

**To what extent
did the mainstream Reformers
succeed in their
avowed aim of restoring
New Testament Christianity?**

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2002

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Introduction.

The cry of *Sola Scriptura*¹ in C16th Europe solidified the political, social and religious discontent into Reformation. In this essay I will evaluate the extent that the mainstream Reformers succeeded in their avowed aim of restoring New Testament Christianity. I will examine the background and circumstances leading up to the Reformation as well as investigating the mainstream Reformers’ view of N.T. Christianity. Of all the Reformers, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin are perhaps the most renowned and I shall give a brief synopsis of their lives and examine the part each played in the Reformation.

At the same time as the mainstream Reformation was evolving, another group of people emerged - the Anabaptists. These were more radical than the Reformers and were not content to just “rock the boat” of the religious and political status-quo – they wanted to sink it! So determined were they to completely restore

¹ Latin for “Only Scripture” or “Scripture alone”

Christianity to their understanding of N.T. values and practices that thousands died rather than compromise their convictions. Until recently, most historians have only recorded the Anabaptists as radical, heretical fanatics instead of devout followers of Jesus Christ. Although historically, some extreme libertine groups have been associated with them, generally speaking, the Anabaptists were hard-working, trustworthy citizens. I will analyse the role the Anabaptists took in taking the Reformation even further than the mainstream Reformers wanted and arguably more in a N.T. direction. Every Christian group develops their own tradition, which soon moulds their view of Christianity. The extent of Scripture's dominance over tradition will determine how close that group stays true to N.T. Christianity.

The background to the Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation was unique to Western European Christianity leaving Eastern Christianity relatively untouched. Its main strongholds were the areas of academia, where the newly invented printing-press was able to influence people directly. By publishing literature, especially the Bible, relatively cheaply and in the vernacular, “the effect of the Reformation [spread] quickly.”²

Protestants sought to change things by using the Bible as the primary authority for doctrine and the early Christian church as an institutional model. In the process, protestants rejected papal authority and [with it] much of the traditional beliefs and practices of the established church.³

² Dickens, A.G., *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1966, p.51.

³ Greengrass, Mark, “The Protestant Reformation: Religious Change and the People of Sixteenth-Century Europe”, University of Sheffield, 1997,

Although religion was at the heart of the Reformation, it encompassed the whole of society. Beard even takes the view that “it was not “primarily a theological... movement at all [but] it was part of a general awakening of the human intellect”.⁴

From the C13th the Church had had a “lively sense of the need of reformation”⁵ and by the close of the C14th there were two rival Popes. Although they were officially deposed and replaced by a third Pope, there was no unity. At a general Council at Constance in 1414, the three Popes were summonsed and they agreed to “unite the church under one acknowledged Pope; to reform it in its head and... members; to extirpate all heretical and erroneous doctrines.”⁶

Meanwhile in England, John Wycliffe was attacking the abuses of the Church leaders and their doctrines, especially the Mass. He based his views on the absolute authority of the Bible, arguing “every man had the right to examine the Bible for himself.”⁷ Richard II’s wife, Anne, was the daughter of Charles IV of Bohemia and she took a personal interest in Wycliffe’s teaching “making herself the channel of communication between Oxford and Prague.”⁸ In Prague, John Huss was introduced to Wycliffe’s teaching and soon attracted the support of royalty, churchmen and the common people. However, the Council of Constance in 1415, condemned Huss to death for heresy⁹ but his followers remained faithful and a hundred years

<http://www.tasc.ac.uk/histcourse/reformat>, (10/09/02).

⁴ Beard, C., *Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, London, Constable and Co. Ltd., 1927, p.2.

⁵ Ibid p.1.

⁶ Ibid p.10.

⁷ Hanks, G., *70 Great Christians Changing the World*, Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 1996, p.102.

⁸ Beard, C., op. cit. p.28.

