

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF THE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT AS PART OF THE FOUNDING OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

A history of condemnation in the Augsburg Confession

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My central question for today is: How was it possible for the churches of the Reformation to legitimize theologically their violence against the Anabaptist movement? And what have been the consequences until today? And what needs to be acknowledged as guilt?

1. THE BEGINNING: BREAKING OUT. FREEDOM. DIVERSITY

Luther's question to God – Do you love me even though I am egoistic? – and the resulting certainty of salvation SOLA GRATIA that he found by studying Scripture touched a nerve of the time. His colleague Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt had the same experience of salvation. Their analysis of church practice led them to recognize salvation by SOLA FIDE, not by works – which were so important for the church at the time. Karlstadt was the first to try to describe a reform with 140 theses in May (2017). Luther published his 95 theses in October 1517 with the hopes of discussing reform.

Luther's and also Karlstadt's lectures, writings, and disputations were noted within a very short time and over a long period throughout Germany. University students and pamphlets spread Luther's ideas about the authority of Scripture and the grace of God. Luther was a charismatic comforter. You can perhaps picture it if you think how young people today watch Johannes Hartl on Livestreams or how Joyce Meyer encourages thousands of women in their everyday lives on television at bibel.tv and god.tv.

Luther's ideas fell like a stroke of release from the burden of guilt. In many places theologians and lay people felt encouraged to study Scripture and share the new experience of God. These first two phases of the Reformation sank deep into the collective memory of evangelical Christendom and beyond as a gift of God to his people. It was the right impulse at the right time.

But how was it possible that ten years later condemnation of the Anabaptist movement was accepted into the Protestant confession and a theologically-based criminalization of Anabaptism was codified for centuries?

I believe it began with Luther's encounter with Cardinal Cajetan. The church finally reacts and questions the monk from Wittenberg. Cajetan is very intelligent and sees that with his emphasis on grace and faith Luther wants a different church. His approach is too radically different from tradition.

Luther soon realizes that he has to free himself from the authority of tradition in order to make grace and faith possible for others. SOLA SCRIPTURA is the third phase. He and his Wittenberg colleagues discover in the Holy Spirit the priesthood of all believers. They begin to dream of a new church, based on the Holy Spirit that teaches lay people through their reading of the Bible. Luther writes: "The Holy Spirit alone makes a Doctor of Theology, and

priest, bishop, and pope come out of the water of baptism.” Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt wrote: “At this time lay people are wiser and more educated than the theologians.” Every believer was encouraged to read and understand the Bible for himself. Dissatisfied and inspired peasants and artisans became lay preachers through the Word of the Bible. We can imagine that this led to an unusual diversity of interpretation and forms of community that also broke social boundaries.

In economically-aspiring Zwickau too, these early impulses – conveyed by Thomas Müntzer – fell on fertile soil. He encouraged a group of spiritually-inspired lay persons, who had probably existed for a long time already under the influence of Waldensian and Taborite piety and were characterized by a vision of community that would transcend social classes. You have to imagine that in Zwickau maids, artisans and councilmen listened to women giving their testimony or artisans interpreting the Bible. In 1520 Thomas Müntzer became preacher in the church of St. Katherine in Zwickau. Here he discovered the ideas of the priesthood of all believers published by Luther (the Holy Spirit alone makes a Doctor of Theology) and Karlstadt (at this time lay people are wiser and more educated). He confirmed Nikolaus Storch, an artisan, in his gift for teaching, and the group in their prophetic self-concept. They experienced a reformation revival.

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1. REJECTION OF ALL REFORMS BY THE POPE IN ROME

Right into this time of new visions and departures, mail from Rome arrives in Wittenberg. In 1520, the pope excommunicates Martin Luther, brusquely and categorically rejecting all Reformation ideas that came from Wittenberg. The dream of the Reformation of the beloved Church is destroyed.

Martin Luther rejected papal authority with sharp indignation and media-savvy by burning the bull of excommunication. But the Wittenbergers also began to negotiate the events by the Holy Spirit. This fourth phase of the Reformation is the well-known SOLUS CHRISTUS. It meant that we have to obey Christ more than the church. But now it also becomes clear how diversely the Reformers wanted to tackle the Reformation in their obedience to Christ.

2. THREE GUIDES FOR THE REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

Müntzer preached that the discipleship of Jesus begins in the heart where he convicts me of sin and liberates me from fear of man. This discipleship must then effect a change, forming a community of the elect and a more just society. According to his model, the Reformation thus begins in the heart and brings about a transformation of life. In the following years he combined his Reformation discovery with the concerns and prospects of the commoners (the lower classes of peasants and artisans). One hundred fifty years later Gottfried Arnold will take up this basic idea of the discipleship of the heart, influencing Pietism and the Enlightenment.

