

'Earthquake and Storm'

- Reformation and change in the 16th Century

CALL FOR REFORM

Deep anxiety

For all the optimism of some humanists, the 16th century began as the 15th had ended, with deep anxiety. There was frequent foreboding about an imminent end of the world, and uncertainty about personal salvation. People sought respite in devotion to the Virgin, the cult of the rosary, pilgrimages and indulgences; or in deepening personal faith and a study of the Scriptures. There was little confidence in the church as an institution; there was moral and pastoral corruption among priests and bishops and the papacy was doing nothing to check the abuses. In fact the popes were most concerned about raising money for extravagant banquets and their building programmes, inspired by renaissance indulgence and expressed in projects like the basilica of St Peter in Rome. The desire for money led the papacy to permit unsuitable and absentee bishops provided there were favourable financial considerations. There were constant cries for reform everywhere. Ironically, the fifth Lateran Council which ended in March 1517 promised yet another reform programme, which came to nothing; within seven months Martin Luther had begun his protest.

Church reform was what everyone wanted; but there were powerful political and social forces at work across Christendom, which once released were to change the shape of the church and Western Europe beyond all expectation.

Luther and faith

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben in Saxony in 1483, the son of a god-fearing and reasonably prosperous copper miner. He studied law at Erfurt; but then in 1505, after a disturbing spiritual experience in a thunderstorm, joined the Augustinian canons. Martin was a tough, solid man of peasant stock. He had deep-set, disturbing eyes, but a character as open as the daylight. Nothing about him was sophisticated; he had a vigorous mind but he was not an intellectual gymnast; he was earnest rather than subtle. He could be a man of rough and vulgar language; he expressed loud laughter but he was not a wit. Years later, in heated debate with guests around the meal table, his wife Katie would complain, 'Martin, you are so rude!' To which he would reply, 'But they make me so rude!'. His writings carried the same passion. He said, 'My pen gets irritated very quickly!'

In 1512 Luther began to teach Scripture at the new university at Wittenberg. He was, however, someone whose conscience never knew genuine peace. His constant spiritual anxiety led his spiritual advisors to despair of his introspection. He personally came to believe he was a castaway; irredeemably damned. Staupitz, his vicar general, encouraged him to study Paul's letter to the Romans with the aid of the writings of Augustine. This proved to have dramatic consequences. It brought him to a new understanding and deep peace as he pondered the words 'the just shall live by faith' [Rom 1:17]. He realised that God's forgiveness was free and absolute on the basis of repentance and faith in the atoning work of Jesus; God's grace, not human effort, was the basis of personal salvation. He began to teach his new and growing understanding in the university and the ideas



spread among teachers and students. However, events were soon to take place which would dramatically focus Luther's new understanding.

Indulgence and theses

We have already mentioned that 'indulgences' had been used by the papacy during the medieval period as one of the means by which to finance itself. An indulgence was a papal document that promised the purchaser forgiveness for sin for either themselves or someone deceased. It was quite simply selling the grace of God, of which the church saw itself to be the administrator.

1517 saw Tetzel, a Dominican, employed to preach and 'sell' the indulgence to raise tax money for the Archbishop of Mainz and finance for the work on St Peter's in Rome. Tetzel was a master of his craft, crying out:

'Another soul to heaven springs,
when in the box a shilling rings.'

Because the medieval peasant mind was so spiritually fearful, it really believed in the efficacy of the indulgence and sales were high.

Luther, watching at the edge of the crowd, was shocked at Tetzel's crudity and the people's credulity. He believed it was essential to have a public debate about the whole issue of indulgences that he believed was contrary to the declaration of God's free grace clearly stated in Scripture. So on 31 October 1517 he fixed a document to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg; it presented 95 'Theses on Indulgences', which he announced he was prepared to defend in public debate. This was not an act of revolution; the theses were not intended for the general public. Martin loved the church and he believed the pope himself would have been appalled if he knew the real harm the sale of indulgences was doing.

Luther's protest and the debate that followed brought a sharp drop in the sale of indulgences; the subsequent loss of money brought the matter to the pope's attention who demanded that Staupitz, the head of Luther's order, keep his monks quiet.