⁹ Allen, David, *Unfailing Streams*, Tonbridge, Sovereign Word, 1994, p.53.

later Luther “took up the baton”, openly supporting his predecessor’s quest for truth:

God has also often awakened pious learned men, who revealed his Word, and gave them courage openly to reprove the false doctrines and abuses that had crept into the church, as John Huss, and others.¹⁰

The Catholic Encyclopaedia acknowledges the support given to the Reformation from Humanists such as Erasmus.¹¹ Born in Holland in 1466, Erasmus edited and corrected the Greek text of the N.T. and made a new Latin translation¹² but was more interested in social change than any real spiritual reform. He was held in “high repute throughout Europe and was regarded as an oracle by princes and scholars.”¹³ Whilst his satires of the Church provoked a lot of controversy, he inspired thousands of Europeans to read and study, especially the Greek Classics and Patristic writings. By encouraging people to think for themselves, they less easily accepted the control and superstition of the established Church. Chadwick describes Erasmus as “the person who did most to make educated Europe think that things must change.”¹⁴ Although the epigram “Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it”¹⁵ links these two men, Luther dismissed Erasmus as “the vilest miscreant that ever disgraced the earth”¹⁶ and also opposed his humanism:

¹⁰ Luther, Martin, *Table Talk*, The Ages Digital Library, Albany OR, Version 1.0, 1997, no.222.

¹¹ “Catholic Encyclopedia”, <http://www.newadvent.org>. *Causes of the Reformation*, Vol. VII, (12/09/02).

¹² Chadwick, Owen, *A History of Christianity*, London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1995, p.200.

¹³ “Catholic Encyclopedia”, op. cit, *Erasmus*, Vol. V, (10/09/02).

¹⁴ Ibid p.198.

¹⁵ Chadwick, op. cit. p.202.

¹⁶ Luther, op. cit. no.671.

Erasmus is very pitiful with his prefaces, though he tries to smooth them over; he appears to see no difference between Jesus Christ our Savior, and the wise pagan legislator Solon. He sneers at St. Paul and St. John; and ventures to say, that the Epistle to the Romans, whatever it might have been at a former period, is not applicable to the present state of things.¹⁷

The catalyst for the Reformation came in 1514, when Pope Leo X permitted the new Archbishop of Mainz to recoup his expenses by selling indulgences.¹⁸

Albert of Brandenburg (Hohenzollern) Germany (1490 -1545) became bishop of Magdeburg in 1513 and Archbishop of Mainz in 1514. In doing so, Albert unknowingly laid the groundwork for the Reformation. Albert at the time was only 24 years of age, way below the prescribed age for a bishop. A papal dispensation was required, along with a large payment, to acquire the high ecclesiastical offices. (This practice of selling a church office is called simony, and originates from Acts 8:18-24.) Needing 24,000 ducats to pay Pope Leo X in exchange for the title of Archbishop of Mainz, Albert borrowed the money from a south German banking house (The Fuggers), and then set about to pay back the loan. To raise the necessary funds, Archbishop Albert promoted the sale of indulgences for the rebuilding of St. Peter's in Rome. Half the collected funds went to Rome for the building of St. Peter's and half went into Albert's pocket. Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk employed by Albert, sold these indulgences in Germany, prompting Martin Luther to write his disputation in 95 theses which he posted to the door of Wittenberg Castle Church (a copy of which he also sent to

¹⁷ Ibid no.672.

¹⁸ *Indulgence* is the Catholic doctrine of “a remission of the temporal punishment due to sin.” “Catholic Encyclopedia”, op. cit. *Indulgences*, Vol. VII, (18/10/02).

Archbishop Albert), on the 31st of October 1517, thus sparking the Reformation.¹⁹

By preaching on the horrors of Hell and the fate of those in purgatory, the people would then be offered the chance to “buy themselves out of so much time in the fires of purgatory”²⁰. A verse circulated at the time encapsulated the trust placed in indulgences: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul into heaven springs.”²¹ Although the Church had made some changes, which Parker describes as “a few bones [that] were tossed to the dogs to stop them barking,”²² they were insufficient. On October 31st 1517, Luther wrote his now famous ‘Ninety-Five Theses’ in criticism of indulgences, and nailed them to the Church door in Wittenberg. Others had spoken out against indulgences before, but Luther's actions on this occasion proved to be the spark that set the Reformation alight.

The mainstream Reformers.

Luther.

