

**RADICAL PROTESTANTISM:
THE SEARCH FOR TRUE CHRISTIANITY**

Richard Dean Carver

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Preface

The German poet Lessing once remarked that if he were given the choice between the actual possession of the truth and the eternal quest for it, he would choose the latter alternative. This was evidently spoken in the spirit of the athlete who is depressed after winning the championship for which he has strived for so long or the actor who turns to drugs and aberrant behavior subsequent to finally achieving the pinnacle in fame and prestige. The quest has always held a certain fascination for the human mind. The search for the holy Grail...the search for the abominable snowman...the search for Noah's Ark...the search for life on other planets...the search for the perfect home...the pursuit of the elusive American dream. How many times haven't we read about people who look back on their lives and wax eloquent about the "lean years" when they were struggling financially and desperately working to "make it"...and how often don't these people speak fondly of those times as the "good old days." Why is that? What was it that Lessing was saying?

It is not my purpose in this paper to delve into the psychological motivations which contribute to this "search" or "quest" mentality which seems to so often control human behavior. Some have labelled this the "rainbow syndrome," meaning that many of us have a strong, compelling impulse which drives us to always search for the pot of gold, but never hope actually to find it for, if we did, the intensity and excitement of the game would end and our life would be robbed of its tension and interest. Be that as it may, we will leave the root of this condition to the psychologists to investigate and define. My guess is that the cause lies somewhere in the stomach of the Old Adam who hungers for a meal that would truly satisfy him, but never eats because what he needs is spiritual food indigestible to the sinful nature. Until we all finally rid ourselves of this pest for good in heaven, we will remain susceptible from time to time to this aggravating yearning sensation which fights keenly to keep us from experiencing that wonderful peace of which Jesus spoke on Easter Sunday evening.

Yes, in spiritual things, too, we often feel a push to find the “real” meaning of faith. We may be raised in a Christian home with fine Christian parents, attend Sunday School, maybe even Christian day school, not miss a single confirmation class, memorize the Enchiridion flawlessly, perhaps even become a dedicated church worker, and still find ourselves wondering, “Is this it? I still don’t really feel ‘fulfilled.’ There must be something missing.” The anticipated zeal and fervor may be lacking. So we may go on our own personal quest, a search for the true meaning of Christianity. And this may go on and on for years and years, perhaps never finding a complete resolution. We become like Lessing, on an eternal quest for truth.

Throughout the history of the Christian church there have been those who have felt an ardent desire to search out the ways of God. This is certainly not altogether a bad thing, for it is only through questioning, meditating and much prayer that a Christian grows and matures in faith and understanding of God’s Word. Martin Luther exemplifies this searching approach to the spiritual life. Simon Peter, King David, and Solomon all conducted personal journeys of faith through which the Holy Spirit assisted them in seeking out answers and solutions to spiritual difficulties. Many more names could be added to the list of those who are already “religious,” who have already been regenerated, but still seek that something extra which they sense is lacking in their hearts and lives.

It is the focus of this paper to analyze a segment of this search which took place in the 1520’s in Switzerland. Conrad Grebel and his brothers in Zurich grappled with many of the same “justification/sanctification” or “dogma versus morals” issues with which many in the church grapple today. It might not be too presumptuous to say that many of our present-day religious controversies, ranging from the role of women in the church to whether or not God’s Word is infallible and verbally-inspired are, at least in part, controversies that have arisen because of problems dealing with a correct understanding of the Christian life and what it means, in a very practical sense, to be and live as Christian in an imperfect and sinful world.

I believe that there are thousands and thousands of Christians today, including many in our own Wisconsin Synod, who are looking for a definitive answer to the question, "What is true Christianity?" What does it mean to "be a Christian?" What is the bottom line on Christian discipleship? The question can be worded in various ways, but the inquiries intersect on that crossroads of spiritual searching, that ongoing quest for truth that appears to be part and parcel of the human experience.

I will strive in the following pages to deal with the question and to examine the various answers which were proposed during the 1520's, many of which are still being offered today as solutions to this problem of nailing down Christian faith and life. After examining the respective Anabaptist and Lutheran positions, we will let Scripture be the final arbitrator and the infallible standard. Of course, both camps used the Bible to substantiate their stands. Who used it faithfully? I hope to make this clear as our search for true Christianity progresses. And I think we will find that God does, indeed, provide us with a definitive answer to our question and gives us a clear and comforting conclusion to our spiritual quest for inner peace.