Next, the Dominicans, the guardians of orthodoxy, tried to prove Luther was a heretic. They argued that the indulgences were sold on papal authority, so it was the pope he was really attacking. So the matter became a debate about papal authority; people said things Luther had not intended. He replied, 'Sadly, the song has been pitched in a key too high for me to sing.'

SWELLING TIDE

Dispute and debate

How long Luther could have lasted unprotected we simply cannot say, however, King Frederick of Saxony and popular opinion supported him. The 'theses' had been printed and spread throughout Germany, bringing even more support. Tetzel could no longer walk the streets of Wittenberg without being attacked! A popular movement, with national as well as spiritual issues entwined within it had started:



- **1518 (Oct) Augsburg:** the papal legate Cajetan told Luther to recant, but Martin respectfully said he could not and would die for the truth. At this time he was probably in the greatest danger, friends hurried him home under cover of darkness. He printed an account of his interview with Cajetan, plus an attack on papal infallibility.
- **1519 (Jan) Altenburg:** an interview with Miltitz, a papal diplomat, who said, ‘an army of 25,000 would not get Luther to Rome’ – such was the popular German feeling. He persuaded Luther to write to the pope, submissive in tone but retracting nothing, which he did.
- **1519 (July) Leipzig:** a public disputation between Dr Eck and Luther’s friend Carlstadt. Luther joins in and Eck brilliantly got him to agree with the ideas for which Jan Hus had been condemned at Constance. The assembly was in turmoil. This was a vital moment for Luther, he had had to choose between the authority of Scripture or the traditions of the church. Later he wrote, ‘We are all Hussites without knowing it; St Paul, St Augustine are all Hussites.’

Luther was now famous. He published numerous pamphlets in his genius of polemics. In 1520 in his document, ‘To the Christian nobility of the German nation’, he called princes and rulers, as their moral duty before God, to rise up and withstand the papacy.

In the summer of 1520 the pope issued a ‘Bull’ stating that Luther was a heretic. On 10 December, Martin led a crowd of students and townsfolk outside Wittenberg to a huge bonfire on which he burnt the ‘Bull’ along with the books of Eck and others. On 3 January 1521, Luther was finally excommunicated. A papal legate wrote, ‘All Germany is in revolution, nine tenths shout for Luther, the others care nothing for Luther but shout, “Death to the court of Rome.”’ Peasants on the road to Wittenberg would ask travellers, ‘Are you for Martin?’ If they were not they were beaten up!

Worms and Wartburg

The youthful Charles V, King of Spain and Emperor of Germany, called Luther to a *diet* at Worms, with the promise safe conduct (remember Jan Hus) to resolve the issue. Luther told his fearful friends that he would go in the face of all the demons of hell. On 15 April 1521, he was asked if he would recant. He replied:

‘I will apologise for genuine faults in my writings, but not for attacking the pope. Unless I am proved wrong by Scripture or evident reason, then I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot, I will not recant. To go against conscience is neither safe nor right, so help me God. Amen.’

He probably did not say, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’ Luther saw the whole event as an anti-climax; he said, ‘I expected the emperor to have collected 50 doctors of the law to confute the monk in argument, but all they said was, “Are these your books?” “Yes.” “Will you recant?” “No.” “Then get out!”’ The verdict was that he could return to Wittenberg, but within a month he would be an outlaw, and his life forfeit to anyone who wished to take it.

Frederick of Saxony, Luther’s protector, was in a dilemma; the only solution was to get Martin ‘kidnapped’ en route from Worms. He was hidden in the castle, ‘the Wartburg’, while rumours that he had been found dead abounded. He was given the pseudonym,



'Squire George', and went through a period of emotional reaction after the years of strain. Once he was well again he began to translate the Bible into German that, in Erasmus' words, 'the plough boy ought to be able to recite Scripture while ploughing, and the weaver to the hum of their shuttle'.

With Luther absent it did not mean that the reform movement ceased. Without his presence, friends like Andreas Carlstadt and Philip Melancthon took the lead. They believed it was time to stop simply criticising abuses and to act. They involved themselves in increasingly provocative behaviour that led to rioting in Wittenberg; destroying images and pictures in the churches. When the news reached Luther he was shocked and felt he could not stand by and watch. In March 1522 he entered Wittenberg once again; he quelled the tumult by the force of his presence alone. Sadly, because of disagreement with Luther, Carlstadt was forced to leave Saxony.