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony in 1483.²³ His father was influential, being a town councillor and “part owner of six mine-shafts and two foundries.”²⁴ After studying at Erfurt University, Luther entered the order of Austin Friars and in 1508 was appointed professor at Wittenberg.²⁵ Here, Luther appeared to all to be industrious and successful but “inwardly he was in turmoil”.²⁶ He learnt Greek so he could read the N.T.

¹⁹ www.aloha.net/~mikesch/instruc.htm

²⁰ Elton, G.R., *Reformation Europe 1517-1559*, London, Collins, 1967, p.19.

²¹ Allen, op. cit. p.55.

²² Parker, T.H.L., *Portrait of Calvin*, London, SCM Press, 1960, p.11.

²³ Elton, op. cit. p.15.

²⁴ Hanks, op. cit. p.105.

²⁵ Elton, op. cit. p.15.

²⁶ Hanks, op. cit. p.105.

in its original language and went on a pilgrimage to Rome but found no peace for his soul. In searching the Patristic writings together with the Bible, Luther began to understand in a new light Romans 1:17: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” The righteousness of God meant, “not God’s anger at sin but His willingness to make the sinner just by the power of His love, bestowed freely on the true believer”.²⁷

When Luther nailed his theses to the Church door, they were, “without his foreknowledge or consent translated, printed and circulated throughout the Empire.”²⁸ A copy was dispatched to Rome for examination, and Luther was denounced as a heretic. At the [kidd6209.htm - title](#) Diet²⁹ of Worms in 1521, Luther was “banned from the Empire and declared an outlaw, wanted dead or alive, permitting anyone to kill him without threat of prosecution.”³⁰ Luther became a prolific writer, translating the complete Bible into German, as well as producing such classics as ‘Table Talk’ before he died in 1546 at the age of 63. Wesley succinctly summarised Luther’s life:

Wed. 19.July. I finished the translation of “Martin Luther’s Life.” Doubtless he was a man highly favored of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand. But O! what pity that he had no faithful friend! None that would, at all hazards, rebuke him plainly and sharply, for

²⁷ Elton, op. cit. p.16.

²⁸ Dixon, Scott C., “The Theologians' Reformation: Martin Luther”, Queen's University, Belfast, 1997, <http://www.tasc.ac.uk/histcourse/reformat/theologo>, (12/09/02).

²⁹ A Diet was a “sort of parliament of princes and bishops presided over by the Holy Roman Emperor.” Allen, op. cit. p.56.

³⁰ “Luther at Diet of Worms”, <http://www.luther.de>, ©KDG Wittenburg, 1997, (11/10/02).

his rough, untraceable spirit, and bitter zeal for opinions, so greatly obstructive of the work of God!³¹

Zwingli.

Ulrich Zwingli was born in Wildhaus, Switzerland in 1484. He came from a prominent middle-class family and studied humanism at Basle, Berne and Vienna, returning to Basle to study Theology.³² He acted as chaplain to the Swiss Armies in Italy and in 1518 was appointed as preacher to Zürich Cathedral.³³ Zwingli went much further than Luther's attack of the common abuses of the Church by publicly denouncing the Mass as well. By 1525 he had reformed the Church in Zurich by introducing vernacular services and abolishing the Mass.³⁴ Although Zwingli had earlier condemned war, he joined the Zürich troops as an armed soldier against the Catholics and was killed in battle in 1531.³⁵

Calvin.

Born in France in 1509, John Calvin was exceptionally brilliant with a very logical mind. Initially, he intended to be a priest, but he entered the field of law, studying at different universities, including Paris and Orleans. In about 1533 Calvin was converted, recalling later: "One thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see."³⁶ Unlike Luther and Zwingli, Calvin "was never ordained in the Catholic Church."³⁷ Although he fled France to escape persecution, when Calvin published his 'Institutes of Religion' in 1536, he prefaced it with a dedication

³¹ Wesley, J., *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd Edition, VOLUME II, The Ages Digital Library, Albany OR, Version 1.0, 1997.

³² "Catholic Encyclopedia", op. cit. *Zwingli*, Vol. XV, (12/09/02).

³³ Elton, op. cit. p.66.

³⁴ Ibid p.67.