Luther's development took a very different turn from Müntzer's. He spent 1521 in Wartburg as Junker Jörg in the protective custody of his Elector Friedrich the Wise. There he did literary work on the one hand. On the other hand, he came into more intensive contact with the aristocracy, an "ennoblement". His network extended into the nobility. He had previously described his idea of a reformation carried out by the Christian nobility in his reform program "To the Christian nobility of the German nation - of the improvement of the Christian estate". This vision unites the hope that all Christians can be taken along the path of the new experience of God, and that, being directed by the political elite, there will be no revolution.

Aside from Müntzer and Luther, a third community model was represented by the university professor Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt. He already initiated reforms in 1521 – in cooperation with Melanchthon and Luther – in Wittenberg, where he was the minister in charge. There it was primarily a question of the images in the church and communion under both kinds. The step was discussed and considered for half a year, and finally the city council adopted a new church constitution.

However, this reform got out of control, leading to violence in January 1522. In connection with the biblical prohibition of images, it led to iconoclasm, the violent destruction of images and works of art. The Elector then demanded that the reforms of Wittenberg be reversed. He ordered an injunction against Karlstadt, who was evidently emerging as a reformer. However, a direct connection between Karlstadt and the Wittenberg iconoclasm cannot be proven.

3. MARTIN LUTHER SEES HIMSELF AS THE ONLY LEGITIMATE PROPHET OF THE REFORMATION

In this situation, Luther returned on his own initiative to Wittenberg from his exile in the Wartburg in March 1522. In the Wartburg he must have reconsidered and changed his radical views of the priesthood of all believers. He returned as the founder of a church, who consciously enforced his influence on the nobility and opposed all alternatives.

He put the situation in Wittenberg into order in March 1521 with the famous *Invocavit* sermons. He revoked the reforms of the city council with the argument that everybody was not yet ready, and love demanded that they wait for everyone. Luther's sermons served to temporarily calm the hotheads (mostly Augustinian monks from the cloister). On the one hand he preserved evangelical freedom for the new movement; on the other hand he made it clear that reforms could only be introduced by himself, the real prophet. Church historians believe that this was the beginning of a church centered on the pastor.

Luther also preached in Zwickau for some days and gained great respect. The Zwickau pastors anticipated Luther would curb the lay piety. He vehemently opposed Bible interpretation by lay people, testimonies by women, and criticism of infant baptism.

Nonetheless, three representatives of the Zwickau movement tried to find recognition and common ground with Luther a few months later. He disputed with them. Luther saw them only as representatives of Müntzer's error and doubted their divine legitimacy. He accused the Zwickau artisan Nikolaus Storch of criticizing infant baptism, although in practice this question was of little significance to the Zwickau lay group.

4. LUTHER'S ACCUSATION OF FANATICISM

In his few discussions with members of the Zwickau movement, and before the backdrop of the Wittenberg agitation, Luther developed his view of a demon-inspired fanaticism. In particular, Luther saw the question of baptism as the most important sign of what he considered rebellious fanaticism. In the bloody Peasants Revolt after 1524, Wittenberg saw confirmation of this accusation of demonic possession.

After these experiences, Luther's theological reasoning placed proclamation in the hands of official, or church-appointed, pastors alone. He put church order in the hands of a Christian government. In this way he could direct the teachings and reforms in accord with the estate-

based society. Placing the Reformation in the hands of the government also offered him political options for suppressing unwelcome alternatives, and he soon made use of these. After being censored by his university, Karlstadt, the reformer and professor from Wittenberg, returned to Orlamünde to serve as a pastor. There he built up a church under the banner of the priesthood of all believers. Imagine this: Karlstadt entered the house of a peasant early in the morning and shouted a Bible verse and asked, “What do you say to that, Farmer?”

Luther is displeased with Karlstadt for withdrawing from his influence and experimenting elsewhere with his vision of a new church. He visits the town, commissioned by the territorial lord, and meets a peasantry that wants to discuss the Bible with him. Furious, he rides off. On Luther’s instigation, Karlstadt is expelled from Saxony with his wife and small children. Finally in 1530 he is accepted in Basel and Zurich as hospital chaplain and then professor in Old Testament studies. It is interesting that during his travels until he was welcomed in Zurich he suffered poverty and deprivation but also that the places he stopped coincide with centers of the later Anabaptist movement.

From 1522 on Luther pushed through his vision of bringing everybody into his new conception of the church and turned to the territorial lords for their support in enforcing his plans. He opposed a reformation based on local initiative and driven by social criticism. (What is surprising is that Luther was unable to see the Waldensian influence. After 1530 and 1536 he successfully established contact with Waldensian bishops. In the coming centuries the Waldensian movement was completely integrated into the reformed churches. Luther also ignored the Taborite influence, although years before he had said we are all Hussites.)