Muntzer and Peasants' War

Luther's conflict with Rome unleashed many different forces within Germany. The central government was weak and real power lay in the hands of a miscellany of local princes, nobles and knights. They involved themselves in a struggle to gain control of church lands. Under their rule were the peasant populations who for years had been bitter and discontented against both the clergy and their exploitive overlords; time and again their feelings had erupted in revolt under the emblem of a 'shoe', led by starving disbanded soldiers and bankrupt knights. Events surrounding Martin Luther led them to hope for justice in equality under God. Matters came to a head with the preaching of Thomas Muntzer.

Muntzer was an early friend of the Reformation and on Luther's recommendation he got a pastoral position in a church in Zwickau by 1520. In his teaching he emphasised inner faith inspired by the Spirit and personally appropriated. In his pastoral work he became concerned with the needs of the peasant population, which led to his involvement in social protest. Opposition to him led to his being forced to leave the city in 1521. After a brief period he became pastor of a church in Allstedt in Saxony. He carried out wide-ranging local reforms, and drew crowds from the surrounding area to his services with German liturgy. He taught that the individual's experience of the Spirit undercut the authority of the clergy who, along with political authorities, were in fact reprobate in placing themselves between God and humankind. Both these would eventually be annihilated by the elect who would establish just spiritual government. Muntzer came increasingly to identify the common people with the elect.

There was strong opposition from the Catholics, but also from Luther. Muntzer, in turn, now personally attacked him, for putting Scripture between God and people. Soon disorder broke out in Allstedt with the destruction of a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Muntzer called on the princes to help the godly destroy the wicked and establish God's kingdom. They refused and expelled him from Allstedt. From now on Muntzer's life became increasingly unsettled. He helped to organise peasant marches in southern Germany between 1524 and 1525, and taught that the coming confrontation with the authorities would be the last judgment. He eagerly joined the peasant army that confronted the princes near Frankenhausen on 15 May 1525 when 6,000 peasants were slaughtered. Muntzer himself escaped only to be captured and executed 12 days later.



The events of this 'Peasants' War' during the days of 1524 to 1525 not only shook the nation, but also filled Luther with dread. He hated disorder, but he failed to understand the true concerns of the peasants. His writings fuelled the situation against the poor:

'Princes must brandish their swords to free, save, help and pity the poor people forced to join the peasants – but the wicked stab, smite and slay all you can ... These times are so extraordinary that a prince can win heaven more easily by bloodshed than by prayer ... You cannot meet a rebel with reason.'

These are astonishing words from a man who once said, 'I do not want to struggle for the gospel by violence and murder.' However, his naiveté and desire for order led him to support the nobility in their use of terrible force and atrocity to suppress the peasants.

Lutheranism

Luther had no intention of founding a new church; he believed that rediscovering the truth of the gospel the church would reform itself. It did not happen like that. He spent the concluding years of his life establishing what he had begun with doctrinal definition and minimal church organisation. His love of tradition meant that he permitted anything that was clearly not forbidden by Scripture, but he would allow nothing that denied the pre-eminence of Scripture and personal faith. What mattered was the universal priesthood of all believers. Lutheran churches became state churches, with the prince having power entrusted by God. So the very person who had challenged ecclesiastical political power himself reinforced the power of the state over the churches. Lutheranism was destined to spread its influence throughout Germany and Scandinavia.

In 1525, the year of the Peasants' War, Martin married a former nun, Catherine von Bora. He was to write to a friend soon after the wedding to say he could not get used to waking up and finding pigtails on his pillow! They were to have six children. In fact the German memory of Luther is not so much the friar but the loving father with his children around his ample knee. He was to say of his wife, 'I would not change my Katie for France or Venice, because God has given her to me, and other women have much worse faults and she is true to me and a good mother to my children.' Luther was eventually to die in 1546 after a long period of ill health.

