for fear that their fall might be our fall. We can learn that a church must not be ashamed if its followers are mostly common people, or moderate its gospel to attract men of authority and wealth. We can learn, too, to answer the downtrodden when they cry for Christian participation in revolution against manifest oppression, not with superior preachings on the nobility of patience, but with the greater appeal for their help in the creative revolution of establishing His Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. And when bitter intolerance threatens to submerge all human values, we can live by the words of Hubmaier: "Heretics should be overcome by holy knowledge. . . . The Inquisitors were the greatest heretics of all."

ALAN DE RUSSETT.