

Spring 5-16-2014

The Emergence of Believer's Baptism as a Political Event

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THE EMERGENCE OF BELIEVER'S BAPTISM AS A POLITICAL EVENT

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Science with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2014

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ABSTRACT

During the Protestant Reformation, the most well-known reformers left the classical church-state relationship largely unchanged. The early Anabaptists, who called for much faster changes than the Reformation's leaders were attempting, argued for a separation of the church from the wider culture. The radical reformers were also the first to argue for the practice of believer's baptism—that the church should only baptize those who had made a personal commitment to Christianity. Studied as a part of the historical narrative, the emergence of believer's baptism is charged with political meaning. This project is an exploration of that significance: namely, that believer's baptism's first instances carried the significance of separation from the state-church.

Keywords: Baptism, Anabaptism, Radical Reformation, Conrad Grebel

Dedicated to Brenton Yadon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Lawrence Snyder for his guidance on this particular project, as well as for his instruction in Christian history, which inspired my topic. I would also like to thank the WKU Honors College for the opportunity to undertake this endeavor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The sacraments are the central rituals of the Christian Church. The term “sacrament” comes from the Latin word for “mystery,” *sacramentum*.¹ They are rightly called “mystery,” since their meaning is very symbolic and they point to realities that are not readily apprehended. Their symbolic existence invites new interpretations of the ceremonies for new times and places; they are images, not theories, and so can be rethought without being fundamentally changed. Precisely how many ceremonies are to be called sacraments, what happens during each, and the appropriate methods for ministering them vary between Christian groups, but two are practiced nearly universally.

The first of these two is the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, or the Mass. It has been known by different names, but each refers to the ceremony that reflects on the meal that Jesus ate with his disciples the night before his arrest. The Lord’s Supper is extremely important in its own right, but it is to the other nearly universal sacrament that we turn.

Baptism is the Christian initiation ritual. Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore writes, “Christian baptism is the sacrament of initiation into life in Christ. It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and discipleship that lasts throughout one’s life. In

¹ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 280

baptism, a person is immersed in water, or water is poured or sprinkled upon him or her, in the triune name of God.” The New Testament uses several images to describe baptism, two of which are very important for this discussion. First, scripture describes baptism as a dying and rising with Christ. This image carries very heavy ethical significance; those who have joined Jesus in his death and resurrection will live very differently from those who have not. Second, baptism is an incorporation of the new Christian into the Christian community.² Thus, what exactly baptism means to Christians will depend on how they understand the nature of their Church and community.

One of the ongoing dialogues in Christian theology regards the question of whether infants ought to be baptized. When Christianity was first beginning, baptism was administered to new converts who professed faith in Jesus, since *all* Christians were new converts, but the question remained of what to do with their children. In some sense, their children were Christians as well, since they were part of the same communities as their parents. Thus, many Christians throughout history have argued that baptism ought to be administered at birth to children to properly join them to the community. Others have responded that the meaning of baptism is not properly preserved if it is administered to infants, for various reasons. In this paper, we will explore the return of believer’s baptism to mainstream Christian discussion after centuries during which infant baptism was the normal practice.

One major feature of the identity of the baptized Christian community is its relationship to the wider world, particularly to political entities. In 2014, we assume the separation of church and state, but the assumption was the opposite for more than a

² Migliore, *Faith*, 282-283.

millennium of Christian history. It was a little band of rebellious Protestants in Zurich, Switzerland, who first re-introduced the idea that the Christian community ought to be separate from the secular government. They believed that the Church ought to exist apart from the state, since it is a community of people who have made a personal commitment to follow the way of Jesus, and thus cannot include all the citizens of a particular place.

Thus, when the Anabaptists, or “re-baptizers” first began to baptize people upon their confession of Christian belief, the baptism was charged with political meaning. To re-baptize someone, or to submit to a re-baptism, was a protest against the existence of the state-church and was to declare oneself separated from it.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH, STATE, AND BAPTISM IN CLASSICAL CHRISTIANITY

Persecution against the early Christians was often intense, but sporadic. In the early expansion led by Paul the apostle, as reported in the Acts of the Apostles, the authorities are sympathetic, or at least neutral to the Christian movement.³ In the years immediately following Paul's life, the Roman Empire took little interest in Christianity,⁴ likely because the movement was still too small to attract the emperor's attention. During the second century, martyrdom was an immanent possibility for Christians, but as the year 200 approached, persecution slackened.⁵ There were a few sporadic persecutions from 195 to 212,⁶ but the "Great Persecution" under Diocletian⁷ would mark the end of serious Roman opposition to Christian advance, for dramatic reasons.