Before proceeding further, I must clarify my use of the terms Anabaptist and Swiss Brethren. All participants in the radical phase of the Reformation were keenly disappointed that Luther and Zwingli failed to bring about a change not only in doctrine but in life as well. They also disavowed several fundamental dogmatic statements of Catholics and Protestants alike. Almost all of these groups disagreed with Luther's teaching on the will and good works. Most emphasized the necessity of good works as evidence of salvation. Some of the radicals wanted to establish a visible church composed only of voluntary believers. This led them to deny infant baptism and question Luther's teachings concerning the invisible church. It seems also that a denial of the real presence in the Lord's Supper was a feature of radical teaching which all the groups held in common.

This left wing of the Reformation was a veritable banyan tree. Roots and branches, parent stock and offshoots, all difficult to distinguish. Even as is the case today, there were vast theological differences amongst these emerging denominations even though they were all lumped together under the umbrella term, "Anabaptist." This has led some to confusion and, perhaps, oversimplification when studying the Reformation period. It is very difficult, for example, to talk about the Anabaptist position on predestination. There really is no Anabaptist position on predestination which would satisfy all of the elements from Caspar Schwenckfeld, the Spiritualist, to Michael Servetus, the Italian humanist, who denied just about everything in the Bible but still called himself a Christian. It is something akin to asking what the Lutherans today teach about fellowship. It depends on which Lutherans you ask. So, too, among the Anabaptists in the 1520's.

Nevertheless, some attempt must be made to narrow the scope of our study. Historians tend to categorize the Anabaptist dissidents into three main groupings: the "true" or "proper" Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Evangelical Rationalists.¹ Those who believed in a restored and gathered congregation of believers under strict discipline and some type of separation from the world and state would fit under the first heading. Generally, the Swiss, the South German, and the Mennonite Anabaptists belonged to this group. The Hutterian Brethren would comprise a second grouping, holding to a church-community in which all things would theoretically be held in common. Thomas Muntzer and the Munster Anabaptists, with their belief in the church-kingdom, would probably fit into this same general grouping. There were men like Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and Hans Denck who held to an inward, invisible, spiritual and universal church.² These men might be considered the Spiritualists, stressing the importance of the "inner word" in contrast to the "outer word," or what they called Biblicism.³ Lastly, there were the Rationalists who opposed the doctrine of the Trinity and denied the authority of the Old Testament. They were greatly influenced by Renaissance humanism and tried to explain the great mysteries of the Word by utilizing logic and human reason.

Three communities among today's denominations can claim direct or indirect descent from these three main groupings. The first, made up of the Amish, the Mennonites, and related bodies, goes back to the Anabaptists "proper." The communitarian Hutterites may be seen as a bridge between the proper Anabaptists and the Spiritualists. The Pennsylvania Schwenckfelder Church stems directly from the Spiritualist, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and a third class, the Unitarians, derive a large share of their heritage from the Evangelical Rationalists. The Baptists of our time may not trace direct ancestry from any of these groups, though they have stronger ties to the Anabaptists proper than to the others.⁴

In this paper we will focus our attention on the Anabaptists proper, primarily referring to the Swiss Brethren in the 1520's, a group of mostly young humanist scholars led by Conrad Grebel, who had gathered in Zurich to study languages under the tutelage of the reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. Their initial devotion to his cause and their subsequent alienation and opposition to Zwingli will occupy the first section of this study. Mennonite historians like to call these early Anabaptists "evangelical Anabaptists" in an attempt to differentiate them from the Spiritualists and Rationalists who in later years took to doctrines far afield from those that were being defended by Grebel and his associates in the early years. In general, the Swiss radicals stressed the New Testament as the standard of all teaching and morals and emphasized the importance of the new covenant into which man and God may enter, made possible by Christ's atoning sacrifice on Calvary. Their repudiation of infant baptism, of course, won for them a certain degree of infamy in Protestant circles and led to a determined and violent effort on the part of their contemporary church leaders to silence their teachings.