RADICAL PATHWAYS

Zwingli and Zurich

On 27 December 1518, Ulrich Zwingli moved to Zurich to become a people's priest on the staff of the central church, the Grossmunster. Zwingli was born high in the Swiss Alps, the son of a village magistrate and prosperous farmer. As a student in Vienna and Basle he encountered 'humanism', the writings of Erasmus having had a particularly strong influence on his thinking. Added to this, he also brought with him to Zurich 12 years' experience as a priest. His reading of the New Testament in Greek had made him determined to preach only the gospel at his new post. A near-death experience in the plague of 1519 sharpened his commitment even more. Exactly when Zwingli took the decisive step to fully embrace Reformation thinking is unclear. He claimed he had been teaching the ideas before he had heard of Luther, and that his work was wholly



independent of him. Whatever the truth of this claim, it seems that the writings of Carlstadt were a formative influence on him.

What is clear, however, is that as reform began in Zurich there was nothing haphazard about its development. Zwingli was an attractive and eloquent preacher whose daily expositions of Scripture drew a growing audience. To this he added teaching and disputation. The first clear act of challenging the old order was a group who broke the Lent fast, by eating pork, in 1522. The group was publicly supported by Zwingli from the pulpit and in writing, and was followed by challenging other issues such as clerical marriage, monastic vows, indulgences, the use of images and eventually ending the mass. By the end of 1522 Zwingli resigned his position as a priest in the church and was employed to preach directly by the city council. From now on the authority of the council was to prove decisive in Zwingli's view as to how the reforms were to progress. He believed that the authority of Scripture was paramount, but his desire for order led him to believe the authorities should be persuaded about truth by preaching, which would then be followed by changes in legislation in favour of reform. This approach was to have significant consequences in the very near future.

Zwingli the scholar, humanist and evangelical reformer was clearly an attractive and forceful personality. However, he did not have Luther's openness of character and his respect for the past. For that reason reform in Zurich was much more thorough-going than in Germany, producing a greater 'simplicity' in faith and practice. Both believed that nothing must be contrary to Scripture; but as we have seen Luther permitted what Scripture did not forbid, while Zwingli only allowed what Scripture explicitly sanctioned. Their debate and disagreement over the eucharist illustrates this most clearly.

Zwingli's belief that the Reformation had to move in harmony with the civil authorities led to his becoming increasingly involved in political activity; he believed that this would open up the whole of Switzerland to the gospel. He saw some success, but some of the strongly Catholic cantons joined forces with the Austrians, and Zurich was one of the cities they attacked. Zwingli stood on the battlefield with his people, sword and battle axe in hand. He died in the Battle of Cappel in 1531. Zwingli was an important reformer, often called 'the third man of the Reformation', whose work in Zurich was to serve as a model for other 'reformed' cities.

Anabaptism

The simple outline of Zwingli's ministry and reform in Zurich belies the fact that during the same period, and in the same place, events more radical and far-reaching in their significance were taking place. By 1521 the learning and attractive personality of Zwingli had drawn around him a number of gifted young humanists with a shared interest in studying the Greek classics. Zwingli then used their common admiration for Erasmus to focus study on the Greek New Testament. By 1522 all the members of this group had come to share Zwingli's zeal for reform; one of the most significant of whom was Conrad Grebel, a vagabond scholar whose father was a member of the Zurich city council.

By October 1523 very real tensions had begun to emerge between Zwingli and some of those who had been his closest and most enthusiastic supporters for reform. Initially it was over changes to make the mass into a simple observance of the Lord's supper in which both wine as well as bread were shared with all the participants. Zwingli was convinced



biblically but would make no move until the city council approved and legislated for the change. Conrad Grebel believed he was seriously compromising truth and what he had professed.

By 1524 Conrad Grebel had drawn like-minded people around him, among who were Simon Stumpf and Felix Manz, a Hebrew scholar. They were soon to be known as the 'Swiss Brethren'. The debate had now moved to the subject of infant baptism. Already Wilhelm Reublin, the pastor of Witikon, a village near to Zurich, was preaching against infant baptism. Three families in another village of Zollikon had withheld their children from baptism. In Zurich, on 17 January 1525, there was a formal debate about baptism. The official ruling of the city council was that infant baptism was biblical, that all infants were to be baptised within eight days and that the group led by Grebel and Mantz were forbidden to meet.