³⁵ "Catholic Encyclopedia", op. cit. *Zwingli*.

³⁶ Parker, T.H.L., *Portrait of Calvin*, London, SCM Press, 1960, p.19.

³⁷ "Catholic Encyclopedia", op. cit. *Calvin*, Vol. III, (12/09/02).

to Francis, king of France.³⁸ Stickelberger comments that the “outlines (of) the faith for which the friends died, should be preceded by a letter to their hangman King Francis. This preface would make the *Institutes* a glowing *apology*.” (Author’s emphasis)³⁹ Calvin went to Geneva as professor of theology but was expelled in 1538, returning in 1541 until his death in 1564. There he set up a “theocratic regime through a series of Ordinances.”⁴⁰ Every citizen of Geneva had to subscribe to the confession of faith that had been adopted by the city council. When the Spanish physician, Servitus, came to Geneva, denying the Trinity and divinity of Christ, he was “arrested and sentenced to be burnt at the stake.”⁴¹ Calvin also helped revise the Anglican ‘Book of Common Prayer’.⁴²

The mainstream Reformer’s view of New Testament Christianity.

Although Luther’s ‘Ninety Five Theses’ in 1517 is regarded as the official starting date of the Reformation, it was two years later, in 1519, when he publicly declared that “the pope and even (the) General Councils of the Church could err. Scripture was the only authority.”⁴³ Within three years of his attack on indulgences, Luther had become a spiritual and political leader. With the support of Frederick of Saxony,⁴⁴ Luther:

[proclaimed the] doctrine of ‘justification by faith alone’,
rejected all supernatural remedies (especially the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Stickelberger, E., (Trans. Gelzer, D.G.), *John Calvin*, Cambridge, James Clarke and Co., 1977, p.36.

⁴⁰ Englander, D., Norman, D., O’Day, R., Owens, W.R. (Ed.), *Culture and Belief in Europe 1450 – 1600*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p.196.

⁴¹ Hanks, op. cit. p.118.

⁴² “Catholic Encyclopedia”, op. cit. *Calvin*.

⁴³ Elton, op. cit. p.20.

⁴⁴ Elton, op. cit. p.22.

sacraments and the Mass), denied the meritoriousness of good works (thus condemning monastic vows and Christian asceticism in general), and finally rejected the institution of a genuine hierarchical priesthood (especially the papacy) in the Church.⁴⁵

In parallel with Luther in Wittenberg, Zwingli was reforming Zürich and by 1523, it “became the first Protestant state outside of Germany.”⁴⁶ Zwingli’s theology was much simpler than Luther’s: “if the Old or New Testament did not say something explicitly and literally, then no Christian should believe or practice it.”⁴⁷

However, it was ‘Communion’ that was at the heart of the Reformation and where the real division came. All the Reformers were agreed in rejecting the doctrine of ‘Mass’ because it re-enacted Christ’s single sacrifice. They also rejected the Catholic concept of ‘transubstantiation’ as “an unscriptural piece of priestly magic.”⁴⁸ Transubstantiation is the belief that:

the 'substance' (the reality within) the bread and the wine was 'transformed' into the substance of the body and blood of Christ (*Real Presence*) leaving only the 'accidents' (or superficial properties - what you could see, touch or taste) unchanged.⁴⁹

Luther taught ‘consubstantiation’, where “our Lord is really present, but without a change in the substance of the emblems.”⁵⁰ Zwingli, however, went much further and saw Communion as “only symbolic and the partaking of the

⁴⁵ “Catholic Encyclopedia”, op. cit. *Causes of the Reformation*, Vol. VII, (12/09/02).

⁴⁶ Hooker, Richard, “Zwingli”, <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/REFORM>, (06/09/02).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Elton, op. cit. p.71.

⁴⁹ Greengrass, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Hammond, T.C., (Ed. and revised Wright, D.), *In Understanding Be Men*, Leicester, I.V.P., 1968, p.175.

emblems a memorial only.”⁵¹ In 1529, Luther and Zwingli came together to discuss their differences but to no avail.⁵² Calvin, who took the middle ground, taught that although there is no ‘Real Presence’ and the substance of the emblems is unchanged, there is “a ‘spiritual reception’ of Christ by faith”⁵³ in the act of Communion.