Most of them went willingly to a martyr's death or patiently endured public exile and humiliation. Their zeal and commitment is obvious. The correctness of their beliefs demands close scrutiny. One thing stands clear: Grebel and his friends were, without question, part of Lessing's eternal quest for truth. They sought something more in their relationship with God, not content to accept the peace of Luther's justification through faith alone, certainly not content to follow Zwingli's slow pace of reform in Zurich. Their impatience to find that which they

sensed was missing fostered a compelling impetus in their search for a pure spiritual life. Their preoccupation with living the sanctified Christian life is both commendable and repulsive as it led to excesses smacking of religious elitism and crass legalism. This is precisely why a study of their movement is both fascinating and practical. We all, at one time or another, desire something more in our personal relationship with God. We all feel impatience with the pace of our own spiritual progress or that of the congregation and church at large. We all daily fight the temptation to let our Christianity evolve into a moralizing standard of ethical conduct, a series of spiritual prescriptions for daily life. Thus, we can learn much from a study of the Swiss Brethren. Perhaps we can profit from their zeal and, at the same time, heed their mistakes so that we avoid the same pitfalls. We are all, to one extent or another, searching for true Christianity.

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- ³ Loewen, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- ⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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Part One:

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF ANABAPTISM

I. In The Footsteps of Christ

*Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine:
Gifts in diff'ring measure, hearts of one accord,
Manifold the service, one the sure reward.*

*Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine.*

*Wider grows the kingdom, reign of love and light;
For it we must labor, till our faith is sight;
Prophets have proclaimed it, martyrs testified,
Poets sung its glory, heroes for it died.*

*Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine.*

– F.L. Hosmer, 1908¹

Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz certainly considered themselves to be part of the “unbroken line” of faithful spirits who had truly testified of the Savior in spite of hardships and persecutions. As they peered back through the ages they sought to establish a kinship with the prophets, poets, and martyrs who had labored in the kingdom’s fields. The Swiss Brethren and their spiritual comrades in Germany and the Netherlands believed that they stood as latter-day heroes in the manner of the Apostle Paul, Savonarola, Hus, and Wycliffe, striving to reclaim for the church its apostolic bearings from a purer and simpler time. They would surely have echoed the words of Thomas a Kempes who, in his Imitation of Christ, marvelled at the

religious fervor of the early church and then lamented the chilly indifference toward inner spiritual enlightenment and commitment he saw in his own day:

How countless and constant were the trials endured by the Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, and all those who strove to follow in the footsteps of Christ. These all hated their lives in this world, that they might keep them to life eternal. How strict and self-denying was the life of the holy Fathers! How great their zeal and ardour for spiritual progress! How pure and upright their intention before God!

(But...)...the carelessness and coldness of this present time! Sloth and lukewarmness make life wearisome for us, and we soon lose our early fervour! May the longing to grow in grace not remain dormant in you, who have been privileged to witness so many examples of the holy life. ²

Thomas a Kempes was a devout Roman Catholic monk who spent most of his life in a Dutch monastery in the early Middle Ages (1380-1471), yet his writings have remarkable similarities to the pietistic penning of a latter day and could have easily been devotionally used by Grebel or Hubmaier or Menno Simons.

The Anabaptists saw themselves as the spiritual descendants of the martyrs and confessors who “strove to follow in the footsteps of Christ.” They were the purveyors of the Gospel’s flame of apostolic purity and zeal to their own time and the people entrusted by God with the awesome task of passing the torch on to the succeeding generations.

The Anabaptists strove mightily to uncover that naked seed of the gospel. They wished to recapture the “ardour for spiritual progress” for which Kempes had praised the early church. They wanted to reestablish the Apostolic Church here on earth in its original form and intent. How the Anabaptists saw themselves is the key to an attempt at understanding their particular interpretation of scripture’s divine call and the methodologies they would utilize in seeking to widen the kingdom’s reign of love and life.

In order to establish a basis for one's own beliefs and philosophies, it is incumbent that there be some cognizance of the historical background for the foundations on which you are asked to build your personal system of life. The same may be said of groups or bodies of people in the religious realm of competing doctrinal systems and formulas. The Anabaptists could only define their purpose by explicitly stating what they agreed or disagreed with in the existing church. And that was possible only after coming to some sort of resolution as to what Jesus Christ had intended His church to be and what, in fact, it had become as the generations retained and changed and adapted. As the Anabaptist movement surveyed the history of the church on earth, what did they see and how did they interpret their data? What did they see that needed reclaiming and/or reforming?