One evening, four days later, 21 January 1525, the small forbidden group met in the home of Felix Mantz in shadow of the Grossmunster. They were filled with anxiety, and after earnest conversation and prayer that God would give them strength and show them mercy, a former priest named George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptise him. He stepped forward and poured water over him. Blaurock then baptised all the others in the room. This was the single most radical step of the whole Reformation movement:

- It challenged and broke the link between the church and the state and confronted the whole concept of Christendom;
- It was the first believer's baptism since the early centuries of the church and it gave focus and identity to the various radical and dissenting groups with the name 'anabaptist' or 'rebaptised'.

Within days of the events in Zurich, the majority of the inhabitants of Zollikon were baptised with the assistance of Grebel, to become the first Anabaptist congregation.

From this spark Anabaptism spread with missionary fervour out into the surrounding areas and then across Europe, for the most part by ordinary men and women preaching, baptising, teaching and forming congregations, inspired by the expectation of Jesus' near return. However, it was in the face of the most severe hostility. To both Catholic and Protestant authorities and leaders. Anabaptism was simply treason, sedition, anarchy, blasphemy, sacrilege and hypocrisy all in one. Their response was to call for arrest, imprisonment and torture. Because this failed to halt the movement, execution soon became the norm. The first known Anabaptist to die for their faith was a preacher, Eberli Bolt, burnt by the Catholics on 29 May 1525. Grebel had sensed that this would be the reaction when he said that, 'Christ must still suffer more in his members.'

Grebel, Manz and Blaurock were all arrested in October 1525 while spreading the gospel of Anabaptism. They were condemned to life imprisonment in the Zurich tower. The court also ruled that anyone performing the act of baptism would be sentenced to death. Their sentence only lasted 14 days, because someone helped them all to escape. Within ten months Conrad Grebel had died of the plague; only a 20 months after his baptism. Felix Manz was to be rearrested within two months of his escape; accused of practising baptism he was sentenced to death with the agreement of Zwingli. He was rowed out into the middle of the Limmat River, which runs through Zurich, tied to a hurdle and drowned; 'the



third baptism'. He died, the first of many martyrs at the hands of Protestants, urging those around to respond to the truth. He was executed on 5 January 1527 with the dying words:

'Into your hands I commend my spirit.'

JOURNEY OF FIRE

Anabaptism motivation

Events in Switzerland seemed to inspire, ignite and find parallels with other similar groups across Germany, the Netherlands and into Moravia. The conditions that gave rise to Anabaptism in Switzerland were found across Europe:

- A spiritual expectancy and restlessness;
- A sense of economic grievance;
- A reaction to the aftermath of the suppression of the Peasants' War;
- A disenchantment with the results of the official reform movements.

Above all it was the tireless activity of the preachers, inspired by the 'great commission' of Jesus, that energised the movement. The missionaries were often 'sent' by the local authorities as they expelled them from one territory after another. Much of the early evangelism was quite uncoordinated, but increasingly preachers and leaders of the movement made contact and developed strategies.

Michael Sattler

A key figure in the consolidation of Anabaptism was Michael Sattler who, before his conversion to Lutheran and then Anabaptism thinking, had been the prior of a Benedictine monastery. Having been driven from city and town he spent time in Strasbourg debating Anabaptism with mainstream reformers, which almost certainly prepared him for his greatest work by sharpening his understanding of his own position. He then went to Germany to continue his work.

In February 1527 Sattler appears to have been a leading influence in a meeting of Anabaptist leaders at Schleithem on the German/Swiss border. We do not know exactly who was at the meeting or how long it lasted, but it produced a 'Confession', which was not a doctrinal statement of faith but it highlighted the distinctive characteristics of Anabaptism in its concern with church order and discipleship. While not every Anabaptist group would accept all the ideas, it presented a yardstick by which to measure mainstream Anabaptism, especially in Switzerland and Germany. The main themes of the Schleithem Confession are:

- **Discipleship:** they chose a daily walk with God shaped by Jesus' teaching and example;
- **Love:** they were committed to pacifism, mutual aid, community, and practising the hard sayings of Jesus;
- **Church:** they aimed at restoring the church to its earliest vigour; authority was congregational with teaching, prophecy, Lord's supper and evangelism;
- **Baptism:** they practised baptism as true Christian initiation but only on the clear personal confession of faith;



- **Discipline:** there was clear understanding of separation from the world and excommunication;
- **State:** they insisted that the church was to be separate from the state; with Christians as free, unforced and uncompelled people; they refused the oath.