A significant turning point for the further development was the Peasants’ Revolt. Peasants and artisans, disquieted and inspired by the way the Reformation had opened the Word of the Bible to them, became lay preachers and attained a higher social standing. Hope for a socially-just society gripped the peasants who had been dissatisfied for a long time. The situation escalated in 1524-25 to the Peasants’ Revolt and a massacre of the peasants in Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525. In the bloody revolts, Wittenberg saw confirmation of their accusation of demon possession.

5. REGIONAL CHURCHES BECOME STATE RELIGION

The introduction of a church order in an alliance with the government began in Saxony in 1526 with the so-called church visitations.¹ Luther was able to enforce this practice, as opposed to a voluntary concept, for example from Hessen into all Lutheran areas. The Reformation as a state religion directed from above, tolerating no experimentation, was first introduced in Saxony and Hessen. Suburban visitation provided a stable structure for conditions at the time for pastor, church, and school and became the foundation of our German education system.

In contrast, in some cities of the Reich, like Ulm, Augsburg, or Nuremberg, a multi-faceted reformation could usually be hidden and moderated by the city council, at least in the 1520s. But not in Zwickau. A law that was passed in Saxony in 1529 against „street preachers“ and „fanaticism“ succeeded in suppressing the lay piety in Zwickau from public awareness. The name “Zwickau Prophets” was adopted by Lutheran orthodoxy to identify the specter of fanaticism. At this time Martin Luther used a Super-star image to ruin the reputation of Müntzer and Karlstadt until today.

The rift between the state-led Lutheran reformation and the idea of a free church consisting of voluntary believers – a concept in which baptism was seen more and more as an aspect of discipleship – grew deeper and deeper. As authorities took over Luther’s point of view more radically, the alternative ideas of transformation of the priesthood of all believers had to also be more radical. Discovery of the Bible contained explosive power because its understanding of society relativized class differences and gave the lower classes hope for a socially-just world.

After the Peasants’ Revolt, alternative reformation attempts were taken over primarily by the Anabaptist movement.

6. THE SECOND DIET IN SPEYER

Protestant territorial princes and city councils introduced new church orders after 1526 following the ideas of the Lutheran, or South German, Reformation. At the second diet in Speyer the princes and cities felt compelled to protest against an imperial initiative to

¹ Visitations: a carry-over from the Catholic church by which bishops, in alliance with the secular authorities, assured that correct theology was being taught.

contain the Reformation. This led to the so-called Protest of the evangelically-minded princes against the Kaiser. (This is where the name Protestant comes from.) But at the same time, all participants in the Diet accepted an imperial law that made possible persecution of the so-called Anabaptists without the process of an Inquisition. All territorial princes accepted the laws criminalizing the Anabaptist Movement. The Protestants presented themselves as a legitimate reformation at the cost of the Anabaptist movement.

7. THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION LEGITIMIZES PERSECUTION

The evangelical movement, now affiliated with the interests and power machinations of evangelically-minded princes stands once again before the Kaiser and his Diet. In Augsburg in 1530 there is a proclamation of the evangelical confession against the Catholic Kaiser. Their request is legitimation of their new persuasion. The Augsburg Confession from the Wittenberg editorial staff will become the central Lutheran confession.

This confession contains condemnation of the Anabaptists as people and of their alleged teaching. In its interpretation, Luther's concept of fanaticism contributes to the criminalization of the Anabaptists. Luther and Melanchthon use theological arguments to advocate criminal persecution of the so-called fanatics.

The fact is that the Anabaptist movement is persecuted to the extreme. The Wittenberg Reformers legitimize this criminalization theologically again six years later in an evaluation. This criminalization justifies harsh persecution in the protestant regions as well. Anabaptist men and women are tortured, drowned, burned, and hanged. They are disenfranchised, disowned, banished, and abused. Anabaptists are considered a threat to the western world from within. Until late into the 19th century Baptists are denounced and persecuted in Germany because, for example, they hold public church services in an unauthorized manner. Lutheran ministers made sure that Baptist children were forced from their homes by police and baptized in Lutheran churches.

The beginning of the young Protestant church was burdened early on with the violent persecution of Christians who emphasized their discipleship of Jesus differently, renounced church orders, and wanted to meet without government protection. With strategic determination these Christians were dispossessed, expelled, and killed as disturbers of society. Many of them fled and later emigrated to the newly-discovered America. With their

expulsion the ideas of freedom of conscience and the dream of tolerance entered North America and became part of the United States constitution. From there it entered the French Revolution and in 1848 the German Revolution – which was, by the way, the year that Jews were granted citizenship in Germany.

8. RAPPROCHEMENT AFTER 500 YEARS?

Only after almost 500 years has it come to a rapprochement in the sense of a reappraisal and reconciliation with the Mennonites as direct descendants of the Anabaptist movement. In 2010 the Lutheran World Federation asked for forgiveness at a reconciliation service “for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and scholarly forms, to the present day.” The Mennonites accepted this request for forgiveness.

