

## Introduction

*Abraham Friesen, PhD*  
*Experience: Professor Emeritus of History,*  
*University of California,*  
*Santa Barbara*



This is lecture 1. It is useful to begin any series of lectures with an overview, and so we shall introduce the following twenty-four lectures on the Radical Reformation with an outline and introduction to the entire series.

In the course of the lectures, we proceed topically but also chronologically. Before we begin, however, we need to say a few words about the nature of the field of study itself. When Luther inadvertently inaugurated the Reformation on October 31, 1517, that is, when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences on the castle church door in Wittenberg, he conjured up a movement of opposition to the Catholic Church that very quickly got out of control. The Catholic Church reacted against Luther's movement, and it attempted to maintain the status quo. In relationship to the Catholic Church, Luther appeared to be the radical. The church, on the other hand, was the conservative. It wanted to maintain things the way they were. But when persons arose who felt that Luther had not gone far enough, Luther and later Zwingli and Calvin were forced to become conservatives on certain points themselves.

Roland Bainton, one of America's premier Reformation historians who died a few years ago, a number of years ago called these radicals the left wing of the Reformation, and the term is still occasionally used. Left-wing because they appeared to the far left of the Catholic Church and the Reformers, but the more common term used today, the term Radical Reformation, was coined by the Harvard historian George Huntston Williams and has gradually come to supersede Bainton's term.

Thus we have the Catholic Church on the right, the major Reformers in the center or in the middle, and the radicals on the left. We shall come back to this pattern at the end of this lecture, but it is important to get this configuration of the larger movement firmly in our mind at the outset. This configuration has raised

a whole series of questions about the left-wing radicals. Such questions as, Why were they dissident; why were the radicals not satisfied with the reforms of a Luther? The reforms of a Zwingli or of a Calvin? Were they troublemakers, or did serious concerns motivate them? Second, what did they have in common with the Reformers, and in what ways did they differ? Third, who were these dissidents, and can we determine what influenced them? Fourth, to what extent was theirs a united opposition and to what extent did they share common goals and ideas? Or were they just malcontent individuals? Fifth, how can one make sense of this oppositional phenomenon?

From these questions alone, it becomes apparent that we will not arrive at a satisfactory answer or at satisfactory answers by simply studying the groups or individuals that we might assign to the Radical Reformation, and George Huntston Williams, for example, has spoken of evangelical Anabaptists, of Revolutionary, of Rational Anabaptists, categorizing them into ideal types. I think it is much better to deal with the phenomenon in terms of a context out of which they grew. And since they were in opposition to Luther, in opposition to Zwingli, or even to Calvin later on, a part of our answer will derive from a study of their relationship to the magisterial Reformers. That's a term that has come to be applied to Luther, to Zwingli, and to Calvin—magisterial because they cooperated with the magistrates in bringing about a reformation.

And so we shall begin by setting a very broad context for the movement. This context will include a brief look into the history of the church prior to the Reformation and then more broadly a look at the period of the Renaissance and the Reformation out of which the Radical Reformation grew. In the second lecture, which essentially begins the series, we shall look at the church in the High Middle Ages, at the Roman Catholic Church in the High Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, a church increasingly powerful and corrupt, yet claiming ever more power over the lives of people.

In the third lecture, we shall inquire into the nature of Renaissance humanism and especially into the nature of Christian humanism, for as we shall insist later, Christian humanism, especially in the person of Desiderius Erasmus, who was called the prince of humanists in his day, one of the great scholars of the sixteenth century, his work, particularly his work on the Bible, had a major impact on the birth of Anabaptism.

In the fourth and fifth lectures, we shall focus our attention on the reformations of Luther and Zwingli. The first beginning in 1517, that is, Luther's Reformation; the second, that is Zwingli's Reformation, beginning around 1520, for it is within the context of these two reformation centers that the Radicals first appear. In other words, the Radicals appear in opposition to Luther, in opposition to Zwingli. They grow out of the Reformation, and this undercuts a whole series of theories that used to have it that the Radicals were medieval sectarian groups revived, and so on. They are an integral part of the Reformation. Whereas the relationship between Luther and the Saxon radicals is more difficult to access, scholars have been nearly universally agreed that the relationship between Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren (Swiss Brethren is the name given to Zwingli's followers after their break with him) that this relationship was very close.