Of course, a reforming spirit had been in the air long before the 1520's. John Hus challenged the church of his day to return to its earlier purity and found himself crying, "O Christ, thou Son of the Living God, have mercy on me," as the flames leaped up his stake near the Rhine River in July of 1415. Savonarola, dying at the hands of a mocking and abusive crowd in Florence in 1498, prophesied that "the reformation of the church will come soon; already the light begins to dawn."

All through the Middle Ages the voices of councils, clergy, kings, and lay people had been crying for an end to the corruption of the institutional church. By the year 1500, many proposals for reform had been heard, but there was little agreement about how these might be carried out. All, however, seemed to agree that reformation meant a return of the church to its first century apostolic roots. In this sense the Reformation was a backward-looking movement. Somewhere along the line the church had fallen and it now needed to return to a virtue it had once possessed.³

What were the abuses in the church that so many detected? The usual litany of Roman Catholic vices included financial scandals, the varied and numerous sins of the papacy, unseemly church involvement in secular and political affairs, and the personal moral shortcomings of the clergy.⁴ It is not the purpose of this paper to examine these problems

closely; however, in relation to our consideration of Anabaptist reactionary trends in response to “institutionalized” religion, one aspect of Roman Catholic “failure” must be highlighted.

The Anabaptists were not the first to see the decay of a vibrant, personal religious experience in the lives of the clergy and the laity. We have already briefly considered Thomas a Kempes and his Imitation of Christ. Kempes is representative of a movement in the church which profoundly influenced many, even leaving its footprints on Erasmus and Luther. This movement has been called mysticism.

Mysticism may be seen as a response to a perceived lack of spiritual progress in the lives of the people and of the church’s disinterest or neglect of personal piety and an active faith-life amongst clergy and laity alike. The mystics were men and women who cultivated an inner, personal, religion and sought intimate union with God. Personal, first-hand experience was for them the final authority in matters of faith. “God could be best known through self-denial, contemplation, and spiritual insight.”⁵

The Anabaptist’s stress on a personal devotion and discipleship can certainly be seen as a continuation of this reforming trend which could claim Bernard of Clairvaux, Master Eckhart, and John Tauler as adherents. This is not to say that all of the groups and individuals influenced by mysticism espoused identical or even similar doctrinal views, yet there was a shared concern for a *devotio moderno* or new devotion.

It is interesting to note that St. Bernard never rejected the church with all of its institutional trappings. The rites and ceremonies were retained even though for Bernard they were largely extraneous. God could best be known through personal insight and concentration on love. The church could be of great assistance on this journey to God, but the individual and his relationship with the Trinity apart from a formalized church relationship was of the greater importance.

However, the Anabaptists could never quite keep both personal discipleship and organized church polity. This will be clearly seen in the break with Zwingli in Zurich. For the “Anabaptist mystic” the organized church became not an aide but a definite hindrance

to walking in the footsteps of Christ. Ultimately, not only the “old” church of the Catholics but the “new” church of the Protestant Reformation were summarily jettisoned. Finally, the Anabaptists rejected mere reformation of an existing institution or even the creation of a new and improved model. Instead they opted for a reclamation of something they came to believe had not simply been misplaced or altered, but totally lost. To them, the Apostolic Church was in residence neither in Rome nor Wittenberg and, to their great dismay, it slipped also out of Zurich.

II. Anabaptist Origins in Zurich

In the twentieth century they are the “left,” the “weathermen,” “populists,” “liberals” (to some), or just plain “radicals.” In other times and places they have been called “Turks,” “Cathars,” “atheists,” and “reds.” In every age there are those whose thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are inconsistent with and viewed with suspicion by the majority. In the 16th century, people who today would be called radicals were usually referred to as Anabaptists:

Radical elements within a historical period have certain common characteristics – great sincerity and enthusiasm, refusal to compromise, and a mode of behavior that disrupts the normal activities of society. These characteristics tempt people to believe that radical movements are monolithic and interrelated, but in fact they are normally more diverse in origin and doctrine than the societies they are criticizing. The tendency to lump all radical groups under a single heading was present during the Reformation just as it is today, and the 16th century saw them all as Anabaptists. ⁶

This predilection to throw everybody into the same basket can make it difficult to really pin down exactly who the Anabaptists were. The radicals found their beginnings in various places and there were significant differences among the groups. For our purposes we will devote most attention to the Swiss Anabaptists who found their origins in Zwingli’s Zurich.