By 303, Diocletian had divided the empire administratively between the East and West. The Great Persecution occurred primarily in the East, where he ruled. Constantinus (in the West) was not so fierce, but it was nonetheless a dark time for the church.⁸ In 305, Diocletian retired from public life, and tensions between the two halves of the empire grew, finally coming to military blows at Milvian Bridge in 312. Here, the western

³ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 108-109.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 148

⁵ *Ibid.*, 180-184

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293-94

⁷ See *ibid.*, 456-460

⁸ D. MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009) 175-6.

emperor Constantine defeated Maxentius, and cleared his way to becoming the new Roman Emperor.⁹ Years later, Constantine would tell Eusebius, the historian of the church, of a remarkable vision he had before the battle. He saw the emblem of the Christian God (the cross and chi-rho) over the midday sun, and heard a voice say, “By this conquer.” He bore the emblem on his banners into battle, and won the throne of Rome.¹⁰ Constantine’s subsequent conversion to Christianity¹¹ was the birth of a new era in the church: Eusebius recounts it as a time of renewal, rebuilding, and the defeat of “the enemies of true religion.”¹²

Almost immediately, Constantine took an interest in church affairs. He had hoped that Christianity would help to unite the empire, but was disappointed to find that Christians were a diverse and divided group within their own ranks. He took up the practice of summoning councils to resolve disputes within the church, in an attempt to protect the unity of church and empire.¹³ The specific disputes and results of these councils are not important to the question at hand, but the fact that the emperor called them with the intent of unity is important. This was the beginning of a long-lasting and deep connection between the church and the empire.

The practice of infant baptism emerged very early in the history of the church. In the New Testament, only new believers were baptized, though this may have been

⁹ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 189.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. Translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: University Press, 1999) 81-82.

¹¹ Because of his belief that the Christian God had given him military success, Constantine’s motives for conversion are not beyond question.

¹² Eusebius, *The History of the Church*. Translated by G.A. Williamson (Oxford: University Press, 1965) 300, 304-306.

¹³ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 211-213.

because all those added to the Christian community were added by conversion.¹⁴

Polycarp was reported to have been martyred in the second century, at the age of eighty-six; in one of his responses to his accusers, he says that he has been God's servant for eighty-six years, possibly suggesting that he was baptized at birth.¹⁵ Whenever it first emerged, infant baptism was a regular practice in the Western Church by the career of the North African theologian Augustine in the early 400s, and quite likely earlier.¹⁶

The two questions of the meaning of baptism and the significance of church and state became related as the notion of the Christian community became more closely related to the communal identity of Western peoples. When Diocletian reorganized the empire (mentioned earlier), he removed the functional capital from Rome to four more strategically placed cities in the empire. This gave the Bishop of Rome (or pope) a chance to exercise power he had not yet been able to exercise. Constantine's many donations and new buildings in Rome for the church also helped to make Rome the center of Western Christianity, and make the pope its leader.¹⁷ In the following centuries, the imperial and papal powers were constantly in dialogue, sometimes working together, sometimes against one another. But whatever the relationship between pope and emperor, the two roles had been joined as allies, and the two identities of "Roman" and "Christian" were

¹⁴ There are, however, references in scripture to the baptism of entire households, which could have included infants (see Acts 16:15 and 1 Corinthians 1:16).

¹⁵ *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp* in *The Christianity Reader*, ed. M. Gerhart and F.E. Udoh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) 237-238.

¹⁶ Frend, *Rise*, 676-677. It was not, however, globally universal at this time (see Cyril of Jerusalem, "Christian Initiation" in *Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. P.C. Hodgson and R.H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985) 265-266.). The two theologians cited below, Tertullian and Augustine, disagreed on this issue, with Tertullian denouncing infant baptism, and Augustine "argu[ing] theologically as if it were a given" (M. Gerhart and F.E. Udoh, Introduction to Chapter 4 in *The Christianity Reader*, ed. M. Gerhart and F.E. Udoh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) 344.).

¹⁷ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 290-293.

no longer clearly separated. Possibly as early as the fourth century, baptism joined a person not only to the church, but also to the state.

Through the next several centuries, the relationship between the pope and secular power (if it can appropriately be called secular power) changed with time, but they were always intertwined. After the fall of the western Roman Empire, the Western Church was threatened with extinction, especially since many of the rising monarchies identified themselves with Arianism, a school of thought that the Church had condemned as heresy at the Council of Nicea.¹⁸ The Church remained influential by keeping powerful allies, until a new and significant shift in church-state relations occurred in 800. During the 700s, the popes developed a good relationship with the Franks, who had emerged as a powerful monarchy in Western Europe. MacCulloch writes, “On Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charles [the king of the Franks] as a Roman Emperor, in Rome itself.” The biggest problem for the acceptance of Charles’s coronation was the already-ruling Roman Emperor—or rather Empress—in Constantinople. Left with few options, Charlemagne (as history remembers him) began to negotiate their marriage. But the already-unpopular Irene had laid the final straw with this proposed marriage, and she was exiled. Soon, the former subjects of Irene would have little choice but to recognize Charlemagne as their ruler.¹⁹

This current situation of church-state relations is critical for our considerations of the emergence of believer’s baptism. With the acceptance of Charlemagne’s rule by the Byzantines (the eastern Roman Empire), an enormous portion of the world was united under a single monarch who had been given his power by the pope. This power was

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 319-320.