Having looked at the larger context of the Reformation, we then turn our attention in the next group of lectures to the specific relationships between the Reformers and the dissidents, or the radicals. In the first of these, we will look at Luther, at the Zwickau prophets, at Karlstadt, and Thomas Müntzer. Saxony and Thuringia are also the regions in which Luther operated. Saxony and Thuringia are also the regions from at least one of the mystical influences reaches into Anabaptism, and the irony is that Luther himself was immersed in the writings of John Tauler, one of the great thirteenth-century German mystics, and *The German Theology*. Luther himself was immersed in this literature in 1516 and 1519, and it is these two documents, Tauler's sermons and *The German Theology*, which is anonymous, which were to play a very important role in Thomas Müntzer's thought and in the mystical thought of the sixteenth century as such.

By 1521, however, because of the impact of Pauline theology, a theology confirmed by Luther's reading of Augustine, motivated Luther to move away from mystical theology more and more, so that between the years 1516 and 1519, he is heavily immersed in this writing; by 1521, he's begun to move away from it.

But there are other factors that play into the conflict between Luther and the radicals. There is the issue of baptism raised by the Zwickau prophets in Wittenberg itself in December 1521, and the issue of the implementation of Reformed ideas. Can one simply speak about these ideas, or must one act upon the new insights and act immediately upon the new insights? In Saxony, as well, the politics of Elector Frederick the Wise is of critical importance, for

it is he who sets very obvious political limits to religious reform in Wittenberg, and this is the problem of the magisterial Reformers. The magistrates, the princes, have very definite political goals, and religion is at times forced to conform to what they want.

The second lecture in this series looks at the Reformation in Zurich and the conflict there between Zwingli and his followers, because these followers by late 1523 had come to a parting of the ways with Zwingli. What were the issues that drove them apart? How did the conflict run its course? And what were the consequences? It is here in Zurich in the conflict between Zwingli and his followers that an entirely new configuration of church-state relations emerges, that an entirely new view of the church emerges. Was this accidental? Was it the result of politics, or was it the direct result of the application of the New Testament models, which they claimed to have rediscovered?

The third lecture deals with another model of religious reform, the Anabaptist reform in Waldshut, a town in southern Germany under Austrian control, a reform that was led by Balthasar Hubmaier, perhaps one of the most educated of the Anabaptist leaders, a man who had his doctorate in theology, had been a student of one of the great Catholic polemicists of the age, John Eck. If Waldshut, where Anabaptism failed because it was suppressed by Austria's military might, if Waldshut could have been reformed in an Anabaptist direction and thus bring Anabaptism and the civil authorities of the city into closer relationship, could this had happened elsewhere? In other words, if Waldshut, if Hubmaier and Waldshut had been successful, could a different configuration of church-state relations than the believers' church or the free church have grown up within Anabaptism? And so Waldshut, the Waldshut experiment, raises interesting issues for and questions about Anabaptism.

The fourth lecture in this series addresses the question of the relationship of Anabaptism to the German Peasants' War of 1524 to 1525 and its relationship to revolution in general. So on the one hand, the particular event of the German Peasants' War and then the larger question of Anabaptism's relationship to revolution in general. A question that shall concern us in other lectures as well.

Arising as it did at the very moment, that is, Anabaptism, arising as it did at the very moment the Peasants' War broke out in the Swiss-German borderlands, Anabaptism was long held to be revolutionary in nature and argued that Thomas Müntzer, a leader

of the Peasants' War in Thuringia, was really its spiritual father. When the Anabaptists in Münster took control of the city in 1534 to 1535, just a decade after the Peasants' War, most people saw their worst fears confirmed, or at least they thought so. Here in 1524 to 1525, the Peasants' War had erupted, Thomas Müntzer was involved, wasn't he the founder of the Anabaptists? Ten years later revolution emerged again in the city of Münster led by Anabaptists. Obviously there had to be some connection. This question, then, the question of revolution, as the later question of Menno Simons's relationship to the Münster revolution of 1534 to 1535, is very important in defining the movement. From these considerations, we turn to the Swiss Brethren and their movement specifically. Our purpose here is essentially twofold: What were the main events in their emergence as a movement, and what were their theological beliefs and the ecclesiastical institutions they developed in the process? Furthermore, why and how did the movement spread? Who were its carriers, and what was the reaction to them? Within this context, we wish to take a closer look at the first Anabaptist confession of faith, the so-called Schleithem Confession of 1527. Who was its author? What does it tell us about the early Swiss-South German Anabaptist movement, and what kind of theology does it reflect?

