

It is fairly common to hear the claims that the Reformers persecuted the Anabaptists just because they "were not willing to baptise babies." One correspondent wrote that rather than celebrate the Reformation "would it not be preferable to study the Scriptures" Of course, our highest priority is to "study the Scriptures daily to see if these things be true". In fact that is the heritage of the Reformation. The Reformation gave us back the Bible freely available, translated into our own languages, and the Reformers championed "Scripture alone is our final authority". The Reformation succeeded in bringing about greater freedoms than had ever been experienced before in human history.

Those who accuse the Reformers of persecuting the Anabaptists are being unfair and selective in not reporting the whole context. The Anabaptists were not so much opposed and convicted for not being willing to baptise babies, but because the Anabaptists in the 1520's and 1530's were radical, violent revolutionaries.

While the Anabaptists claimed to be the only true Christians, they denied many of the key elements of the Faith. They rejected Biblical Law, Christian ministry, worship and sacraments, and the Anabaptists proclaimed socialism, egalitarianism and revolution. They claimed "it is impossible to be Christian and wealthy at the same time"; "all authorities, secular and clerical, must be deprived of their offices once and for all or be killed by the sword"

Igor Shafarevich in his book *The Socialist Phenomenon*, documents the teachings and activities of two important Anabaptist leaders, Thomas Muntzer and John of Leyden. Muntzer, an itinerant preacher and organiser of rebellions, established his revolutionary base in Muhlhausen from where he issued proclamations damning landowners, magistrates, and the Reformers. "I would like to smell your frying carcass" he wrote to Martin Luther.

In 1525, Muntzer was successful in rousing up many of the peasants of central Germany in the bloody, so called Peasants Revolt, which it should be noted attracted several nobles to his side. "Let your swords be ever-warm with blood!" Muntzer exhorted his faithful followers. Muntzer's army of Anabaptists struck terror throughout the countryside, robbing, burning and destroying the property of the faithful, killing many thousands.

Frederick Engels praised Muntzer's "robust vandalism" and explained "by the Kingdom of God Muntzer meant a society without class differences, private property and the state authority. All the existing authorities were to be overthrown, all work and property shared in common and complete equality introduced."

Engels praised Muntzer's doctrines in this way: "Under the cloak of Christianity he preached a kind of pantheism, which curiously resembled modern speculative contemplation and at times even approached atheism. He repudiated the Bible both as the only and as the infallible revelation. The real and living revelation, he said, was reason, a revelation which existed and always exists amongst all people at all times. To hold up the Bible against reason, he maintained, was to kill the spirit with the letter, faith is nothing but reason come alive in man, and pagans could therefore also have faith just as there is no heaven in the beyond, there is no hell and no damnation. Similarly, there is no devil Christ was a man, as we are, a prophet and a teacher..."

In 1534, Anabaptist leader Jan Mattheijs siezed the town of Munster. "Armed Anabaptists broke into houses and drove out everyone who was unwilling to accept second baptism. Winter was drawing to a close; it was a stormy day and wet snow was falling. An eyewitness account describes crowds of expelled citizens walking through the knee-deep snow. They had not been allowed even to take warm clothing with them. Women carrying children in their arms, old men leaning on staffs. At the city gate they were robbed once more." (The Socialist Phenomenon - Shafarevich)

Jan Mattheijs and Johan Bokelson then instituted a reign of

terror in Munster, ordering the socialisation of all property, and ordaining apostles of revolution to preach throughout Europe. The communist paradise of Munster attracted thousands of Anabaptists from throughout Germany and Holland. Matthijs was killed in one of the early battles with surrounding cities. Johan Bokelson took command and established a dictatorship in Munster. He then issued the order for holding everything in common, including wives.

As Frederick Engels observed: "It is a curious fact that in every large revolutionary movement the question of free-love comes to the foreground". No woman was allowed to be exempt - there was a law against being unmarried, which meant that every girl was forced to be passed around amongst the men. Every woman in Munster became fair game for the lusts of these Anabaptist men. Rapes, suicides, severe punishments and mass executions took place almost every day. On one notable occasion, Bokelson himself beheaded a virtuous woman who had refused his sexual advances. As he ceremoniously chopped her head off in the public square, a choir of his wives sang "Glory to God in the Highest!" (Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators by David Chilton).

This reign of terror continued for a year and a half until the city was freed by Protestant forces who put Bokelson and his lieutenants to death for their crimes - crimes committed in the name of love, equality and spirituality.

I have left out most of the sordid and horrifying details of the 1525 Peasants Revolt and the 1534 Anabaptist "Kingdom of God" established in Munster. But these few examples should be sufficient to explain why Anabaptists were opposed. It was not that they were being persecuted for taking the Scriptures seriously, but because they were violent revolutionaries subverting the entire social order and guilty of the deaths of many thousands of innocent people.

Those who would claim that the Anabaptists have changed dramatically since that time, should recognise that it is for that very reason therefore unfair to portray the Reformers as supporting the persecution of poor innocent Anabaptists, as that is plainly not the case. Yes, the Anabaptists have changed since. So we should not continue to propagate the false accusation that Reformers were persecuting pacifist Anabaptists who were seeking to mind their own business. The Anabaptists that were opposed by the Reformers in the 1520's and 1530's were violent revolutionaries guilty of abominable atrocities and abuses.

For further reading, I would encourage you to read - [When All Men Speak Well of You](all_men_speak_well.htm) and [Why Is There So Much Hostility Against the Bible and Christianity?](why_so_much_hostility.htm) and obtain these outstanding books: *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born* by Dr. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *Under the Influence - How Christianity Transformed Civilisation* by Alvin Schmidt, and *The Great Christian Revolution* by Otto Scott. We all owe a tremendous debt to the Reformation in so many different ways. The Reformation was the greatest movement for faith and freedom that the world has ever seen.

Dr. Peter Hammond
Frontline Fellowship
P O Box 74,
Newlands, 7725, Cape Town, South Africa
Tel.: +27 21 689-4480 Fax: +27 21 685-5884
E-Mail: [admin@frontline.org.za](mailto:%20admin@frontline.org.za)