¹⁹ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 346-350.

granted to him in more than a symbolic sense, for it was Leo's daring coronation of Charlemagne that eventually made him the "Holy Roman Emperor." This is one of the fullest expressions of the ideal of "Christendom"—a Christian society, ruled by a Christian monarch, operating together with a united Christian Church—in the history of Christianity.

Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire were still in place when the Roman Catholic Church's²⁰ greatest theologian emerged. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is one of the most significant works of Western history. Nearly 800 years later, it is still very relevant to contemporary theological discourse, as is Thomas's²¹ other work. His was the dominant voice in Western Christianity in the centuries approaching the Reformation.

For Thomas, baptism joins a person to the people of God, and in Christendom, the people of God are not clearly distinct from European subjects of a particular monarch. Thomas regarded human governmental institutions as achievements of human society, and not simply ways to prevent human violence.²² The law does not just prevent evil, but functions to instill virtue in humans; instruction is sufficient for some, violence is necessary for others.²³ Human institutions are thus the ally of the church, and work closely in tandem with it. Thomas also wrote that baptism, like circumcision in the

²⁰ Strictly speaking, Augustine was Catholic and probably more historically significant than Thomas Aquinas, but one cannot speak of the *Roman* Catholic Church until 1054, when the churches of the West formally split with the churches of the East.

²¹ Thomas is conventionally addressed by his first name.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 4, trans. by the Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963) xxii.

²³ *Ibid.* 41-45, 101-103.

Hebrew Scriptures, is the sign that joins a person to the people of God.²⁴ In Thomas's world, the identity of the people of God and the subjects of a particular monarch were not clearly distinct. Thus, if Christianity and the state are closely entangled, baptism is indirectly related to citizenship, and such was the case in his theology.

For most of Christian history, baptism has been connected to citizenship by virtue of the relationship of the church to the state. The rite of Christian initiation has joined one to the "people of God," and to the Christian communal identity. In the West, that communal identity has been merged with political identity since the centuries following Constantine's conversion. "To be Christian" has not been clearly distinct from "To be Roman" or "To be a subject of Charlemagne." Baptism, by joining a person to the Christian community, could not have avoided becoming an emblem of citizenship. To be baptized was not only to be joined to the church; it was to become a citizen.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 157.

CHAPTER 3

THE REFORMATION IN ZURICH: CHURCH AND CONFEDERATION

In the city of Zurich, Switzerland, the classical situation would remain more-or-less in place, though somewhat detached from the Roman Catholic Church. Ulrich Zwingli was a major religious leader in the city, and his rejection of his papal pension in 1520 marked the early beginnings of Zurich's break with Rome.²⁵ Under Zwingli's leadership, Zurich would come to develop its own state-church. Zwingli's understanding of baptism developed accordingly. Though Zwingli had once been willing to abandon infant baptism, his understanding of baptism remained intertwined with his notions of the state-church, especially as he responded to the Anabaptist challenge.

The humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus had a great influence on many of the reformers. When he was young, his parents provided him with a Christian education and sent him to a monastery. Erasmus hated the monastic life, and managed to slip away by acquiring a position as a bishop's secretary and shortly moving on. He took an interest in Greek, through which he studied the church fathers and the New Testament. In 1516, he published an edition of it in Greek and Latin that would have a massive impact on the history of the church. The Vulgate, Jerome's translation of the New Testament into Latin, and the accompanying commentary had been woven into Christian thought for a

²⁵ W.P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 17.

millennium, and Erasmus challenged it on several points.²⁶ The particulars of his disagreement are not as important as the fact that he made the challenge; he was appealing to scripture *over against* tradition, which would become the anthem of reform.

Two other points of Erasmus's work had obvious influence on the situation in Zurich around the time of the birth of Anabaptism. First, he sought to purify Christianity. Erasmus had distaste for the rituals of the Catholic Church, and sought to remove unnecessary things, leaving only the pure religion of Jesus.²⁷ This is a theme that will emerge in the iconoclasm of September 1523 and especially in the council of the following month on the use of images and the mass. Second, Erasmus's dislike of the monastery found its way into his ideas about civil government. "What is the state but a great monastery?" he asked. For Erasmus, the monastery was unnecessary because the state functioned in a similar way: it enforced right living on its people through the exercise of law.²⁸ Zwingli's articulation of the relationship between church and state was similar to this: the magistrates not only preserved basic order, but also saw to it that people practiced righteousness.