On returning home from Schleithem, Michael Satler was arrested, along with his wife and others. He was imprisoned in the tower of Binsdorf and eventually tried. His testimony was clear and unequivocal though he was mocked throughout. His sentence of death was prefaced by torture. A piece of his tongue was cut out, and on six occasions en route to the fire red-hot tongs tore lumps of flesh from his body. While praying for his persecutors he was then tied to a ladder that was thrown into a huge fire. As his wrists burnt free he raised an arm as a silent signal to Anabaptists in the crowd that a martyr's death was bearable. Several days later, his wife Margaretha, who was once a Begine and described as 'a talented, clever little woman' was drowned in the River Neckar, all attempts to secure a recantation having failed. It has been suggested that few other Anabaptist executions had such a far-reaching influence as that of Michael Satler; Wilhelm Reublin's account of it circulated Europe, encouraging Anabaptists and challenging Lutherans, Reformed and Catholics.

However, Anabaptists were to be tortured and executed in their thousands; more than 2,500 in the Netherlands alone. The true numbers will never be known because accurate records were never kept; to the authorities most of the men and women were nobodies, simply a social threat to be removed. The massive martyrology, the *Martyr's Mirror*, which was to nourish the self-identity of later generations, tells of some as a testimony to the many. What comes through the pages is the courage and character of these ordinary people:

'Dirk Willems came from Asperen in the Netherlands. He was arrested and convicted of being an Anabaptist. One winter night he managed to escape, but was seen and pursued by a guard, however, Dirk escaped across frozen water. On reaching the other side he heard a cry from his pursuer as the ice broke under him. Dirk made his way back over the ice and dragged the half-drowned man to the safety of the shore. The burgomaster ordered his immediate rearrest and he was burnt to death on 16 May 1569. The godly compassion motivating his selfless act in the knowledge of almost certain martyrdom symbolises the Anabaptist spirit.'

Munster

Exactly ten years after the momentous baptisms in Zurich a tragedy took place in Munster, in northern Germany, which shook Anabaptism to the core, and became a scandal throughout Europe.

Melchior Hoffman was the person through whom Anabaptism reached the Netherlands. He was strongly influenced by eccentric interpretations of the books of Daniel and Revelation that led him to believe that he was 'Elijah' and Strasbourg would be the site of the 'New Jerusalem' in Jesus' imminent return. He allowed himself to be imprisoned in Strasbourg to hasten the fulfilment of the prophecy. At this point a baker named Jan Matthijs claimed leadership of Hoffman's followers in Amsterdam and sent out 12 apostles in pairs to preach. Some of the apostles reached Munster and found a priest called Rothman in the



city; he had accepted Anabaptist teaching and through his influence it was becoming a haven for Anabaptist refugees.

In 1534 Jan Matthijs settled in Munster and prophesied that this in fact would be the true scene of the fulfilment of Hoffman's prophecy. But more significantly, we suddenly see violence being preached: the faithful are to annihilate the wicked by force to hasten Christ's return. Everyone in the city was forced to be baptised or to leave the city. Messages were sent out to all those wanting to be part of the 'New Jerusalem' urging them to come to Munster. Preparations were made for the final battle that would usher in God's kingdom. As far as conflict was concerned they were not to be disappointed, as the absentee Catholic Bishop of Munster gathered an army with the support of German princes and laid a siege. Matthijs led a small 'Gideon' band against the troops in certain belief of a miraculous victory; he and his companions were all killed.

