This is lecture 21. The topic is Anabaptism and monasticism. In this last series of lectures, we shall seek to establish the larger context within which we might better understand the nature of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Within Anabaptism itself, there are many allusions to what they considered their place within church history. Reformers often referred to them at Donatists or new monks, obviously also make connections to previous movements within the church.

In this lecture, we wish to inquire into the relationship between Anabaptism and monasticism, not in terms of the direct influence of former monks on Anabaptist thought, as has sometimes been done, and many early Anabaptist leaders came from the monasteries, but rather we want to look at Anabaptism and monasticism as parallel movements within the larger scope of church history.

Let us begin with a statement from Bernhard Rothmann's *Confessions Concerning the Two Sacraments*. There he wrote, and I quote,

Monasteries and convents grew out of infant baptism. The baptized infants, knowing nothing about Christ, found it easy to depart from him, whereupon He, Christ, left them. Thus the profession and ordinances of Christ were forgotten and so monks and nuns turned to a different set of professions and regulations. Once they set these up, they made it very difficult for others to join them. These people, who deemed themselves holy, that is, monks and nuns, themselves label this entrance into a monastery a second or a rebaptism by which the first is superseded. By it they are baptized into the service of the patron of their order. Without a doubt, it would not have come to such an abomination of what is called Christendom had unknowing children not been baptized.
In contrast to opening the church to everyone through infant baptism, people are not allowed into the monastery until they have reached the age of discretion and have been instructed in the rules and regulations of the order so that they know what is required of them in it. They are even subjected to a year’s probation, a year of testing, before they are allowed to take the vows. And once they have taken them, they can no longer be retracted, however, into the holy church; that is, into the order and obedience of God are allowed the dumb and untutored children who as yet have no conception of good and evil, and they do this without concern. Yet when someone argues that we should trust Christ and be accepted into the church because we wish to be obedient to God's will, they consider this some kind of mockery or hypocrisy.

If entry into a monastery was considered a second or a rebaptism, why would the Catholic Church object so strongly to the Anabaptists’ own rejection of infant baptism and to their baptizing only on a confession of faith? At any rate, Rothmann's statement points to a parallel development between the two movements, and it is this parallelism we wish to examine in the present lecture.

In the course of earlier lectures, we have heard radicals argue that the early church quickly became corrupt, some saying right after the death of the apostles, others saying that it became corrupt with the Constantinian transformation in 325. Many contemporaries spoke of similar development. Saint Jerome, himself a man who pursued the ascetic ideal, said, and I quote, “The church, after it arrived at the existence of Christian princes, became greater in power as measured by its wealth, but less in virtue.” He described bishops as, and I quote again, “ailing pilots on a sinking ship,” and he described fellow Christians as only concerned with their bellies.

Similar complaints can be found in the writings of other church fathers, especially in the writings of the young Augustine. As Peter Brown, Augustine’s chief biographer, has written, and I quote, “The spread of Christianity by indiscriminately filling the churches had simply washed away the moral landmarks that separated church from world.” As it changed from a church of believers to a universal church and hence the term “catholic,” it lost its apostolic character. Thus there arose a conflict in the church between what we might call apostolicity on the one
hand and catholicity on the other, or purity on the one hand and universality on the other. Was the one possible only at the expense of the other? In the Reformation, the Reformers faced this same struggle. While they wished to recover an apostolic theology, they were forced into a territorial catholicity, even though they had themselves torn the universality of the Roman Catholic Church apart. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, chose apostolicity. Monks wished to have both apostolicity and catholicity, and they tried to do it by joining a monastic order which was subsumed under the larger umbrella of the Catholic Church. They joined the Catholic Church as infants by baptism but the monastic order only as adults through a ceremony of induction often called, as we have just seen, “a second baptism.”

This induction ceremony was clearly modeled on the ancient baptismal ritual. It should not surprise us then to see that many new monastic orders saw themselves as reestablishing the primitive church. The point of the foregoing analysis is that some of the themes that appear in the Radical Reformation had already been sounded in the Catholic Church long before the Reformation period. The Catholic Church was inclusive enough to accommodate this striving for Christian perfection within its ranks. Every monastic order had a rule by which it sought to aid its members on the road to perfection. The most famous of these rules was the sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict. It contained seventy-two articles to be observed by the monks. Of these, the most important were drawn from Christ’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, for example, rule 27 required monks not to swear. Rule 29 required them not to return evil for evil. Rule 30 required them not to wrong anyone but to bear patiently the wrongs done to them. Rule 31 required them to love their enemies, and rule 33 required them to suffer persecution for the sake of justice.