Important though Erasmus was, it was Zwingli's own study of the New Testament that inspired him to pursue reform. Erasmus's greatest contribution to Zwingli's life was to inspire him to return to scripture for his source of doctrine. In the later disputations, Zwingli appealed not to church tradition or logic, but to scripture to make his arguments. He advanced his reforms via preaching, teaching, and public disputations with the assistance of the Zurich government, and attracted a good deal of young talent to his

²⁶ MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 594-597.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 599.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 600-601.

cause, including a young man named Conrad Grebel.²⁹

Zwingli's position as a reformer was secured during the Lenten fast of 1522. Several tired workers in Zurich broke the fast by eating sausage, since the price of fish had been raised by the Lenten demand. While Zwingli did not partake, he publicly approved of the actions of the workers, in an open defiance of church authority. Also in 1522, Grebel and others began to raise complaints about the monasteries.³⁰ The council did not immediately respond; they considered Grebel an agitator. This was not the last time the council would move too slowly for Grebel's taste. In August 1523, Zwingli began a series of revisions to the mass, and in September, some of the radicals performed some iconoclastic acts, that is, they destroyed religious images in Zurich churches. Thus, the reformation began fairly steadily in Zurich, though it would not remain that way for long.

Zwingli's vision for the city of Zurich was more shaped by the Old Testament than the New.³¹ The church and state were more than allies in his thought; they were two parts of the same creature.³² He employed the body-and-soul duality of humanity as an allegory. The government functions like the body, in the lower, subordinate role, but the

²⁹ W.R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 9.

³⁰ Monasteries were unpopular among the reformers because they were expensive and perceived as superfluous.

³¹ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 4.

³² Some have argued that this was a later development in Zwingli's thought. George Williams quotes Zwingli in a letter written in 1520, "Never will the world be a friend to Christ." Williams goes on to say that it was concern for keeping the peace in Zurich that led him to modify his stance (G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962], 89). As discussed below, Zwingli was more cautious than the radicals with regard to the speed and timing of reform, so this is very plausible (though Zwingli's lifelong patriotism presents a problem for the argument). But whatever Zwingli's ideas about the church and the government had been before 1522, during and after 1522, he was ardently in favor of the state-church, and expertly implemented it in accomplishing the changes he sought for the church in Zurich.

church could not exist without the state in the same way that the soul depends on the body. Laws ought to be taken from scripture, and Christians should govern, since, in W.P. Stephens's words, "[they] know God's law, and would be able to interpret laws in a Christian way."³³ In Zwinglian theory and practice, the church and state were inextricably connected.

Zwingli's understanding of baptism developed in the context of the state-church and in response to the Anabaptist challenge. Often (not always), the difference between Zwingli and the radicals was not found in theory, but rather in questions of feasibility. This will become most pronounced when we turn to the disputation of October 1523, but is also visible in the fast-breaking incident of 1522 and the iconoclasm earlier in 1523.³⁴ Zwingli, who had spent much of his life involved in the affairs of the council, had a greater awareness of the readiness of the people for change. This wariness made him more cautious than the radicals, who were generally very young and had fewer connections to the Zurich government.³⁵ Thus, while he agreed with the fast-breakers and the iconoclasts in theory, he did not join in their actions.³⁶ Zwingli's ideas about baptism *were* different in theory from the Anabaptists, but reflect the same careful concern.

Zwingli's ideas regarding baptism developed in response to the challenge provided by the radicals. Stephens writes, "Before the baptismal controversy Zwingli said

³³ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 129-131.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 85.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that Grebel and Zwingli were both members of important families of Zurich, but reacted to it in different ways. Zwingli seems to have embraced his birth (see Stephens's second chapter), while Grebel seems to have rebelled against it (Bender discusses Grebel's partying and brawling during his collegiate years).

³⁶ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 85.

little about baptism and in what he wrote the emphasis was on faith.”³⁷ He also cites baptism as an example of one area in which Zwingli’s theology was developed in response to a challenge.³⁸ It is not difficult to guess what that particular challenge was. Before the controversy, Zwingli was willing to wait to baptize; he taught that baptism strengthened faith, and since infants cannot have faith, it is ineffective to baptize them.³⁸ Later, however, Zwingli would diverge from the Anabaptists on these points in very important ways.

Primarily, Zwingli made the case that infant baptism was scriptural. He pointed to the baptism of households in 1 Corinthians 1 and Acts 16, and pointed to Jesus insistence that the disciples allow children to come to him, saying that to deny infants baptism was to deny their coming to Christ. He also answered several scriptural objections to infant baptism. The Anabaptists argued that the apostles would examine candidates for baptism, but Zwingli said they only sometimes did so. Responding to the objection that the apostles did not baptize infants, Zwingli wittily pointed out that the apostles also did not baptize anyone in Calcutta, but no one would object to baptizing people in Calcutta.³⁹ True to form, Zwingli carefully developed his position in line with scripture.

As he articulated his position, the individualistic elements evaporated from Zwingli’s writings on baptism, leaving a stronger emphasis on the notion of the people of God. Stephens writes, “He stated that in the Bible, baptism is the initiation both of those who have believed and of those who are going to believe.”⁴⁰ The Old Testament became much more important for Zwingli on the issue of baptism as he responded to the

³⁷ *Ibid.* 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 4.

³⁹ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 86-87.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 86

Radicals. In the Old Testament, one was joined to the people of God (then the nation of Israel) by the ceremony of circumcision, which was the symbol of the covenant God had made with Abraham, Israel's patriarch. In the mid-1520s, Zwingli often used circumcision in his writings as the precursor of baptism, and developed his understanding of covenant accordingly.⁴¹ Thus, Zwingli's understanding of baptism became more centered on his understanding of the communal nature of Christianity than on individual faith.