Leadership passed to a Jan van Leiden, and a bad situation got worse. He became more extreme than Matthijs; he proclaimed himself the new 'King David', the mouthpiece of God who executed anyone who disobeyed him. Community of goods was organised and, because there were now three women to every man, so was polygamy. Then Van Leiden had himself crowned the 'King of the New Zion'; a madness gripped the city. When supplies ran low the old, children and the women were sent from the city; many being brutally murdered by the besieging army. On 25 June 1535 the city of Munster was betrayed by an informer and the 800 remaining men were overwhelmed by 3,000 troops. The killing lasted two days and almost everyone left in the city died. The leaders were taken alive, interrogated, tortured, executed and their bodies hung in cages for all to see. Across Europe it was believed that Anabaptism began with Thomas Muntzer and ended with Munster. The truth about its origins and character was of course quite different.

Menno Simons

In the year of the Munster disaster, a Dutch priest called Menno Simons, who was troubled by Catholic doctrine, started to search the Scriptures as the result the execution of an Anabaptist. He was impressed by the zeal and courage of the Munster supporters in Holland, but saw them as in error and like sheep without a shepherd; his own brother is thought to have died in the events. However, the events galvanised his thinking and he was baptised in 1536. The same year he married his wife Gertrude who faithfully shared his years of hardship and persecution.

Menno was soon asked by six or eight people to lead their Anabaptist group. For the rest of his life, until his death in 1561, he worked to rally and shape the lives and scattered communities of Anabaptists throughout the Netherlands and Germany. He was always travelling and hiding, preaching at night and writing tracts that he printed on his simple press, which he carried about with him. He soon had a price of 100 gold guilders on his head, with the promise of a free pardon to any Anabaptist who would betray him. He once compared himself to the ministers in the Protestant churches:

'I with my poor, weak wife and children have for years endured excessive anxiety, oppression, affliction and persecution ... Yes, when the preachers repose on easy beds and soft pillows, we generally have to hide ourselves in out-of-the-way corners ... We have to be on our guard when a dog barks for



fear the arresting officer has arrived ... our recompense and portion be but fire, sword and death.'

Menno's life was also fraught by theological debate; but his final years were spent in relative safety on the estates of a German baron who, while not an Anabaptist, had sympathy for their sufferings. It has been said that Menno's abiding contribution to Anabaptism was his character; it was also his pastoring care and resolute pacifist commitment that did so much to see the movement survive in northern Europe. It is for this reason that many of their descendants call themselves 'Mennonite'.

Hutterites

It was in Moravia that another expression of Anabaptism emerged; it came to be known as 'Hutterite', named after Jakob Hutter, an early influential leader who was publicly burnt at the stake in 1536. Moravia appeared to promise a safe haven for a group of Anabaptists who wanted not only to practise non-violence but also the community of goods. A cloak had been thrown on the ground into which everyone had placed their meagre resources. This step of communal sharing had initially been taken in 1528 as the only means of survival, but they were soon sharing the things they consumed and produced together as a community. The early years of the community saw tensions due to lack of experience in communal living and it was for this reason that they asked Jakob Hutter to come and help them, which he did by bringing the skills of organisation and leadership. He spent only a few years helping them but his influence is reflected in the fact that they are called the 'Hutterian Brethren' to this day.

They came to believe that there could be no true Christian love without renouncing private possessions and committing oneself to the community of the brethren; this belief that this is the only path of true Christian discipleship is a tradition that has continued with them for the past 450 years. In the 16th century their skills at community saw their 'Bruderhofs' become wealthy and large, with up to 30,000 members across Moravia and Hungary at one point. Their communities were described as being like 'a beehive where all the busy bees work together to a common end ... not for their own need but for the common good of all'. This prosperity and their refusal to pay taxes brought envy and hostility from their neighbours, and in 1595 persecutions began with confiscation and repression. Eventually the survivors sought a future by migrating to the Ukraine.

Questions

1. What do you understand by the word 'reform' with regard to the church? Can the church ever be 'fully' reformed? What sense does the phrase 'reformed church' make? Is 'reform' an event, a continual state or simply a hope?
2. The magisterial reformers such as Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, who insisted on linking the church with the authority of the state, are seen as having 'won' the Reformation. The Anabaptists, who refused the link between church and state, are seen as having 'lost' the Reformation. What is your opinion on the matter?
3. Scripture alone, *Sola scriptura*, was appealed to as the basis for authority in the church by many of the reformers. How do you understand such a phrase? Does it provide a sufficient basis for truth? Where do you believe final authority is to be found in the church?



Reading & Resources

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