
CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Introduction</i> | v |
| 1 Birth and Background | 1 |
| 2 Reformation or Radical Obedience | 11 |
| 3 Swiss Brethren | 21 |
| 4 Dutch Anabaptism | 31 |
| 5 South Germany and the Hutterites | 43 |
| 6 European Developments and Divisions | 55 |
| 7 The Russian Mennonite Story | 67 |
| 8 North American Beginnings | 79 |
| 9 Awakening Movements | 91 |
| 10 Modernity and Fundamentalism | 103 |
| 11 Upheaval and New Groups | 115 |
| 12 The Anabaptist Witness | 125 |
| 13 Following Jesus Today | 137 |
| Timeline | 150 |
| The Nicene Creed | 151 |
| The Schleithem Confession of Faith | 152 |
| Dordrecht Confession of Faith (Mennonite, 1632) | 159 |
| Selected Bibliography | 173 |
| Daily Readings | 175 |

INTRODUCTION

The first Anabaptists were seekers. And they were seekers who found. As they sought renewal in the institutional church of their day, they encountered Christ in the Scriptures and were stirred to a personal response. The words of Christ pierced through the religious debates of the Protestant Reformation: “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” These words lit a fire. Christ, the chosen One of God to redeem creation, was calling each of them individually to follow Him, to surrender themselves and abandon themselves to Him. He was asking for their allegiance and obedience, calling them to take action and join His work!

They understood that Christ was calling them to die to their old selves and their old allegiances and to follow Christ into the new day of the resurrection. In uniting themselves with Christ, they would become part of His body, an actual community of believers grounded in a particular time and place. While yielding to Christ and committing one’s life to Him was a personal choice, it was also a choice to join the church, the corporate reality of being in Christ. In the church, believers worked together by the light of the indwelling Spirit to further God’s work of reconciliation in the world.

As they studied the New Testament teachings about the church, these seekers came to see baptism as the public expression of their choice to renounce sin and Satan and to identify with Christ and His body. They saw no license in the Scriptures for relegating their faith to the private spiritual sphere; it was a corporate and public reality. In other words, their baptism not only signified an inner spiritual experience, but also proclaimed their total allegiance to the Christ King and a vow to realign every aspect of their life, inner and outer, with His rule.

Looking back at this original vision and at the developments in the Anabaptist movement since, we can ask, “What is the value in studying the stories of our history? Does knowing the past help us today?”

This is a worthwhile question. We can see in the Scriptures that remembering the past comes with both potential benefits and potential perils. After God opened a path across the Jordan River for the children of Israel to pass through into the promised land, Joshua instructed them to gather stones from the river and build a memorial to help them remember God’s faithful acts on their behalf. The people were to pass the memory of that experience down to their children, not to make them nostalgic about the past or to encourage a sense of superiority, but rather to assure them of God’s constant faithfulness and to strengthen their trust in Him. Retaining a memory of the past would strengthen them for living faithfully in the present.

In another instance, God used a brass serpent on a pole as a symbol and instrument of healing power. The sculpture, preserved as a reminder of God’s miraculous intervention, later became a problem: later generations saw it as a substitute for God rather than a reminder of the need to depend on Him. Memories of the past served to derail rather than strengthen their faith.

Studying our own history presents similar possibilities. If the story of “our people” urges us toward greater faithfulness in our walk with Christ, studying the history is worthwhile. Following are some examples of the ways that our history can be a resource toward faithfulness:

- ◆ It reminds us of our utter dependence on God for redemption and for living a life worthy of our calling.
- ◆ It challenges us to submit to the authority of the Scriptures.
- ◆ It assures us that God’s Spirit enables believers to endure severe persecutions and difficulties.
- ◆ It encourages us to return blessing for cursing, to have a loving, forgiving spirit even toward those who treat us unfairly.

- ◆ It urges us to carry out the mission of Christ's body without regard to national, political, or ethnic boundaries.
- ◆ It encourages us to yield to and respect each other in the church in spite of differences that are difficult to tolerate.
- ◆ It warns us that pride in our own opinions and understandings leads to strife and division.

