

From Wittenberg to Zionsville: Where the BFC Fits in the Reformation
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Introduction

The subtitle of our talk raises the question of where the BFC fits in the Reformation. That is a good question to ask of a group whose founders wrote its doctrine in 1866 to “conform to the teachings of Christ, his apostles, and our church reformer, Menno Simons.” The fact of the matter is that if persons following the doctrine of our church reformer Menno Simons had appeared in Wittenberg or Geneva five hundred years ago, they would have been run out of town, or worse. So it is not a little ironic that this year many of our churches are proudly celebrating the Reformation and that even the Ministerial Convention was addressed on the Five Solas. I think we should celebrate the Reformation, but I think we should do so with a good understanding of where our spiritual forefathers stood in the midst of those tumultuous times. And, as I shall suggest, also give thanks to God for bringing together the discoveries of that era to form the unique blessing we enjoy in the Bible Fellowship Church.

I intend to do three things this morning. First, give a few facts concerning the relationship between the main Reformers and the Anabaptists. Next, make a few evaluative statements on that relationship from my perspective five hundred years later. And third, show a few slides from our recent trip to Germany and Switzerland to illustrate the story of the Reformation, mainly from the life of Martin Luther.

The Reformers and the Anabaptists

In retrospect, we label the leading reformers as the “magisterial reformers” because they aligned themselves with the magistrates, or political leaders of the day. At least part of the reason for this relationship was simple pragmatism - it was the only way they could survive the pressure of the pope and those governments that were loyal to the Church. Humanly speaking, Luther would have never lived if Frederick the Wise had not protected him. Most of the energy of these men was exerted in defending themselves from the Catholic Church - its doctrine, its tradition, its power.

But in their rear, behind the front line, was another enemy. The Reformers had many names for these enemies, and in fact, they were of various sorts. In some cases, they arose from their own disciples, making them all the more dangerous and despised. The best historians label these enemies as radical reformers, for all of them wanted to go deeper, to the root (radix). Some, such as Casper Schwenckfeld, were spiritualists, trusting in inner visions for directions. Thomas Muntzer, one of Luther’s early opponents, mocked Luther’s dependence on the Bible. Luther in response said he would not listen to Muntzer even though “he swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all.” Other radical reformers were rationalists, even questioning the Bible in their devotion to human reason. Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician captured and executed in Geneva in 1553, denied the trinity in his rationalist approach. Finally, other radical reformers were evangelical Anabaptists, who according to their understanding of Scripture, founded gathered churches of believers who had been baptized on confession of their faith.

The story of Ulrich Zwingli and his disciples is well known. Conrad Grebel and others challenged Zwingli on the issue of infant baptism. On January 21, 1525, twelve men acted on their convictions and baptized one another. Anabaptism was born. After public debate, Zwingli sided with the town council and opposed the “Brethren”. They were outlawed and scattered. Feliz Manz was the first one to pay with his life, drowned in the Limmat River on January 5, 1527. This began the persecution of the Anabaptists by the Reformed churches of Switzerland.

Even earlier, Martin Luther had been alarmed by the radical actions of extremists in Saxony. His former colleague on the Wittenberg faculty, Andrew Carlstadt, led Wittenberg into radical reform while Luther was in the Wartburg. The smashing of statues, abuse of priests, and immediate changes in the liturgy shocked Luther and frightened the people. “Prophets” arrived who claimed immediate revelations from God. Luther scattered them at his reappearance in Wittenberg, but held a life-long fear of those who would disrupt public order. And many of these extremists went on to participate in the Peasants War of 1525 and the even worse debacle at Munster in 1535. Luther accordingly was in favor of banishing Anabaptists from territories loyal to him. But he was reluctant to punish them, believing that coercion was never right in matters of conscience.

John Calvin was a second-generation reformer and as such was better able to distinguish the various types of radical reformers. He read and critiqued Anabaptist literature, and was highly critical of Menno Simon’s unique Christology. Menno taught that the eternal Word came into Mary’s womb through the Holy Spirit and became flesh and blood without taking this flesh and blood from Mary’s body. Jesus became man in Mary but not of Mary; his was strictly a heavenly humanity.

Calvin correctly identified this as a variation of the ancient heresy of Valentine which had been refuted by Irenaeus. Menno’s concern was to distance the humanity of Christ from the sin of Adam. But his view actually separated Christ from those he came to save. In Contra Mennonem, Calvin argued for the sinlessness of Christ through Mary, “We do not make Christ immune to every stain because He is so born of His mother (without the union of man), but because He is sanctified by the Spirit, that His generation be pure and perfect, as it would have been before the fall.” Calvin’s verdict on our church reformer Menno Simons is; “Nothing can be more conceited than this donkey, nor more impudent than this dog.”

Calvin, with the other main reformers, completely rejected the Anabaptist view of baptism and the gathered church. Anabaptists were not welcome in Geneva; though Calvin’s view of them was kinder than that of others who denied the trinity or held to other heretical views.

Evaluation

The first comment I would like to make is that things were much more confusing at that time than they are now. In the fog of war, it was difficult to tell friend from foe in the spiritual battle raging around them. Now five hundred years later, the dust has settled, and we can see that

the Bible believing Anabaptists were both close to the Reformers and worlds apart from the other radicals. But it is hard to criticize the first reformers for failing to see that. Roland Bainton remarks in that spirit on Luther's first exposure to their ideas. "The leaders were Andrew Carlstadt and Thomas Muntzer. This was unfortunate because, although both were sensitive and gifted neither was balance and stable. If Luther had met such ideas first in Zwingli and the sober Anabaptists, he might not have been so devoid of understanding and so implacable in opposition." They were schwärmer, gnats, to Luther. As one historian has said it, we can only claim to be stepchildren of the Reformers.

On the other hand, I have always been impressed with how much the Reformers did know about the Anabaptists, and yet rejected it. They admired the internal discipline of the Anabaptists, and could not deny that the every-day Christian living of the average Anabaptist often exceeded that of the average Lutheran or Reformed Christian. The main argument, of course, surrounded baptism, and there I can only say that I disagree with Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Just as we disagree with our Lutheran and Presbyterian friends today. We respect and admire these great men, but we must be careful not to follow "reformed theology" just because the reformers believed it.

Finally, I think it must be said that although many of them paid for their convictions with their lives, the verdict of history is that the Anabaptists were right. The church should be separate from the state, the church should be a gathering of believers, and believers should be marked with the ordinance of baptism. We are certainly not the one true church, but it is a remarkable blessing to hold to reformed soteriology and to Anabaptist ecclesiology in the Bible Fellowship Church. I want to believe that if Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were here today, we could have a respectful discussion if not complete agreement on these matters. In any case, I am thankful to the Lord for each of these men, and for our Anabaptist forebears who have enriched our Christian faith today.