Thus, for Zwingli, infant baptism and the state-church were united in a single understanding of the nature of the people of God. In his covenantal thought, the government must take part in the life of the church to Christianize the population of a given place as a whole rather than part of the people as individuals. As circumcision joined one to the political, ethnic, and religious entity that was Old Testament Israel, baptism joined a person to the Zurich state-church, which was both political and religious.⁴² Baptism had held political meaning for the baptized for much of church history, and this was still true in sixteenth-century Zurich.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 86-88

⁴² In some sense, it was ethnic as well, but only by default.

CHAPTER 4

CONRAD GREBEL AND THE ZURICH RADICALS

Despite Zwingli's efforts to maintain a unified state-church in Zurich, division was on the horizon. In the 1520s, group of hotheaded young Zwinglians began to challenge the pace of Zwingli's reforms and the role of the city council in church affairs. Eventually, these young men called for a break of the church from the state, and shortly thereafter began refusing to have their children baptized. After the council ruled in Zwingli's favor on the issue of baptism in 1525, the radicals performed a set of believer's baptisms in direct defiance of the council's decision. For Conrad Grebel and his friends, believer's baptism emerged as a late development in their theological formation and was a consequence of their ideas regarding church and state.

Grebel's rowdy youth is fitting for someone whom history remembers as "radical." He was born into a wealthy and influential family in Zurich, but was never eager to follow in his father's footsteps. He began his education in Zurich, studied at the University of Basel, where he first encountered humanism, and continued at the University of Vienna. In Vienna, he met Vadian, who had a significant impact on him as a budding humanist. He later studied in Paris, but failed to complete a degree after being expelled following repeated brawls. He returned to Zurich, and for nine months, we know nothing of him, since none of his personal correspondence from that period has survived. At the point where Grebel's historical silence is broken, we find him a committed

Zwinglian.⁴³

By all indications, Grebel was a faithful Zwinglian until 1523. Personally, he and Zwingli were very close. It seems that it was during his early friendship with Zwingli that Grebel finally “settled down,” if one can ever describe him as “settled.” During the nine months of which we know nothing, Grebel had found a purpose in the Zurich reformation,⁴⁴ suggesting that he and Zwingli were quite close and agreed on many things. The reformers in Zurich also shared an admiration for Erasmus, who was more similar to Zwingli on the issue that would later divide the two, namely, the relationship of the church to the government.⁴⁵ As we will see shortly, Grebel and his friends were shocked when the split finally came; they saw Zwingli as a close ally, and felt a sense of betrayal at his decision at the 1523 disputation.⁴⁶ Which of them changed is uncertain, but until 1523, it seems that Grebel and Zwingli were very agreed.⁴⁷

Two other young men in Zwingli’s faction became important when the factions split in 1523. Felix Mantz was among the group who became interested in biblical languages under Erasmus’s influence, and showed some promise in their study. Zwingli wanted to appoint him an instructor in Hebrew in Zurich, but refrained because of his

⁴³ H.S. Bender, “Conrad Grebel, The Founder of Swiss Anabaptism,” *Church History* 7, no. 2 (1938): 166, doi: 10.2307/3160677.

⁴⁴ J.L. Ruth, *Conrad Grebel: Son of Zurich* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975) 62-63

⁴⁵ Estep, *Story*, 9.

⁴⁶ Bender, “Conrad Grebel,” 168.

⁴⁷ See note 31. Some scholars have argued that Zwingli was more like the radicals early in his career, but his concern for the unity of Switzerland forced him to take a more moderate stance (see Williams 89-90; on page 3 Stephens mentions that this was John Howard Yoder’s position). Others hold that Zwingli held a more consistent position over his career, which would imply that it was Grebel who changed.

“radical theological tendencies” (this was in September 1523, before the major split).⁴⁸

William Reublin was a rebellious preacher in nearby St. Albans. By 1522, he had been preaching against many Roman Catholic rituals and even the bishop himself to audiences as large as 4,000 people. In June of that year, he replaced a relic in a procession with a Bible, and his local support was insufficient to protect him from banishment. At the suggestion of a friend, he went to Zurich, where he became a preacher once again.⁴⁹

In 1522, when the citizens of Zurich broke the Lenten fast, it seems that the reformation there was still unified. While Zwingli did not join in the action, he approved of those who did. The iconoclasm of 1523 also suggests unity between Zwingli and the soon-to-be radicals. It was in council in October 1523 that the split began.