On the other hand, studying our history could be detrimental:

- ◆ It could make us feel superior to other people.
- ◆ It might cause us to be apathetic and nonchalant in our pursuit of Christ. We can inadvertently begin to rely on the strength of our structure to carry us, rather than feeling our constant need to move toward Christ.
- ◆ It can lure us into thinking that a particular time in history was the pure and perfect moment to which we must strive to return.

Looking at our history honestly should help us avoid these mistakes. While there is much to appreciate and admire, the historical record has no perfect, pristine chapter that provides a gold standard for us. Instead, the story is full of normal people, people who repeatedly fell short of loving God with all of their beings and loving their neighbor as themselves. And yet, this is exactly what is hopeful about the story. Generation after generation, Christ continues to call imperfect people to follow Him and to bear the treasure of His resurrected life in "earthen vessels."

Our prayer is that this study will be a blessing to you and your congregation. As you ponder the events of the last five centuries, may you be encouraged to take your place in this cloud of witnesses, moving toward greater faithfulness in your walk with Christ today and preparing future generations to do the same.

Kendall Myers
Project Chair

LESSON 1

BIRTH AND BACKGROUND



LESSON AIM

To trace the story of the church from its inception at Pentecost to the events that led to the baptism of adult believers on January 21, 1525

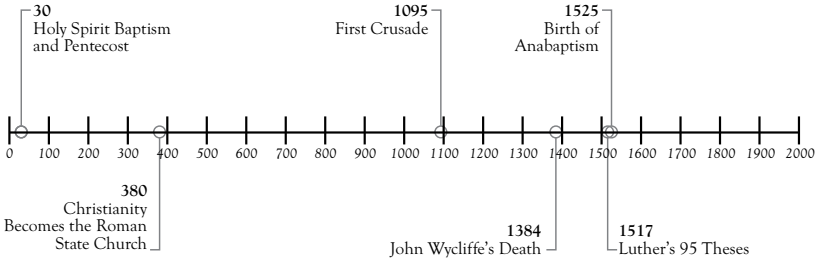
MAJOR ISSUES

- ◆ The story of the church
- ◆ Relationship of church and state
- ◆ The perils of apostasy

SCRIPTURES TO CONSIDER

- ◆ Acts 2. The birth of the church
- ◆ 1 Peter 2. Peter's description of the church, our relationship to governing authorities, and our response to suffering
- ◆ Romans 13. The role of the state

LESSON 1



INTRODUCTION

January 21, 1525

On a cold winter evening in Zurich, Switzerland, a group of a dozen or so young men made their way singly and in pairs to the home of Felix Manz to pray and talk. They had been meeting for months to study the Bible and to seek the Spirit's leading. Now they faced an ultimatum from the Zurich authorities: quit meeting together and submit to the practices of the state church. What should they do? To resist would cost them everything, but to obey would violate what appeared to them the clear teachings of Scripture. They could not avoid the words of Jesus: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Here is the eyewitness account of what happened:

And it came to pass that they were together until anxiety came upon them, yes, they were so pressed in their hearts. Thereupon they began to bow their knees to the Most High God in heaven and called upon him as the Informer of Hearts, and they prayed that he would give to them his divine will and that he would show his mercy unto them. For flesh and blood and human forwardness did not drive them, since they well knew what they would have to suffer on account of it.

After the prayer, George of the House of Jacob stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God's sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained minister to perform such work.

After his baptism at the hands of Grebel, Blaurock proceeded to baptize all the others present. The newly baptized then pledged themselves as true disciples of Christ to live lives separated from the world and to teach the gospel and hold the faith.¹

Thus Anabaptism was born. But what had been happening to bring the men to this point?

LESSON

Back to the Beginning

The story begins many centuries before with another group of people gathered in a house to talk, to pray, and to wait on God. Jesus, the one they had come to believe in as the Messiah and Savior, had told them to wait for the baptism from on high. There, with tongues of fire and the sound of a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit fell on the believers, filling them with God's own presence and empowering them to carry forward His plan of redemption. There the church was born. In Jesus, God had entered our world, and now through the church, He would continue to be present in the world in visible form.