Ulrich Zwingli was two months younger than Martin Luther and in many ways mirrored Luther's zealotry and desire for true church reform. He studied for the priesthood and attained this office at the age of twenty-one. One year before Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Zwingli was speaking out against church abuses in Switzerland.⁷ Zwingli was a popular preacher, as a result of which he left his small parish in Einsiedeln in 1519 to be installed in the prestigious church in Zurich. Here he startled his congregation by preaching directly out of the Bible. As he continued his scripturally-based expositions, he found himself drifting farther away from traditional Catholic positions.

By the middle of 1522, the Catholics in Zurich and other Swiss towns became so aroused they began to threaten Zwingli. As was customary in those days, the Council of the Two Hundred, which was the governing body of the city of Zurich, arranged for a disputation to resolve the growing crisis. The end result was that the council backed Zwingli, who had by this time resigned as priest of the Roman Catholic Church and had been reinstated by the council, under their authority, with instructions to preach nothing but the Gospel truth.

Inspired by Zwingli's "back-to-the-Scriptures" movement, Bible study groups had formed in Zurich in the early 1520's. These groups came to be known as the Swiss Brethren and those involved were becoming keenly aware of the seeming contradictions between traditional religious forms and Biblical practice. In this the Brethren were largely following Zwingli's lead as they imitated his concern for the "ancient and inner things of faith."⁸ 1522 and 1523 saw a wave of house meetings for Bible study. These groups encouraged what might be termed "Biblical radicalism" among the common people and increasingly grew adamant in their feeling that the true believers must return to Christianity's roots, even if this meant a rejection of the established church organization, whenever that institution varied from "primitive, Apostolic" Christianity.

As Zwingli's preaching and consequent process of reformation went on, the council found it increasingly difficult to accept all the implications arising from his rediscovery of the Gospel.⁹ Zwingli came to the conclusion that the taking of interest (taxes) was unbiblical. The

Zurich area peasants petitioned the city council to do away with this tax but, faced with a substantial loss of income, the aldermen decided to slow the pace of change. The reactions of Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren to the council's move differed dramatically, revealing the first seeds of discontent amongst the Brethren that would eventually grow to a repudiation of Zwinglian-style reformation. Wilhelm Reublin, a Zurich priest, and Conrad Grebel, a reader in one of the Bible study groups, urged Zwingli to ignore the council's decision and refrain from paying the tax. Zwingli refused, preferring to work with the civic authorities as much as possible to bring about the reform he desired. The Brethren wanted their change now. Even though, as we shall see, there developed distinct doctrinal divisions between the two parties, it is also not incorrect to say that a major point of contention concerned simply how fast the old should be replaced by the new. Zwingli was certainly no slowpoke in his reforming efforts, but to men like Reublin, Grebel and others, his inability or unwillingness to force the council's hand was finally interpreted as a betrayal of the movement.

Because of delays and compromises with the Council of Two Hundred, this feeling of dissatisfaction began to grow within the circle of Zwingli's most devoted disciples. Zwingli's negotiations with the council on the question of when to replace the Roman Mass with an evangelical communion service resulted in the first recorded outright disagreement in the Zwinglian camp. Zwingli submitted to the council's decree that, even though they and the majority of the people accepted the validity of Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper, they had no intentions of hurrying along external changes in religious practices. Zwingli accepted this indefinite delay rather than jeopardize his working relationship with the council.¹⁰ Grebel and Simon Stumpf, a priest in the country town of Hongg, were not quite so willing as Zwingli to see the council left with the responsibility of running their reformation. In October of 1523 the following exchange took place:

Conrad Grebel rose and thought that the priests should be given instructions, since they were all present, as to what should be done about the Mass...

Zwingli: My Lords [the Council] will decide how to proceed with the Mass.

Simon Stumpf: Master Ulrich, you have no authority to place the decision in the hands of my Lords, for the decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides. ¹¹

Soon would come the break between the “conservative” and “radical” reformers.