In that month, before the city council of Zurich, the reformers held a council concerning the use of images and the mass. Both were ruled unscriptural, in a seemingly unanimous decision. Zwingli, however, observed that the council members were not ready to make such radical changes immediately, and was willing to leave the timing of the decision’s implementation to the city fathers. This shocked the radicals, since Zwingli had long been teaching the sole authority of scripture on religious matters. Grebel, Manz, Reublin, and the other radicals wanted immediate action, complaining that the council would be rendered vain if it did not happen. Zwingli responded, “My lords [of the council] will decide whatever regulations are to be adopted in the future in regard to the mass.” Simon Stumpf replied for the radicals, “Master Ulrich, you do not have the right to place the decision...in the hands of my lords, for the decision has already been made:

⁴⁸ G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 92

⁴⁹ Williams, *Reformation*, 88.

the Spirit of God decides...if my lords adopt and decide on some other course that would be against the decision of God, I will ask Christ for his spirit, and I will preach and act against it.”⁵⁰

Thus, the initial division between Zwingli and the radical faction was the proper relationship of the church to the city council. Zwingli was willing to leave the mass in place if it meant keeping Zurich unified. The radicals considered Zwingli’s decision to be against the principle of scriptural authority. The radicals, particularly Grebel, felt betrayed: they believed that their leader had sacrificed the integrity of the word of God to protect his relationship with the city council. Bender writes, “To [Grebel], it seemed as though the word of God was being set aside by, and made subordinate to, the action of a political body.”⁵¹ For the radicals, this was unacceptable.

In the remainder of 1523 and the next year, the radicals emerged as a distinct faction. During this time, the group met for Bible study and fellowship led by Grebel and Mantz.⁵² At these meetings they would often celebrate the Lord’s Supper⁵³ in a manner consonant with the decisions of the October disputation.⁵⁴ The friendship between Grebel and Zwingli had evaporated by the fall of 1524; Zwingli condemned Grebel and his friends as “Satans going about as angels of light,” and the radicals responded by calling

⁵⁰ Williams, *Reformation*, 95.

⁵¹ Bender, “Conrad Grebel,” 167-168.

⁵² *Ibid.* 168.

⁵³ The Lord’s Supper, the mass, Eucharist and communion are all approximately equivalent names for the same sacrament. Usually, the names highlight differences in theory, but this is not always the case. Here, I use “Lord’s Supper” to emphasize that the particular theory behind the action was in line with the Zwinglian (and radical) interpretation of scripture rather than the Roman Catholic convention.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Reformation*, 96.

Zwingli and his allies “false shepherds.”⁵⁵ Most importantly, at these meetings and in their correspondence, the radicals began to develop their own distinctive theology.

First, they began to argue for a voluntary church that was separate from the wider world. Bender writes,

According to Zwingli’s own testimony, these men came to him repeatedly with the proposal that he set up a new kind of voluntary Christian church, one composed of true believers only, willing to live a life of true righteousness before God and man according to the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and in which a gospel discipline would be maintained. This new church would be freed from state control, although its members would endeavor to secure a true Christian membership on the city council so that the latter would support and not hinder the work of the church.⁵⁶

That the church ought to exist apart from the government and wider world would become a defining feature of Anabaptism. Whether Christians can hold government positions at all was not yet an issue for the radicals,⁵⁷ but they had begun to develop a unique ecclesiology.

Second, though executing believer’s baptism had not yet been discussed, the first refusals to have infants baptized occurred in 1524. The first of these refusals occurred in Reublin’s congregation; that year, he added infant baptism to the list of Catholic practices he had preached against, and by Easter, several families in his congregation had refused

⁵⁵ Bender, “Conrad Grebel,” 167.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Reformation*, 96.

to present their newborn children for baptism.⁵⁸ In September, Grebel wrote to Thomas Muntzer seeking support for his movement from outside Zurich.⁵⁹ In the letter, he set forth his understanding of baptism: it entails a personal commitment, the faith of the baptized, and death to sin. Thus, he condemned infant baptism as “a senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture.”⁶⁰ For Grebel, baptism joins one to the voluntary, separated community that the radicals had suggested to Zwingli.

The issue of baptism would eventually bring Zwingli and the radicals to another disputation, this time as opponents. In late 1524, the radicals began to call for a debate between their group and the Zwinglians over the issue of baptism, proclaiming that they were willing to hear scriptural argument against their case. Because of Zwingli’s talent at verbal debates, the radicals requested a written interchange, but were denied. The two factions would meet before the city council on January 10 and 17, 1525.⁶¹

Grebel and his friends approached this disputation at an enormous disadvantage. The members of the council were the primary audience, since they had the power to implement the decisions of the debate; this gave Zwingli one advantage, since he had long been involved with the council’s affairs. The council would also have been unlikely to come down in support of a faction that would greatly weaken their authority. Beyond this, there was a significant difference in talent between Zwingli and the radicals. The radicals included Grebel, who had failed to finish his academic education, Manz, who

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁵⁹ The radicals attempted to contact several people from outside the city during this time, but with negligible success (see Bender, “Conrad Grebel,” 169).

⁶⁰ Conrad Grebel, “From Letters to Thomas Muntzer by Conrad Grebel and Friends,” in *The Christianity Reader*, eds. Mary Gerhart and Fabian E. Udoh (Chicago: University Press, 2007), 524.