The second group of Anabaptists we wish to discuss are the mystical, revolutionary Anabaptists coming out of Saxony and Thuringia with Hans Hut, Thomas Müntzer's former disciple, at their head. Once again, we will look at the concrete events which gave rise to their conflict with Luther, their subsequent careers, and their impact upon the movement as a whole. At the same time, we wish to look at the relationship between these individuals and the Swiss Brethren. Specifically, we will focus on meetings, encounters, and other similar events for implications for these relationships. Key personalities in this regard are Andreas Boldenstein von Karlstadt, Luther's partner in Wittenberg; Thomas Müntzer, whom we have already mentioned; Hans Hut; and the South German mystical Anabaptist, Hans Denck.

The second lecture in this series will be devoted to the latter two, that is, to Hans Hut and Hans Denck. In the third lecture in this group, we will cast our glance at the Hutterites, the communitarian branch of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. How did their movement originate? Who were the leaders? What were their primary concerns, and how do they relate to the rest of the Radical Reformation?

Our third major center of Anabaptist activity is northern Europe, specifically the Netherlands and northern Germany. Here our focus must be on the former Lutheran lay apostle, Melchior Hoffman, his transformation to Anabaptism, and his impact on northern Europe. Especially, what was his relationship to the revolutionary movement in Münster, the city in Westphalia? And what about the city of Münster itself? What transpired? Who was responsible, and what were the results?

The second lecture here focuses on Menno Simons. Menno Simons came to be the great leader of the Dutch Anabaptists. How did he develop intellectually, theologically? What was his relationship to Münster? What was his role in the recovering of a peaceful Anabaptism, and what were his major writings?

In this sixth section, we want to probe ways of accessing the various elements of the Radical Reformation and seek to discover in the course of its development to mid-century to what extent the Radicals eventually formed a unified movement. In other words, we want to look at Anabaptism as a movement, and we shall define what we mean by movement and see to what extent a unified movement emerged. What were the lasting, what were the temporary or temporal aspects of the movement? We will have to define what we mean by a movement. How we see its development. What its characteristic features are. We want to do this through two major analyses. On the one hand, we wish to look briefly at the debates of the radicals with the Reformers, and we will do this by analyzing specific encounters between the two groups.

Second, we shall take a look at the internal debates, that is, debates among the radicals themselves, beginning with Grebel's famous 1524 letter to Thomas Müntzer, Hubmaier's 1527 encounter with Hans Hut, Hans Denck's encounter with the Swiss Brethren, Pilgram Marpeck's use of Bernhard Rothmann's confession concerning the two sacraments, and the like. Bernhard Rothmann was the intellectual spokesperson for the Münster Anabaptists. In this fashion, by dealing with the internal debates, we will be the more able to watch the internal struggle for uniformity, while at the same time accessing the various groups' attempts to distinguish themselves from the Reformers.

Third, we will make an attempt to trace the development toward unity in the movement and to what extent it was achieved. The South German Anabaptist leader, Pilgram Marpeck, will serve as the central figure of this lecture because his entire life was



devoted to bringing the various groups together.

The fourth lecture in this second-to-last group will describe the main features of Anabaptist thought and ecclesiastical polity, the Anabaptist importance in the context of the sixteenth-century Reformation, and their standing in the modern world. Aside from the direct relationship between Reformers and radicals, and between the various radicals themselves, it is also important for us to realize that different patterns occur in church history and different relationship may be established over time within the history of the church. We shall seek to establish some of these patterns and some of these relationships in the last group of lectures.