On that Day of Pentecost, believers entered this visible body of Christ one by one through baptism. After they entered, "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the

1. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, Vol. 1 (Plough Publishing House, 1987), 45.

breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Initially, the apostles were the primary sources for understanding the life and teachings of Jesus. Their listeners passed their messages on to others. As the disciples multiplied over the next decades, sometimes questions arose in outlying areas. Church leaders could consult with the disciples who had listened and learned from Jesus firsthand. Fortunately, before the apostles died, they—or those who heard them—wrote down their stories and teachings. For the next several centuries, these writings were copied and read in the regular gatherings of the church.

From Jerusalem, the church spread as Jesus had commanded throughout Judea, north into Samaria, and then further north and west via Paul’s missionary travels throughout the Roman Empire. According to church tradition, the other apostles carried the Gospel as far west as Spain and the British Isles, south into Egypt and Africa, and east into Persia and the East Indies.²

In the early centuries of the church, the Gospel had its greatest acceptance among the poor and oppressed. Many slaves became believers, but some wealthy and influential people also believed. The transforming, unifying power of the Gospel was demonstrated over and over as rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile came together in one body as brothers and sisters.

The leveling into true brotherhood was markedly manifest in the weekly gatherings, which consisted of three main parts: the first, a meal that provided significant sustenance for those who had little; the second, a time of open worship in which anyone could offer a testimony, a prophecy, or recitation of Scripture; and the third, the sharing of bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus. Of this, Alan Kreider writes:

At the heart of early Christian worship was table fellowship . . . Many people are present who in the wider society are powerless, of no account, and who

2. Thieleman J. van Bragt, *The Martyrs Mirror* (Mennonite Publishing House, 1950) 72-97.

will never have enough money or influence to be at a non-Christian banquet. Here, in the Christian banquet, they have worth. Not only can they eat; they can speak. . . . The poor, who have never been at a banquet, need to learn the politesse and discipline of a meal. The richer members, who may have frequented an association's banquets, need to learn the values of a community that does not seat people by rank but values the poor as equals.³

During the first three centuries, persecution at times stifled the growth of the church. On the other hand, opposition sometimes seemed to energize it, causing the early church father Tertullian to write, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." After a particularly severe decade of persecution under Diocletian, however, the new emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. This order gave everyone, including Christians, the freedom to worship whatever deity they pleased, gave Christians legal right to organize churches, and directed the return of confiscated property to Christians.

Merging of Church and State

The toleration of Christians under Constantine soon shifted toward a cooperative relationship. When a controversy arose over the nature of Christ,⁴ Constantine ordered a gathering of church bishops in Nicaea to settle it and presided over the gathering himself. The Nicene Creed emerged from this conference in 325, and although it did not eliminate Arianism from the empire, it became the official stance of the church regarding Jesus' nature. Thus, despite the blurred witness that resulted from (and worsened with) the merging of church and civil authority, good things also followed. Today, all orthodox churches affirm the Nicene Creed.

As the church grew in wealth and power, it also grew in influence

3. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 186, 188.

4. Arius taught that Jesus was a created being, not truly divine.

until the emperor Theodosius in 380 declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

But even before Theodosius' move, people were pressured, even forced at times, to convert to Christianity. Tragically, those who had formerly been persecuted for their faith came to persecute those who refused the faith. As one historian put it, "Just as the sword had flashed in defence of the old religion so would it now flash in defence of the new."⁵

Many Christians—both at the time and through the centuries since—viewed the favor of Constantine and the resultant merging of church and state as an advance of Christianity. Others, including the Anabaptists, saw it as a terrible fall: the church had forsaken the way of Jesus and had taken the ways of the world.

This merging resulted not only in forced conversions, but in "holy wars" (or more accurately the unholy Crusades), and in rivalry between popes and kings. Sometimes this rivalry was between popes, for at times there was more than one pope. The wealth of the church also led to excesses, drunkenness, and immorality in the lives of priests, bishops, and popes. Beliefs and practices foreign to the New Testament emerged—praying to saints, infant baptism, worship of Mary, purgatory, and the sale of indulgences.⁶

Light in Dark Places

However, not all was dark. In the late 1100s, Peter Waldo, a wealthy cloth merchant, read the New Testament and became convicted to sell his business and live in poverty. He and his followers traveled around preaching the Gospel. Eventually, they were persecuted by the Catholic authorities.