⁶¹ Williams, *Reformation*, 120.

was educated, but had never held an academic position, and Reublin and George Cajacob, who were nothing more than rebellious priests (Cajacob is more commonly remembered as Blaurock). These were the four leaders who would challenge the council's friend, the religious leader of Zurich, and the master of the disputation.⁶² Even a small victory seemed unlikely.

Though "each side claimed the victory," the council followed expectations and sided with Zwingli in decisions handed down on January 18 and 21. Some of the radicals were expelled from Zurich as foreigners, and Grebel and Manz were forbidden to continue holding their meetings.⁶³ The council also demanded the baptism of all unbaptized infants upon pain of exile. This brought the radicals to a final decision, especially since Grebel had a two-week-old daughter that had not been baptized. On January 19, between the two sets of decisions, Zwingli wrote to an old friend of Grebel's and his, "Grebel persists in his stand."⁶⁴

Anabaptism was born immediately following the second set of decisions, handed down on January 21. The radicals had been praying for divine guidance for months,⁶⁵ but had not yet discussed re-baptizing.⁶⁴ In a private meeting at the house of Felix Mantz, in a moment of inspiration, the group performed the first of the anabaptisms. Williams quotes the Hutterite *Chronicle's* record of Blaurock's reminiscences:

After the prayer, George Cajacob arose and asked Conrad to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down and with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since

⁶² *Ibid.*, 120-121.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁴ Bender, "Conrad Grebel," 172.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Reformation*, 122.

at that time there was no ordained minister to perform such work. After that was done the others similarly desired George to baptize them, which he also did upon their request.⁶⁶

The Anabaptists had been born in an act of civil disobedience.

From here, the council and the Anabaptists were enemies, but the Anabaptists continued to spread their message. Several other groups began re-baptizing those who had been baptized as infants, in an open rejection of the Zurich church and—if the latter was not clear already—the Roman Catholic Church.⁶⁶ Bender writes, “Fearing neither Zwingli nor the council, they went from house to house and into the towns and villages of the countryside teaching and preaching and urging men and women everywhere to join them in their new fellowship.” They continued despite persecution from the council, and met with considerable success, though few in numbers.⁶⁷

The future story of the Anabaptist movement is important in its own right, but is not the present concern. Grebel served a good deal of time in prison for the remainder of his career, but managed to publish a booklet laying out the group’s position on baptism (no copy survives, but Zwingli’s attempted refutation is accessible). Tragically, harsh conditions and repeated imprisonment took a toll on Grebel’s health, and he died in 1527, at the age of 29.⁶⁸ Mantz also experienced repeated imprisonment as he preached;⁶⁹ he was later martyred by drowning as the first of many Anabaptists to suffer this fate.⁷⁰

Blaurock’s future was brighter: he was so zealous in his preaching that he earned the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

⁶⁷ Bender, “Conrad Grebel,” 173-174.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Reformation*, 126-127.

⁷⁰ Estep, *Story*, 32.

nickname “the new Paul,” despite suffering repeated incarceration, often with Mantz and others.⁶⁹

Having thus taken a close look at the narrative, one can see that the practice of believer’s baptism was charged with political meaning upon its emergence. The first re-baptisms were performed in direct defiance of a decision handed down by the city council against those who refused to have their children baptized. The refusal to baptize infants emerged as the radicals developed the notion of a separated Christian community; thus, it was as they began to teach the separation of the church that they began refusing to join their children to the Zurich state-church. The notion of a voluntary Christian community emerged in their thought immediately following their split with Zwingli over an issue of the proper relationship of the church to the city council. Thus, here we have a series of events that reached its climax when Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock: Zwingli’s decision to allow the council to decide the timing of the abolishment of the mass led the radicals to develop their notions of a separated Christian community, which in turn led them to reject infant baptism, and this rejection crystallized when they baptized their little band again, in rejection of their first baptism. For them, it was no true church that was not apart from the state, and thus, they baptized. The emergence of believer’s baptism in 1525 is thus a very deeply political event.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND ECHOES

From chapter 1, it is apparent that baptism held political significance for the Christian community from very early in its existence. First, the connection has existed (and continues to exist) because of the nature of baptism as the Christian initiation ceremony. Part of the nature of any community is defined by how it relates to those broad human communities that we call “political.” The nature of initiation into any group is affected by the nature of the group itself. What it means to join something is obviously dependent on what it is that one joins. If a community has a political significance, joining it must also have political significance as an action. Second, the close connection of church and state that began with Constantine made this connection clear. If the Roman Empire is declared to be Christian, then baptism—that which joins one to the Christian community—must also join a person to the Roman Empire. To be “Roman” was to be “Christian.”

In Zurich, Zwingli’s reforms refreshed the existence of the state-church and adapted its function to the confederate government of Switzerland, leaving the meaning of baptism entangled with the meaning of citizenship. Zwingli developed the theory and practice of the co-working of church and council as he sought to create a Christian Switzerland. As discussed above, Zwingli’s writings on baptism shift from an early

emphasis on faith to a later emphasis on the people of God, to which baptism joined a person. In Zurich, the “people of God” were not clearly distinct from the citizens of the city, thus to be baptized still effectively made one a citizen.