Conrad Grebel (1495-1526) was the chief leader of the Swiss Brethren during this period. Grebel was the son of a well-to-do family in Zurich who had spent his youth rather aimlessly in Vienna and Paris studying at the universities. Zwingli had taken him under his spiritual wings and led him to a strong personal commitment to the Bible and the cause of reform. But as is sometimes true of new converts to the faith, his initial zealotry developed into an uncompromising piety that grew frustrated at the inconsistencies, weaknesses, and shortcomings of his fellow Christians. We might term this a kind of “Christian idealism” which fails to take into account that, even though perfection in faith-life is something for which we must continually strive, nevertheless the Old Adam kicks and fights and often causes even the best of us to stumble and fall. Grebel and his group seem to have finally decided to discard Zwingli when it became apparent that the man was not perfect and failed to measure up as the Christian Superman they had believed him to be. His willingness to work with the council, whom Grebel and Stumpf had deemed incompetent to judge in religious matters, vexed them sorely and they began to search for the tool by which they could pry themselves away from this sullied reform movement.

From the October, 1523, disagreement with Zwingli cited earlier, events moved quickly. Grebel and Stumpf urged complete abolition of the Mass without further hesitation. When the council left the matter to the discretion of each priest, Stumpf resigned and became a lay minister. On November 3, the council ordered him into exile. The breaking point was at hand, and infant baptism became the debate around which positions solidified and compromise

became impossible. Grebel and the Bible study groups had been uncomfortable with the practice for some time because they saw no scriptural example of it. As time passed and their hand was forced, so to speak, by the council's intransigence on the Mass and Stumpf's exile, they went public with their views and called the question. It was as if they were telling Zwingli and his council, "Fine, so you won't change the Mass. Well, you're not only wrong about that but you've really blown it on baptism, too, and it's about time everybody knew it!"

In early 1523, Wilhelm Reublin was preaching against infant baptism in Zollikon and Witikon. His boldness in advocating a position that neither the Catholics nor Zwinglians held landed him in jail. In September of 1524, Conrad Grebel wrote letters to Luther, Andreas Carlstadt, and Thomas Muntzer expressing the conviction that, as the Reformation continued, the Word of God should be the only and final authority. In addition, Grebel's letters addressed the Swiss Brethren's concern over a correct understanding of baptism. Clearly, Grebel and his circle had abandoned any last hope that Zwingli would see things their way and were reaching out to other potential allies.

Part of Grebel's letter to Muntzer attempts to outline his views on baptism:

We understand that even an adult is not to be baptized without Christ's rule of binding and loosing. The scripture describes baptism for us thus, that it signifies that by faith and the blood of Christ sins have been washed away for him who is baptized, changes his mind, and believes before and after; that it signifies that a man is dead and ought to be dead to sin and walks in newness of life and spirit, and that he shall certainly be saved if, according to this meaning, he lives his faith by inner baptism; so that the water does not confirm or increase faith, as the scholars at Wittenberg say, and [does not] give comfort [nor] is it the final refuge on the death bed. Also baptism does not save... 12

Convinced of their correctness in this matter, the Brethren petitioned the city council to repudiate infant baptism and generally reform the church in accordance with what they held as Scriptural principles. Zwingli opposed their request. A debate was conducted in front of the

council between Zwingli and his former colleagues, the result being that Zwingli's position was upheld and the Brethren's rejected. The magistrates demanded that the Brethren have their infants baptized and subject themselves to the authority and discipline of the Council of Two Hundred, which still reigned supreme at this time in dictating the course of reformation in Zurich. Concerning infant baptism in particular the council agreed with Zwingli that the initiation of children into Christianity by baptism was comparable to the initiation of infants into Judaism by circumcision.¹³ The council further ruled that any parents who refused to baptize their children should be expelled from the Zurich area. One week was given for the Brethren to choose between compliance and exile.