In another part, the rules stated, and I quote, “Moreover, fulfilling the precept of the Lord by practice in adversities and injuries, they who are struck on the one cheek offer the other, and being force to walk one mile, they go two. With Paul the apostle, they bear false brethren and they bless those who curse them.” Benedict advised that only such persons be allowed into a monastery as had undergone a conversion, but these were persons who were already in the church, so this was not a conversion from paganism to Christianity that he was speaking of. It was rather a conversion from a merely nominal Christianity to the life of Christian discipline and discipleship within the monastery.
The lines between church and world had to be redrawn, even if this took place within the universal church. The Rule therefore observed, and I quote, “To him who newly comes to conversion let not an easy entrance be granted, but as the apostle says, ‘try the spirits if they be of God.’” Conversion was therefore followed by a lengthy period of testing, during which from time to time the entire rule was read to the candidate, and I quote, “that he may know to what he is entering.” Perhaps this was to take the place of the instruction given to the catechumens in the ancient church, and only after the candidate had successfully completed the time of testing was he admitted as a full member to the monastic brotherhood.

The ceremony of admission is itself intriguing and in many ways reflects the rite of ancient baptism. Already in the ancient church some began to look upon martyrdom as a substitute for water baptism. Martyrdom, in fact, came to be designated as baptism by blood. Those martyred for the faith were considered to have had their sins automatically forgiven. By the late second century, the church father Tertullian could speak of martyrdom as a second baptism. Monks, who saw themselves as taking up the cross in the age of peace after Constantine and martyring themselves for Christ, came to regard entry into the monastery and the ascetic life also as a second baptism. Thus, John of Antioch could write in the twelfth century, and I quote, “It is a fact made clear that the sacred initiation of monks by way of reminder an imitation of holy baptism is composed of renunciations and resolutions unusually burdensome and fearful. This initiation our holy fathers have named a second baptism and a renewal of the first.”

The similarity to baptism is also reflected in the monastic rite of initiation. Initiation into a monastery began with a serious examination of the candidate, and in this instance, unlike infant baptism, the candidate had to answer for himself. His godparent could not do it. In Romans 6:4, Saint Paul speaks of our being buried together with Christ in baptism unto death and being raised with Him from the death to newness of life. This was symbolically expressed in the baptismal ritual of the ancient church where catechumens had their old clothes taken away before baptism and were given new white garments afterwards to symbolize this newness of life. The person baptized was then encouraged to keep himself unspotted from the world. Similarly, when a monk made his profession, his old clothing was taken away and he was dressed in a monk’s cowl. This dress was to be taken as a baptismal garment to be worn by the monk every time
he entered into God’s presence, as one historian has put it. With this ceremony completed, the monk was said to have completely died to the world, as even Luther put it after his own initiation.

By the time of the Reformation, monks and monasteries were in great disrepute. Not only had many of them become corrupt, but also the decree of the Fourth Lateran Church Council of 1215 not to allow the foundation of any new monastic orders meant that this corruption was not reversed by periodic renewal, and from Luther’s point of view, monasticism was the worst form of works righteousness. And so the Reformers turned against monasticism, but what did they put in its place to make room for those Christians who would seek to be holy?

Some years ago Adolf von Harnack wrote that the Reformers had to abolish monasticism because, and I quote, “to take a vow of lifelong asceticism was a piece of presumption, and it rightly considered that any worldly vocation conscientiously followed in the sight of God was equal to, nay, was better than being a monk.” Harnack did concede, however, that there was a kind of monasticism that was, as he put it, “necessary in the evangelical sense, which had disappeared altogether with the Protestant Reformation.” And the Reformation church was eventually declared to be a territorial church of wheat and tares where, according to the Anabaptists at least, the tares had submerged the wheat. And so people in the Reformation were thrown back into the same kind of church conditions which had given rise to monasticism.

What we have here are parallel patterns in the history of the fourth-century church and the history of the sixteenth-century church, but unlike the monks of the late third and fourth centuries, the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century did not seek to maintain connections with the larger Christian society. Rather, they took to heart the example of the apostles who had created a new church. For them, the apostolic model was to prove more important than any kind of universality or catholicity. But let us take a brief look at the similarities between the two.

First of all, there was a common emphasis upon conversion. We noted earlier what Benedict’s rule said about conversion. This same emphasis can be seen in Francis of Assisi, in John Tauler, in Ignatius Loyola, and in many others. John Tauler especially spoke of a conversion through the Holy Spirit, as we have seen. Instruction followed conversion, whereupon the vows were
administered; then followed a life of separation from the world. This emphasis on conversion was also central to Anabaptism. From the outset, the Anabaptists argued for a responsible as opposed to what they believed to be an irresponsible Christianity. And they focused their attention on the act of conversion. It was to be repeatedly emphasized in the various confessional Anabaptist statements and was central to the thought of Menno Simons. Such a conversion demanded a radical break with the ways of the world, indeed, even with the so-called Christian world of the sixteenth century.

Second, just as in monasticism, the Anabaptists tried to make sure that baptismal candidates understood what baptism meant. The Schleitheim Confession said, and I quote, “Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and amendment of life and who believe truly that their sins are taken way through Christ and to all who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Third, the divergence between the two movements comes with respect to baptism for the Anabaptists and the induction of novices for the monks. Perhaps because of the biblical story about the rich young ruler, the early hermits and monks were able to rationalize a kind of two-tiered Christianity—one that lived by the standards of the natural law and another that lived by the ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, the monastic order did not have to reject the baptismal ceremony of the church. A monastic order rather sought to recover or to renew it, perhaps on a higher level of meanings, as Rothmann had argued, giving to their induction ceremony the meaning and significance baptism had had in the primitive church. As we approach the sixteenth century, a number of individuals rejected this two-tiered Christianity, Erasmus being one of them saying that Christ had made no such distinctions. And so along with Erasmus, the Anabaptists argued that the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount applied to all who wished to be considered Christians. There could only be one true church, and it had to be grounded on the teachings of Christ and modeled on the apostolic church.