In the 1300s, John Wycliffe preached against sins he observed in the church and specifically against the doctrine of

5. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 42.

6. An indulgence was a grant from the pope remitting part or all of a person's suffering for sin, either in this life or in purgatory. Money from the sale of indulgences funded building projects for the church.

transubstantiation,⁷ stirring the wrath of church officials. He also translated the Bible into English so the common people could read it. Wycliffe died of a stroke, but three decades after his death he was officially declared a heretic by Roman authorities, and his body was exhumed and burned.

In the early 1400s, Thomas à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, a devotional classic that continues to inspire believers today. In the same century, John Hus led a group that eventually came to be known as the Moravian Church. His followers were characterized by devout prayers and evangelistic zeal.

Some historians have attempted to trace an undivided line of a “pure church” from the time of the apostles to modern times. Perhaps it is better to recognize that although there have always been devout believers through the centuries, no group has been perfect. The great wonder of grace is that despite many failures in the church, some of them horrendous, Jesus has been building His church. Where the church wanes and becomes corrupted in one place or one era, it suddenly springs forth with new life in another. Our hope and our glory are not in ourselves, but in Jesus.

7. The teaching that the bread and wine in the mass literally becomes the body and blood of Jesus. Lanfranc of Bec, a Benedictine monk in the eleventh century, developed the rationale for this doctrine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was clarifying, surprising, or impactful in this lesson?
2. Why did the Gospel have its greatest appeal to lower levels of Roman society? Is this still so in our time?
3. What was gained and what was lost in Constantine's friendly stance toward the church?
4. What characteristics of the early church were no longer apparent by the time of the Reformation?
5. How have you observed the witness of the church waning in one area of the world and springing up elsewhere in recent times?
6. What lessons can we learn in looking back over church history and what assumptions should we avoid?
7. How is Christian nationalism today similar to and different from the shift that happened under Constantine?

SELECTED WRITING FOR LESSON 1

Balthasar Hubmaier, “The Twelve Articles,” 1526-1527

In this excerpt, Hubmaier comments on lines from the Apostles' Creed. The Anabaptists cherished the early writings, often referencing the Church Fathers in their own writings.

I believe also in Jesus Christ, your only Son, our Lord. I believe that he has made atonement to you, my Father, for the fall; that he has made peace between you and me, who am a poor sinner, and has won, through his obedience, an inheritance for me. He has now given me strength through the Holy Word which he has sent, so that I may become your child through faith. I hope and trust in him entirely. He will not allow the healing and comforting name of Jesus to be lost to me, a miserable sinner, but rather will save me from all my sins. For I believe that he is Christ, true God and true man.

I also believe and confess, my Lord Jesus Christ, that you were conceived through the Holy Spirit without human seed, and born of Mary a pure and eternally chaste virgin. This was to redeem me and all believing men and to obtain from your heavenly Father the grace of the Holy Spirit, which had been withdrawn from me on account of my sins. I believe and trust that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in me, and that the power of almighty God has overshadowed my soul like Mary's, and that I was conceived a new man, and born again of your living immortal Word, and in the Spirit. I believe that I shall behold the kingdom of God. You are the Son of the living God, and have become man, that we poor mortals might through you become the children of God.

I believe and confess that you suffered under the judge Pontius Pilate, that you were crucified, dead, and buried. All this you did on account of my sins in order that you might save me from eternal suffering, torment and death, by your cross, anguish, torment, and bitter death. Through your rose-coloured blood shed for me you purchased my redemption.

Your great love for us poor men can be seen in this: that you have given us, instead of a heavy cross, a light yoke; instead of your

bitter sorrow, indestructible joy; instead of your awful death, eternal life. Therefore, I praise and thank my kind Lord Jesus Christ for ever and ever.⁸

8. *Anabaptism in Outline*, 25, 26.