The Anabaptists.

The Reformation was not pre-planned with a strategy and purpose in view. Rather it evolved because of frustrations with the religious, political and social constraints of the time. What started with an objection to the practice of indulgences, became a fully-fledged ‘Freedom Movement’, with the belief in the importance of Scripture and the doctrine of ‘Justification by Faith Alone’, as core values. When Zwingli, let the town council have the final say on the disposition of the Mass and the use of images, rather than Scripture, some objected. They felt that Zwingli had “abandoned his avowed position of no compromise where the Word of God had spoken.”⁵⁴

With their appetite for change whetted, this group in Zürich was determined to restore the church to N.T. principles. The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren records their actions:

After the prayer, Georg Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptize him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the truth. With this request he knelt down, and Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no appointed servant of the Word. Then the others turned to Georg in their turn, asking him to baptize them, which he did.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.175.

⁵² Elton, op. cit. p.74.

⁵³ Hammond, op. cit. p.176.

⁵⁴ Estep, William R., *The Anabaptist Story*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1963, p.13.

And so, in great fear of God, together they surrendered themselves to the Lord. They confirmed one another for the service of the Gospel and began to teach the faith and to keep it. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways.⁵⁵

This group was nicknamed ‘Anabaptists’ meaning ‘rebaptizer’, though the label was never used by the Anabaptists themselves and was often vigorously objected to by them because “of the opprobrium and criminal character attached to the name. [Since] Justinian's time (A.D. 529) rebaptism [was] one of the two heresies penalized by death.”⁵⁶

Whilst the Reformers and Anabaptists both intended to restore N.T. Christianity they differed over when the Church had fallen. The Reformers dated the Church errors to the early C7th and wanted to reform the abuses of power rather than the church structure. The Anabaptists perceived the fall of the church at A.D.313 with Constantine’s ‘Edict of Milan’.

Because of the union of church and state and the developed rite of infant baptism, the church was flooded with hordes of nominal Christians and unregenerate peoples.⁵⁷

In their attempt to restore N.T. Christianity, the Anabaptists tried to remove the historic perversions that came from the union of church and state. Believers’ baptism was the tool that would remove the unregenerate membership from the church and it became the organizing principle around which the Anabaptists sought to restore the N.T. Christianity.

⁵⁵ “*The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*”, Vol. 1, pp. 41-47, as cited by “1517-1525: The Beginnings of Anabaptism”, <http://www.bibleviews.com/History.html>, (06/09/02).

⁵⁶ “Mennonite Encyclopedia”, <http://www.anabaptists.org/history>, *Anabaptist*, (10/09/02).

⁵⁷ Nelson, op. cit.

Although there were “numerous variations within (the Anabaptist) body”⁵⁸ accounting for the differences in doctrine, Estep makes the point that the Anabaptists have been misunderstood because of “confusion in the terms Anabaptists, inspirationists, rationalists, and libertines.”⁵⁹ Although the ‘Peasants Revolt’ in 1525 and the Münster debacle in 1534, have overshadowed Anabaptists they were not representative of them. The ‘Peasants Revolt’, which was suppressed with Luther’s support, amid much bloodshed, was led by Thomas Müntzer who “never practiced nor taught rebaptism, and had no connection with the true Anabaptist movement”⁶⁰ Whilst Grebel, one of the founding members of the Anabaptists, never met Müntzer, he did correspond with him in 1524,⁶¹ over a “restoration church after the primitive N.T. church model.”⁶² At Münster, totally out of character with the majority of Anabaptists, Jan of Leyden attempted to set up the kingdom of God by force. Using the O.T. to validate violence, polygamy and theocracy, it became the scene of great atrocities and “left the name of Anabaptist in odious repute.”⁶³ Estep notes that too much has been said of Münster: “it belongs on the fringe of Anabaptist life which was completely divorced from the evangelical biblical heart of the movement.”⁶⁴

All the Anabaptists were persecuted as heretics by both Catholics and Reformers. Bax cites at least a thousand Anabaptists slain by the Catholics in the Tyrol between 1525

⁵⁸ Bax, Belfort, *The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptists*, London, Swan, Sonnenschein and Co. Ltd., 1903 (Reprinted New York, August M. Kelly, 1970), p.32.