Hence, they rejected the great church or the church of the great mass of Christians. In other words, they rejected catholicity, as the Reformers clearly noted. Therefore, rather than having to attempt to recapture the original meaning and intent of baptism in their induction ritual as the monks did, the Anabaptists themselves rejected the term “rebaptism” and went back to what they
believed to be the original ceremony itself. They returned to Saint Paul’s statement in Romans 6:4 and saw baptism as a reflection of Christ’s death and resurrection. Thus the Schleitheim Confession says, and I quote, “Baptism shall be given to all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and be buried with Him in death, so that they might rise with Him.” And Menno wrote, and I quote, “Beloved reader, take heed to the Word of the Lord. Paul, who did not receive his gospel from men but from the Lord Himself, teaches that even as Christ died and was buried, so also ought we to die to our sins and be buried with Christ in baptism. Not that we are to do this for the first time after baptism, but we must have begun all of this beforehand.”

The Anabaptists did not regard infant baptism as a first baptism to be superseded later on by a second or a rebaptism. They were interested in restoring biblical baptism to what they considered its rightful place in the church. They were Taufers, they were Baptists, practicing believer’s baptism. They certainly did not consider themselves to be Wiedertaufers, Anabaptists, as contemporaries called them.

Fourth, all of the above makes clear that the Anabaptists, like the monks, took entry into their church very seriously indeed. Hubmaier argued repeatedly that every Christian could and should take the baptism vows only for himself. Thus, infant baptism, where someone else took the vows for the child, was rejected, Michael Sattler calling it, and I quote, “the greatest and first abomination of the pope.” For by means of infant baptism, wheat and tares had become indiscriminately mixed within the church. In this connection, that is, in the taking of the baptismal vow, the baptismal candidates committed themselves to living the life of Christian discipleship. As Robert Friedman has written, one of the terms used for baptism by the Anabaptists was “feirzigalot” understood as a vow to discipleship, somewhat compared with monastic vows. The difference was that Anabaptists saw themselves taking this vow to Christ not to some human founder of an order and his rule. Menno Simons put it this way, and I quote,

As to being new monks, we list those as new monks who formerly established churches, cloisters, human statues, and the easy Epicurean life under the cloak of a zeal which they have abandoned and have altogether fallen into a still more sensuous, pompous, and carnal life without change of heart, continuing in their sins and having placed the basis of their faith, hope, and salvation upon human choice and
opinion and flattery and glosses from the very beginning. It is the manner and custom of monks to follow human statutes, commands, and institutions and not the Word of God. They have their abbots, their priors, and their pursers, and procurators, and are called Augustinians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Bernardines, and Jacobins for their founders and masters. Not so with us. We trust by the grace and mercy of the Lord that we are children of God and disciples of Christ. We know no other abbot than Him on whom all Christians call in spirit and truth and say, “Abba, Father.” Our head or prior is Christ Jesus. Our procurator or purser is the Holy Spirit. Our profession is the sincere, frank, and fearless confession of faith. Our statues and laws are the expressed commandments of the Lord. Our cap and cloak are the garments of righteousness with which we gladly clothe ourselves. Our cloisters are the assembly of the saints, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Our soft and easy monks’ life and pleasures are the daily expectation of prison and fetters, fire and water, or exile with our wives and children to suffer hunger, discomfort, anguish, sorrow, pain, and tears on our cheeks. Behold, kind reader, this is the monkhood which we confess to and which we practice and none other. By the grace and power of the Lord, we also hope to abide therein unchangeably all of our lives.

There could only be one true church, and the Anabaptists sought against overwhelming odds to recover it. The monastic substitute would not do.

In a sense, the later German Pietists also attempted to create within the larger Lutheran Church such havens for serious-minded Christians. They called them collagia pietatis [colleges of piety]. To a certain extent, the Pietists went back to Luther’s introduction to his German Mass of 1526 where he spoke of an ecclesiola in ecclesia, a small church within a larger church, and within that small church one could have Bible study, prayer, Christian fellowship, but Luther came to believe that it would be nearly impossible or impracticable to create such a church and so he gave up the idea. The Pietists, however, successfully implemented the concept in the late seventeenth century, but they did not seek to renew baptism as the monks did, though the Church of the Brethren grew out of this pietism and began to practice believer’s baptism later on.
Other parallel patterns in church history could be pointed to. Here, however, we wish to conclude by simply stating the fact that the pure church, equated with the model of the apostolic church, though submerged within the great church, has been repeatedly resurrected. And in the age of the Reformation, it was the Anabaptists who did so.