The action of the Anabaptists, read in this context, is a rebellion against the state-church. Since they had all been baptized as infants, to baptize or receive baptism again was to reject the validity of the infant baptism that had made them citizens and members of the state-church. Recall also that the initiation of the events that led to the re-baptisms began with a controversy over the relationship of church and state, namely, whether it was appropriate to allow the city council to decide the timing of the removal of images from the church and the Mass. The baptisms themselves were acts of civil disobedience; when the council gave the radicals eight days to baptize all un-baptized children upon pain of banishment, they immediately followed by rejecting their own baptisms in this way. The story of the emergence of believer’s baptism is the story of the rejection of the state-church, *which then led* the Anabaptists to re-baptize.

We can also make this connection from within the theological developments of the Zurich radicals. The events that split the Zwinglians from the Anabaptists began when the Anabaptists effectively rejected the city council’s role in accomplishing what they believed was the work of God: the beginning was the Anabaptist rejection of the state-church. In the interim between the two disputations, the radicals carried the notion of separation one step further as they wrote to Zwingli with their proposals of a separated, voluntary Christian community. The baptisms, then, are the beginning of that community, since they were a rejection of the state-church. By following their convictions regarding the word of God *over against* the instruction of the Christian city council, the Anabaptists

became what they had theorized: they were separated from the state as a community of voluntary Christians.

Thus, read in historical context, the first believer's baptisms, executed in Zurich in 1525, were religious events that had political significance. They said to the state-church, "We are separate," and to all who would listen, "The church exists apart."

ECHOES: LOOKING FORWARD FROM 1525

In the decades following the Zurich disputations, Balthasar Hubmaier accomplished a great deal as an Anabaptist theologian. One scholar comments that the Anabaptists, generally, were "men of modest [intellectual] ability," but cites Hubmaier, among others, as an exception to this trend.⁷¹ He was not from Zurich, but played a part in the council of 1523; it was he who articulated the radicals' position.⁷² Hubmaier distinguished between the "world"—ruled by Satan—and the government, thus allowing him to consider church and government as separate, but not enemies. The government is the protector of the church, but does not enforce church discipline. In Hubmaier's thought, we have the existence of a non-coercive state religion. Kirk MacGregor presents Hubmaier as a pioneer of religious freedom. Ultimately, it was his notion of free choice that led him to both believer's baptism and the non-coerciveness of the state church.⁷³ Thus, for Hubmaier, the connection between baptism and politics is slightly different than for Grebel and the Zurich radicals, but it is still present in many of the same ways.

⁷¹ C. Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 314.

⁷² Williams, *Reformation*, 90

⁷³ K.R. MacGregor, "Hubmaier's Death and the Threat of a Free State Church," *Church History and Religious Culture* 91.3-4 (2011): 326-330, doi: 10.1163/187124111X609360.

Another contemporary of Grebel, Menno Simons, was more influential than Hubmaier for the future of Anabaptism. It is for Simons that the Mennonites are named. Simons's articulation of "the ban"—the state of the world as separated from the church—would become the most recognized feature of Mennonite communities. His development of separation showed no discrimination for even the closest of relationships: even a husband ought to shun a wife who does not believe. Simons does maintain limitations on what the ban entails: though one should not do business with someone who is under it, one should still show them love and mercy.⁷⁴ Thus, the Mennonite communities were (and are), in many ways, the full outworking of the radical ideal of a separated community of voluntarily committed Christians under the discipline of the church.

Finally, one can hear loud echoes of the Zurich division in John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. Yoder's principal argument in the book is that Jesus *did* have a significant social and political message rather than simply an individual and spiritual one: "Theologians have long been asking how Jerusalem can relate to Athens; here is the claim that Bethlehem has something to say about Rome."⁷⁵ Yoder argues against the tendency in his contemporary scholarship to say that Jesus did not give his disciples a social ethic, leaving them to develop one of their own in subsequent generations.⁷⁶ He criticizes the tradition that would have people choose between prophet and institution, between political and sectarian, and between the catastrophic kingdom and the inner

⁷⁴ Simons, Menno, "Questions and Answers on the Ban," *The Christianity Reader*, eds. Mary Gerhart and Fabian E. Udoh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 527-8.

⁷⁵ J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

kingdom.⁷⁷ Such divisions are reminiscent of Zwingli's distinction between divine and human righteousness, and the argument of *The Politics of Jesus* is highly similar to the developments of the radicals. Zwingli argued that Jesus was not presenting human righteousness, which was another way to formulate Jesus's lack of a social ethic. Grebel might have echoed Yoder's response in saying, "Jesus has something to say."

The events that occurred in Zurich in the 1520s, though they occurred among a radical minority, had far-reaching historical impact. The Anabaptists had a huge influence on several major Western Christian groups, and the discussion in which they found themselves continues today. When Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock, he initiated a discussion that has not yet ended: that of how the church ought to relate to the world around it.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 106-114.

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