⁵⁹ Ibid p.1.

⁶⁰ “Mennonite Encyclopedia”, op. cit. *Anabaptist*.

⁶¹ Estep, op. cit. p.191.

⁶² Nelson, “*A Believer’s Church Theology*”, ?, House Church Central, 1996, as cited by “The Anabaptists Story”, www.hccentral.com/nelson1, (27/10/20).

⁶³ Estep, op. cit. p.1.

⁶⁴ Ibid footnote 4, p.5.

and 1530⁶⁵ and they fared little better under the Reformers:

Of a certain decree which those of Zürich published against the Anabaptists A.D.1525. At this time not only the papists, but also the Zwinglians or so-called Reformed in the city of Zürich (sic) laid their hands on the innocent and defenseless flock of Christ; yet not, as far as we can learn, punishing them with death, or depriving them of life by the executioner, but confining them under severe imprisonment, until ultimately, as may be inferred, death followed. ⁶⁶

Even today, some writers still discard the Anabaptists as heretical, linking them with non-Christian cults:

Very demonstrably, their modern stepchildren comprise various contemporary ecclesiastic revolutionaries. Such include the Christadelphians, the Mormons, the Seventh-day Adventists, the Jehovah witnesses... and the left-wing liberationists... For the Anabaptists actually represent re-emergent variants of neo-paganized sub-christian early-mediaeval and mid-mediaeval heresies.⁶⁷

Although labelled as heretics by their enemies, the Anabaptists were mostly orthodox in their beliefs. They accepted “the teaching of the Apostle’s Creed, the trinitarian concept of God, the incarnation, the atoning work of Christ and the authority of Scriptures.”⁶⁸

The Anabaptists have been described as a “church of radical

⁶⁵ Bax, op. cit. p.71.

⁶⁶ Braght, Thieleman J., “*Martyrs Mirror*”, 1660, (Trans. Sohm, Joseph, 1886), <http://homecomers.org/mirror>, (12/10/02), p.414.

⁶⁷ Lee, F. N., “The Anabaptists and their Stepchildren”, <http://www.reformed.org/sacramentology/lee>, (07/09/02).

⁶⁸ Estep, op. cit. p.131.

Bible readers”⁶⁹ and “were distinguished by an unusual passion for it.”⁷⁰ However, unlike the other Reformers, they had few academics among their people. Nelson explains that:

most of the Anabaptists leadership had been killed by 1530... The movement continued but the leadership now fell to those who were without the same commitments, biblical training and skills.⁷¹

With their emphasis on the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit on the Scriptures rather than the study of Greek, Latin and scholarly works, the Anabaptists felt that the “Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* took the place of the basic principle *solus Christus*.”⁷² Denck, a prominent Anabaptist, “feared bibliolatry... urging his followers and opponents to press beyond the written words to the living Word.”⁷³ Whilst the Anabaptists agreed with the other Reformers that the whole Bible was God's infallible and holy Word, they differed over the use of the N.T., emphasising that the O.T. needed to be “interpreted in the light of the N.T. and of the new covenant.”⁷⁴

In contrast, Frieson explains the other contemporary views of Scriptures:

The Catholic Church had the power to supersede, indeed even to change Christ's explicit commands; Luther argued that as long as something was not explicitly forbidden in the Bible, it was permissible.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Frieson, Abraham, *Erasmus, the Early Anabaptists and the Great Commission*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1998, p.38.

⁷⁰ Murray, S., *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, Kitchener, Ontario, Pandora Press, 2000, p.15.

⁷¹ Nelson, op. cit.

⁷² Murray, op. cit. p.20.

⁷³ Ibid p.150.

⁷⁴ Estep, op. cit. Ibid p.102.

⁷⁵ Frieson, op. cit. p.13.

