This is lecture 18, and it deals with the internal debates within Anabaptism. The internal clarification within the Radical Reformation begins as early as Conrad Grebel’s letter to Thomas Müntzer of September 1524; that is, it begins even before the first adult baptism took place. This letter has been interpreted in various ways: as showing Müntzer’s influence on the early Anabaptists, as demonstrating their criticism of Thomas Müntzer, as demonstrating a search for allies on the part of the Swiss Brethren.

And there are several things the Swiss Brethren certainly had in common with Thomas Müntzer. The one was their criticism of the magisterial Reformers’ accommodation with political authority. The other was that while the Reformers had clarified theological truth, they had failed to implement it. But there the similarities end. The differences stand out in three areas: in the area of baptism, in the matter of using force, and in the matter of the relationship of symbol and spiritual essence.

With respect to baptism, Müntzer referred to the external symbols, such as water baptism, as holy signs. These holy signs, however, were not important. What was important to Thomas Müntzer was the inner essence, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. There was no integral relationship between these two as far as he was concerned. He therefore interpreted the passage in John 3:5, and I quote, “Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,” as redundant, for “water in the biblical sense,” he said, “meant the Holy Spirit.”

As in the case of the stirring of the water, of which he said, and I quote, “You see your companion, the evangelist interprets himself and speaks of the waters in the manner of the prophets, for the water is the stirring of our spirit in God’s Spirit as John himself explains.” And since the holy signs, the external symbols, had come in the Catholic Church to be the real essence because of
their claim to contain objective grace, Müntzer referred to them as an abomination in the holy place.

The Swiss Brethren, as Felix Manz’s December 1524 protestation makes eminently clear, emphasized the inner conversion, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the water baptism as two aspects of a greater whole with the latter having meaning only if preceded by the former. Explaining the baptism of Cornelius in Acts 10, Manz wrote, and I quote,

After receiving of this teaching in the descent of the Holy Spirit, which was evidence to those who had heard the word of Peter by the speaking in tongues, they were thereafter poured over with water, meaning that just as they were cleansed within by the coming of the Holy Spirit, so they also were poured over with water externally to signify for the inner cleansing and dying to sin.

For the Swiss Brethren, baptism, water baptism, had meaning only if it was preceded by the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the coming of faith. Therefore, infant baptism was wrong, but so was the rejection of the outer symbol of the inner essence simply because it continued to be abused. That the Swiss Brethren had some sense of Müntzer’s position is apparent in their letter of September 1524, for they wrote to him, and I quote, “We do not gather from your booklets that you utterly repudiate baptism,” that is, water baptism, and they must have heard that he had done so, but they continue, “that you condemn infant baptism and the misunderstanding of baptism.”

But they also had their doubts about his interpretation of John 3:5, saying, and I quote, “What water means in John 3, we want to examine further in your booklet and in the Scriptures.” Obviously, they were not totally convinced. And they never did accept Müntzer’s interpretation. Indeed, on January 21, 1525, water baptism became for them a very powerful symbol.

Much more forceful because better understood was their rejection of Müntzer’s revolutionary rhetoric. Moreover, they wrote in that same letter to Thomas Müntzer, and I quote, “The gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor are they thus to protect themselves which, as we learn from our brother, is your opinion and practice.” Christians were to be sheep among wolves. The true church was a persecuted, a suffering church, not the vengeful arm of the Lord poised to exterminate the godless.
In baptism, in nonresistance, in personal discipleship, as well as in the institution of the church and its ordinances, the Swiss Brethren sought to restore the connection, the congruence, between the spiritual, the inner essence, and the external symbol or life. Essence and sign were considered one. The one without the other was less than what Christ and the apostles had preached.

Müntzer’s position, as we saw earlier, was ultimately based on his separation in mystical fashion of Word from Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the living Word. The Bible he called the dead Word. The Swiss Brethren were in September 1524 as yet unaware of this and so did not address the issue. But Schleitheim, that is, the Confession of Schleitheim, appears to have done so in 1527 when it addressed the false brothers in their midst and spoke of them as having introduced the concept and practice of the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ.

This may well have been a reference to Ludwig Haetzer, a marginal figure in early Anabaptist history, who helped Hans Denck translate the prophetic books of the Old Testament in Strasbourg and in Worms in 1527. For in 1529, Haetzer was executed in the city of Constance for bigamy. Like Nikolas Storch, who is supposed to have argued the same thing, these people may well have been influenced by the medieval heresy known as the heresy of the free spirit. In any case, from the Swiss Brethren point of view, Word and Spirit belong together. The Spirit would never go against the Word, nor could the Word be used against the Holy Spirit.