The first of these centers on the relationship of Anabaptism to monasticism. The latter, that is, monasticism, arose in the church at a time when the great church, the all-inclusive church of the late third and fourth centuries, became increasingly worldly. Admission into a monastery was often called a second baptism, and the induction ceremonies into a monastery demonstrated striking similarities to the ancient baptismal ceremonies. Founders of new monastic orders also spoke of reestablishing the primitive or apostolic church. The life they sought to lead, they called the *vita apostolica*, or the apostolic life.

Can Anabaptism be seen as a similar reaction to *Volkskirche* or the state church with its wheat and tares in the age of the Reformation?

The second lecture in this group deals with the relationship of medieval mysticism to Anabaptism. With respect to the Swiss group, there appears to have been little mystical influence, but in Thomas Müntzer, Hans Denck, and some of the others, this influence appears to have been very strong indeed. What is the nature of mysticism? How did it affect Anabaptism? Could it lead directly to Anabaptism on its own? Thomas Müntzer from Thuringia and Hans Denck from Nuremberg shall serve as our test cases.

The third of the lectures in this last group probes the relationship between Christian humanism, especially the Christian humanism of Desiderius Erasmus, to that of Anabaptism. Here we shall begin with an intellectual model or paradigm of thought, that is, Erasmus's intellectual model, and seek to show how a radical shift took place in this model from the Renaissance to the Reformation

that made possible an altogether different interpretation. Erasmus's Christianity is steeped in neo-Platonism, and virtually every aspect of his thought is informed by that philosophy. We misread Erasmus badly if we neglect this fact. But Luther was determined to remove all philosophy from theology, and the other Reformers attempted to follow in his footsteps. It was nearly inevitable that the Swiss Anabaptists should have turned to the writings of Erasmus since Zwingli had himself been strongly influenced by them. But how did they read these writings and what specific connections are there?

The fourth lecture in this series centers on Matthew 13 and the parable of the tares. What is the field from which the tares were to be uprooted in the time of harvest—the church or the world? In his writings, Augustine, the great Latin church father, argued that the field was the church. Was he correct? The Donatists of his day rejected his assertion; they say that in his explanation of the parable to His disciples, Christ had Himself said that the field was the world. Hence, they argued that the parable had no application to the church whatsoever. The debate was important, for if Augustine was right, the church must consist of wheat and tares, sinners and saints, a fitting description for the reality of the post-Constantinian church, as Augustine himself saw. If the Donatists were right, then sinners were to be separated from the church and the church was to be pure. What was the biblical norm? Was it *Volkskirche*, a state church, or a believers' church?

The phenomenon we will discuss in the next twenty-three lectures then has been called by various names over the years. Originally they were all called Anabaptist, *Wiedertäufer*, even though some of the individuals like Thomas Müntzer, Karlstadt, Martin Cellarius, were never rebaptized or were never baptized on their confession of faith. More recently, Ludwig Keller, the late-nineteenth-century Müntzer archivist and historian, attempted to impose the label of Old Evangelical Congregations on the entire movement. This was in line with his argument that a kind of apostolic succession of Old Evangelicals could be traced throughout church history from the ancient church through the Middle Ages, particularly through the Waldensians, right up into the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.

Then, in the mid-twentieth century, Roland Bainton, as we have seen, spoke of a left wing of the Reformation, and still more recently George Huntston Williams has used the term "Radical Reformation." Both terms are useful, especially Bainton's if we



use it in connection with the two other major players in the age of the Reformation—the Catholic Church and the magisterial Reformers. In this context, the Catholic Church, because of its reactionary stance against reform, becomes the right wing. The Reformers, originally the revolutionaries, become the centrists, once dissent to their movement begins to appear, and the radicals form the left wing. If we look at the three groups from this perspective, it should become immediately obvious to us that the Magisterial Reformers found themselves in the most precarious position, because of all the three groups, they were the ones who had to fight a two-front war. The Catholics could content themselves with declaring the radicals to be the legitimate offspring of Luther's revolt against God's church, and the radicals by the very nature of their position could focus their essential criticism on the perceived shortcomings of the Reformers, but these Reformers found themselves attacked by both sides and fighting a two-front war.

With this as background, let us now turn to our first major topic.