Whilst the Anabaptists produced no creeds or “authoritative doctrinal statements”,⁷⁶ they did produce several confessions, including the ‘Schleitheim Confession’, which became a kind of ‘church manual’ for the Anabaptists, strictly following N.T. teaching and not traditions of the Church. Drawn up by Michael Sattler and adopted in 1527, it contains these seven articles: “Baptism; Ban; Breaking of Bread; Separation; Pastors; Sword; Oath.”⁷⁷

‘Baptism’ was restricted to Believers and separated them from the Reformers who continued to baptise children. The ‘Ban’ was their method of dealing with members who became unfaithful in their Christian walk in accordance with Matthew 18. ‘Breaking of Bread’ was reserved for baptized believers. ‘Separation’ meant exclusion from those living in contradiction to Scripture. ‘Pastors in the Church’ set forth Biblical standards for Pastors; The ‘Sword’ prohibited physical violence for Christians, whose weapons were ‘spiritual’. ‘Oaths’ - Believers were not to swear oaths but to let their “yes be yes,” and “no be no” according to Matthew 5:34-37.⁷⁸

Oppressive persecution, together with the strict interpretation of their ethics, prevented the Anabaptists from asserting major political influence in Europe. Although the Reformers were bringing much needed change to religion, the Anabaptists’ frustration with the lack of real reform can be seen in this statement:

These two, Luther and Zwingli, exposed all the deception and villainy of the pope and brought it to the light of day as if they would strike everything to the ground with thunderbolts. But they put nothing better in

⁷⁶ Ibid p.48.

⁷⁷ Estep, op. cit. p41.

⁷⁸ “Mennonite Encyclopedia”, op. cit. *Schleitheim Confession*.

its place. As soon as they began to cling to worldly power and put their trust in human help, they were just as bad - like someone mending an old kettle and only making a bigger hole. They left behind a shameless people, whom they had taught to sin.⁷⁹

Conclusion.

The Reformers, especially Luther, made great strides towards restoring N.T. Christianity but fell far short in reaching their intentions. Probably their inability to separate Church from State was the major factor, especially when, as seen in Zürich and Geneva, the State enforced the new Church's doctrines. Although both Luther and Zwingli, had argued for principles and practices on the basis of biblical teaching, they later refused to follow through as they realised the costly implications. This led the Anabaptists to derisively call them "partial reformers."⁸⁰ Grebel wrote, "around here there are not even twenty who believe the Word of God. They only believe humans – Zwingli, Leo and others."⁸¹ Murray comments that the Anabaptists believed that "on many more issues than the Reformers admitted, Scripture was easy to understand – though very costly to obey."⁸²

However we must not underestimate the achievements the Reformers did make. The institutional fabric of the Catholic Church was demolished relatively quickly, religious images were removed, traditional rituals abandoned, the church year refashioned. Nevertheless, the deeper changes in consciousness took much longer. So, while it was the Reformers who began to restore N.T. Christianity, it was, I believe, the Anabaptists, who,

⁷⁹ "The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren", op. cit. Vol. 1, pp. 41-47.

⁸⁰ Nelson, op. cit.

⁸¹ Murray, op. cit. p.48.

⁸² Ibid p.49.

amidst great persecution and many failings, actually achieved a closer N.T. Christianity. “Their theme was that the church was for believers and for believers only... Christianity is a way of living not a status.”⁸³

Though the Anabaptists’ initial influence was limited, today their descendants who practice ‘Believers Baptism’ are vast. In the year 2000, Pentecostals and Charismatics alone, were estimated to be 523,767,000 people throughout the world.⁸⁴

The Daily Telegraph’s description of the pattern for events in the first years of Christianity as: “preaching, miraculous healing, arguments with the religious establishment, imprisonment and sooner or later martyrdom,”⁸⁵ aptly fit the Anabaptists and we should see them as “stepchildren of the Reformers. They owed much to them, but they were not simply radicalizers of Reformation ideas.”⁸⁶

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⁸³ Nelson, op. cit.

⁸⁴ Burgess, Stanley M. (ed.), “Global Statistics”, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2002, p.287.

⁸⁵ Howse, Christopher, (Ed.), “AD 2000 years of Christianity”, *The Daily Telegraph*, Part I, 1-400, (1999), p.7.

⁸⁶ Murray, op. cit. p.28.

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