This tendency to raise the Spirit high above the dead letter of the Word was typical of those influenced by medieval mysticism and of those like Hut and Melchior Rink, who had come under Thomas Müntzer’s influence. Like Hut, Melchior Rink had been baptized and became a major figure in the early history of Hessian Anabaptism. It was with these people that many Hutterite missionaries met on their various journeys. In the early 1530s, one of the Hessian Anabaptists, Hans Both by name, and a close friend and follower of Rink, came to the Hutterites. When he began to expound his ideas in their midst, they halted him, especially when he began to exalt this “well of living water,” as he called it within himself. They accused him of intruding false teachings into the midst of God’s people, but he persisted in his position, even arguing that Melchior Rink held the same position as he did. The Hutterites responded by saying that “even if Rink held this position, it would not be right,” but they did not believe that Rink indeed held it. “If he did,” they said, “he would be a
false prophet.” And Hans Both and his followers were expelled from their midst. In this encounter, in a sense Thomas Müntzer once again encounters the Swiss Brethren, and here the issues are clearly drawn and spiritualism is clearly rejected.

This same repudiation of spiritualism can be seen in the writings of Pilgram Marpeck, the most important leader of south German Anabaptism in the 1530s, 1540s, and 1550s. As early as 1530 in a tract entitled *A Clear Refutation*, he attacked this position in the person of Caspar Schwenckfeld, a mystic Silesian nobleman. In the opening lines of his tract he wrote, and I quote,

First certain spirits are advocating that the children of God should no longer use the ceremonies of the New Testament, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and even the Scriptures. These spirits think that such ceremonies are to be shunned because they have been abused and destroyed by the antichrist who imitates them without a mandate and without the witness of the heart. Therefore, the ceremonies are misunderstood, abused, and stained. This abomination will remain to the end.

There are clear echoes of Müntzer’s spiritualism here, but the attack is directed against Schwenckfeld, who Marpeck had come to known in Strasbourgh in 1530. Like the other Swiss South German Anabaptists, Pilgram Marpeck clearly and decisively rejected the spiritualist position, asserting the integrity and apostolicity of the original Swiss Brethren position.

In 1542, in his *Vermahnung*, his *Admonition*, he attacked Schwenckfeld again, calling him and his adherence, and I quoted, “false messengers of Satan who mixed with the members of the covenant of the truth in Christ in order to hinder, to cover up, and despise the truth.” They had, he said, and I quote “joined themselves with the members of the church in order to spoil, blind, and embitter. Through such methods the insidious serpent, a true enemy of human salvation has worn out and brutally oppressed the zealous and sincere people.”

The above examples could be multiplied, but these must suffice to indicate that virtually from the outset, Swiss and South German Anabaptism sought to repudiate and separate itself from mystical spiritualism. And in the 1527 encounter in Nikolsburg between Hans Hut and Hubmaier, we have the rejection in the person of Hut of a modified Münsterian eschatology, an eschatological
position strikingly similar to the one developed in Münster during 153 to 1535.

As we have seen, Melchior Hoffman came to Strasbourg in 1530. There he absorbed Schwenckfeld’s view of the heavenly flesh of Christ, and he absorbed the eschatological ideas of the prophets of Strasbourg, the Josts. This brought a serious rift into the Strasbourg Anabaptist circles which seriously threatened the movement and led to a major parting of the ways. With Marpeck the leader of the one group and Jacob Kautz the leader of the other. Marpeck’s *Clare Verantwortung or Clear Accounting* of 1531 is a direct rejection of the spiritualism of the Hoffmanite group, and there are indications that Leupold ScharnSchlager opposed Schwenckfeld’s and Hoffman’s Christology; that is, he opposed their theology of the heavenly flesh of Christ.

This rejection of Hoffman’s Christology surfaced again later on. In the 1550, renewed discussion of the dual natures of Christ took place in Strasbourg due to Schwenckfeld’s writings and Menno’s position which he had inherited from the Melchiorites. In 1555, Pilgram Marpeck wrote a letter from Augsburg to his followers in Langenau on the subject which stresses the humanity of Christ in contrast to Schwenckfeld’s Christology, and on August 24, 1555, a conference on precisely this topic was held in the city of Strasbourg. The evidence indicates that a discussion on the issue had become urgent because of the view of the Dutch Anabaptists; that is, because of Menno Simon’s view on the topic. Apparently Anabaptists gathered from many places for the conference for the purpose of bringing harmony on this issue into the brotherhood.

The decision reached was characteristic of Anabaptism. First of all, the decision encouraged everyone to avoid speculative theological pronouncements on the topic and encouraged them to stick to the simple statements of Scripture on the incarnation. Second, it argued that keeping the commandments of Christ was more important than attempting to understand the mysteries of how Christ had become flesh. In the process, the Hoffmanite speculations were clearly rejected.

Another major internal confrontation took place during and immediately after the Münster revolution of 1534 to 1535. There had been differences with respect to the use of the sword by Christian prior to the Münster event, as we have seen. Hubmaier’s views had been opposed in the late 1520s and a split had occurred in the ranks because of this. In his 1542 *Vermahnung, or Admonition,*
Pilgram Marpeck wrote the following, and I quote,

Thus when according to the Word of Christ and His example, the gospel was first preached by many faithful men of God who suffered in patience and against whom Satan raised his portals and the appearance of the gospel, they wanted to fight with a physical sword, as if they were fighting like the Jews for an earthly kingdom or land. The Peasants’ War and after that Zwingli’s and now in the appearance of the true baptism of Christ, the Münsterites in Westphalia have done the same.