On the evening of January 21, 1525, Grebel and the others met at the home of Felix Mantz to consider their next move. Five years later an Anabaptist in Klettgau, Switzerland, wrote to a group of comrades in Cologne describing what happened:

Therefore, dear brothers, since you have asked us about the beginning of the brotherhood of the Swiss Brethren, it was about the time when men wrote the year 1522 that Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, a nobleman, and Felix Mantz – all three very learned men, experienced in the German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages – came to discuss matters of faith, and discovered that infant baptism is unnecessary, also not known as a baptism. Thereupon the two – Conrad and Felix – believed and confessed that one must, according to Christian order, be baptized according to the words of Christ: he who believes and is baptized shall be saved. This led to disunity among the three, and Ulrich Zwingli did not wish this, but said that it would create a disturbance. But the two previously mentioned men held that one could not ignore God's command because of that.

Meanwhile it happened that a priest with the name of George, of the house of Jacob, who was called George Blaurock because he wore a blue coat, also came with a particular zeal he had towards God's will. He was held to be an ordinary and simple priest but with a godly zeal in matters of faith, who through the grace of God which was given him acted in a strange manner. He came to Zwingli and talked to him about the faith, but achieved nothing. Thereupon he was told that there were others who had more zeal than Zwingli.

These he sought out and came to them, namely, to Conrad and Felix, and talked with them and they became united in these things.

And it happened that they were together. After fear lay greatly upon them, they called upon God in heaven, that he should show mercy to them. Then George arose and asked Conrad for God's sake to baptize him: and this he did. After that, he baptized the others also. [Grebel or Blaurock? If Grebel, who baptized him?] After this, more priests and other people were added who soon sealed it with their blood. So also the above-named Felix Mantz, who was the first; he was drowned at Zurich. Wolfgang Uliman was burned at Waltzen with ten others including his brother, who was his companion. He was the seventh. After him a cleric named Hans Pretle [Johann Brotli] who was also our servant in the land. And thus it spread through persecution, as with Michael Sattler and many of his relatives. Thus also Melchoir Veit, who was George Blaurock's companion, who was burned at Dracha.

Thus you have the facts about what happened at the beginning. Later many things happened, so that many ran disorderly. But the sure foundation of truth remained. The Lord knows his own. Let those who call upon the name of the Lord forsake unrighteousness. And so you have the account of the beginning concerning which you should have no doubt, for we have most surely experienced it. ¹⁴

There could be debate at this point as to whether the Swiss Brethren acted out of desire to break with Zwingli as part of a devised strategem, or if they sincerely felt that the time had come to simply express their inner convictions regardless of the consequences. I must opt for the latter. How else can you explain a decision which certainly must lead to such dire results? Capito, the reformer of Strassburg, wrote in 1527 concerning the Swiss Brethren:

I frankly confess that in most [of them] there is in evidence piety and consecration and indeed a zeal which is beyond any suspicion of insincerity. For what earthly advantage could they hope to win by enduring exile, torture, and unspeakable punishment of the flesh. I testify before God that I cannot say that on account of a lack of wisdom they are somewhat indifferent toward earthly things, but rather from divine motives. ¹⁵

In their desire to root out and reestablish true, apostolic Christianity, the Swiss Brethren were relentless. Their zeal, if not always their doctrine, must be admired. If only all the possessors of the true doctrine were armed also with such an iron ardor for proclaiming the truth! The Swiss Anabaptists sought, at least in part, not so much a reformation of doctrine as a reclamation of a lost way of life. They came to realize that doctrine and life are inseparable and were eventually forced to produce a style of systematic theology in an attempt to define just what type of life it was they wished the true Christian to live.

As we continue our search for the true Christianity in the next section of this paper, it becomes increasingly clear that a seemingly irresolvable tension often exists in the church. Those who stress doctrinal refinement as their exclusive domain often fail to live the pure Word they profess to defend, hoarding and protecting it from danger, but taking few risks in propagating the numbers of those who can only be saved by sharing in it. This is how the Swiss Brethren came to see the Lutherans.

Conversely, those who stress the personal, subjective, Spirit-filled life and demand a Christ-like piety and conduct a zealous, enthusiastic embracing of the Gospel's lessons of love and commitment, often find that their enthusiasm becomes a yoke greater to bear than any doctrinal suppositions. Their relentless pursuit of the appropriate Christian conduct becomes all too often a pharasaical rule, an unyielding grind that slowly evolves into but another style of work righteousness. Almost inevitably, their personal piety assumes a greater importance than pure doctrine and soon true Christianity becomes a self-actualizing idolatry. This is how the Lutherans and Zwinglians saw the Swiss Brethren.

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