In my opinion, a discussion of the Augsburg Confession is still due, on the part of the Lutheran Church, in light of this reconciliation process.

Still to this day this confession legitimizes the condemnation of so-called Anabaptists and, as a consequence, the attitude of marginalizing free-church theology and teaching.

Our Lutheran Confession, particularly the ministers and church leaders who are appointed on this confession, bear the burden of this violent history. The condemnation conveys Luther’s concept of fanaticism. People who are moved by the Spirit but are not trained in theology or consecrated by the church are disqualified by the ministry. Many feel incapacitated by [their lack of] theology and [the idea that] the Bible can only be interpreted by appointed pastors. Free churches are fundamentally seen as inferior and their theology is presented in books about sects and differing ideologies (*Handbuch der Weltanschauungsbeauftragten*, 2016; Germany’s Protestant Church could not imagine including the Free Churches as partners in the reconciliation service celebrating the Reformation Year in March 2017.)

Today we summarize many ramifications of the guilt of that time under the concept of a pastor-centered church.

The reconciliation process with Mennonites at a global level has not yet reached the national level nor the level of the regional churches. But the first step has been taken – thank Jesus!

I wish that my church would recognize the diversity of the Holy Spirit and that it would develop a trusting relationship to the priesthood of all believers, that is, a church from below, the grassroots movement of the Spirit. I wish the church a new beginning in its relationship with the free churches.

This will only happen through grace and forgiveness.

9. SUMMARY

In 1521-22 Luther developed his idea of demon-possessed fanaticism. This evolved in the few discussions with representatives of the Zwickau lay preachers, with the backdrop of the Wittenberg agitation in January 1522. Luther took the question of baptism in particular as the most significant mark of seditious fanaticism. His concept of fanaticism prepared the way for the violent interpretation of later condemnation in the evangelical confession.

After these experiences, Luther's theological reasoning placed proclamation in the hands of officially-appointed pastors and church order in the hands of a Christian government. In this way he could steer his teachings and reforms in accord with the estate-based society. Placing the Reformation in the hands of the government also offered him political options for suppressing unwelcome alternatives.

Peasants and artisans, disquieted and inspired by the Reformation's rediscovery of the Word of the Bible, became lay preachers and attained a higher standing. Hope for a socially-just society gripped the peasants who had been dissatisfied for a long time. The situation escalated in 1524-25 to the Peasants' Revolt and a massacre of the peasants in Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525. In the bloody revolts Wittenberg saw confirmation of their accusation of demon possession.

At the second diet in Speyer, evangelical princes presented themselves to the Kaiser as a legitimate reformation in a joint protest. This took place at the cost of the Anabaptist movement. The criminalization of the Anabaptists was accepted by all the princes in an intensified imperial law of 1529. The Anabaptists had no voice.

This criminalization was reinforced theologically and recommended above all by the exposition of accusations in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 by Luther and Melanchthon.

The marginalization and persecution of Christians who understand discipleship differently, who renounce church consecration and meet without a protective alliance with the authorities became part of the genetic makeup of the young evangelical state church. With strategic determination these Christians were dispossessed, expelled, and killed as disturbers of society. Many of them fled and later emigrated to the newly-discovered America.

10. PLEA FOR RECONCILIATION AT THE PRAYER CONFERENCE WITTENBERG 2017

Identifying with my Lutheran Church and its clergy, I confess the sin of arrogance and pride, which is portrayed in examples of defamation, rejection, and debasement of brothers and sisters of the faith in other churches and movements.

I confess to sinning against the First Commandment. As the evangelical church in alliance with state power, we have relied on humans. We trusted the strength of the law when it was a matter of protecting the truth of the gospel as we understood it from corruption.

I confess to sinning against the Fifth Commandment. We have taken home, property and life from many Christians and their families. We have destroyed human and spiritual life for the sake of preserving our own power.

I confess to sinning against the Seventh Commandment because we took the possessions of Anabaptists who had been driven out or executed.

I confess to sinning against the Eighth Commandment because we are guilty of evil talk against God's people, the Jews, and of defamation of divergent theologies and their practices.

I ask the triune God for forgiveness ...

... that we were too proud to let God challenge us through the Anabaptist movement.

The sins of our fathers continue to work in me and among us in our attitudes and thoughts.

We confess before God and before you, sisters and brothers, that we ourselves, the fellowship of believers, and the world suffer from this guilt.

Today we declare our confidence in the mercy of God, which is founded on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We confess that we have sinned. Please forgive our guilt in your great mercy, as we also forgive those who have sinned against us.

We ask our triune God and you brothers and sisters in the free churches, in the Catholic Church, Jews, and Messianic Jews for forgiveness.

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