Here the issue is more sharply focused on the use of the sword in defense of the gospel, and it is clearly rejected. The Christian use of the sword is also the central issue dividing Menno and the Münsterites. In Menno’s first written statement against the Münsterites, that is, in his Against the Blasphemy of Jan of Leiden, he singles out two major issues for attack. The first is the Münsterites’ use of the sword to defend their gospel. The second is their concept of the visible kingdom of Christ. It was the second, the visible kingdom of Christ, as Marpeck also argued, which led to the abuse of the first. This case is most clearly made by Dirk Philips, Menno’s most important early coworker, when he wrote in his tract On Spiritual Restitution, and I quote,

Out of this have come many errors so that everyone has interpreted this restitution in a strange fashion in accordance with his own preconceptions in a physical manner, as many still do. Therefore, I have decided to deal briefly, by God’s grace, with everything that has happened since the beginning of time, that all of this has been restored in Christ and His spiritual kingdom, that the simple may be instructed somewhat in this matter, and not allow themselves to be deceived by the false prophets who embellish and cover their false teachings with the old essence of the letter or shadow and figure. For everything that they cannot justify with the New Testament, they wish to prove with the Old and the letter of the prophets. From this have come many sects, indeed, from this foundation above all have flowed the godless ceremonies and pomp of the anti-Christian churches and the deplorable blunders of the revolutionary sects, which in our time under the appearance of the holy gospel, faith, and Christian religion have done great damage and created great scandals.
Aside from rejecting the visible kingdom of Christ and the use of the sword to inaugurate it, Dirk Philips here also rejects the false use of the Old Testament and the putting it on a par with the New, something the Anabaptists also rejected with respect to Reformed arguments.

After the collapse of Münster, a cleansing within the ranks took place, primarily by means of the use of excommunication or the ban. David Joris, a Münsterite for a time, and one who regarded the Scriptures as inadequate was rejected. Then Jan of Battenberg and his followers, alluded to by Dirk Philips in the above passage, as those who still sought to introduce a physical kingdom by means of the sword, were also rejected.

In 1547, Adam Pastor, a man ordained by Menno and Dirk themselves in 1542, was excommunicated for asserting that Christ had not existed prior to the incarnation.

All of these internal problems among the Dutch Anabaptists gradually led to an extreme use of the ban or of excommunication in an effort to cleanse the church. Menno was at first reluctant to sanction extreme measures, where even the wife was refused the right to live with an excommunicated spouse, was gradually talked into it by his coworker Leonard Bouwens. The use of the ban became one of two topics discussed at a second meeting of the Anabaptists in the city of Strasbourg in the year 1557. This conference had been preceded by a meeting called at Cologne by Menno and Bouwens in which the latter had hoped to win the south German Anabaptists to their more stringent position on the ban. But few of the south Germans had come, and the Strasbourg conference was a response to Menno and Bouwens’s letter to them concerning that issue.

In their decision, the South Germans rejected the strict application of the ban, something Marpeck had already criticized the Swiss Brethren for earlier, and they expressed the strong hope that the Dutch would follow their lead. In any case, they hoped the differences with respect to the implementation of excommunication would not lead to a rupture between them. But this was not to be. The Dutch rejected the milder approach at a meeting in 1559 and in the process excommunicated the South German leaders themselves.

Thus one can see the Anabaptists also fight a two-front war. On the one hand, they were forced to clarify their positions—these would
be the magisterial Reformers. On the other hand, they had to fend off influences that threatened them from within, influences that derived from elsewhere to a large extent but which nonetheless created internal problems.

In the development of any movement, issues and ideas are not always, if ever, immediately clarified. If we take a look at Martin Luther, it is quite clear that scholars would argue that the position that he espouses in 1516, for example, is not the position of the mature Luther or of the mature Lutheran Church. Similarly, it took a while within the Anabaptist movement for the issues to become clarified, and as these issues became clarified, gradually the spirits began to see where they belonged. So it takes time to sift the spirits and to determine what belongs and what does not belong. This is especially true when those influenced by medieval German mysticism were attracted to and joined the Anabaptists, as is the case with Hans Hut, Melchior Rink, and Hans Denck.

And in Hans Hut, there was also a latent revolutionary spirit that raised itself again in the city of Münster. This struggle was all the more difficult because unlike the Catholic Church and the magisterial Reformers, the Anabaptists could not physically suppress such persons. Being a persecuted minority themselves, a minority defending religious liberty, they could hardly violate their own principles by suppressing internal problem makers, but as the movement matured, a gradual consensus began to emerge. In any case, the revolutionaries and the spiritualists either died out or broke away shortly after 1536, and persecution by the authorities was its own cleansing agent.