Anabaptist History: Day 1

Trajectory of the Course:

We are going to go to the Early Church. Follow them through their persecutions and their disputes and follow them to Constantine.

From Constantine we are going to follow the persecuted church until the Reformation.

From the Reformation we are going to look at some of the spiritual and political events of the day, then come to Zurich.

From Zurich, we will look at how the Anabaptist movement started. We will get into some of the personal lives of men like Conrad Grabel. We will follow the Swiss Brethren North, East.

To the East, the Moravian Anabaptists. The Swiss Brethren give rise to communal, mission centered Hutterites. These fight through centuries of persecution.

To the North, the Dutch Mennonites. Also, terrible Anabaptist mutations like Munster.

Holland is rather like us--a place free of persecution and growing abundantly, rapidly, and financially, but also growing complacent.

We will trace the Dutch Mennonites into Russia. The Russian Mennonites accomplish some amazing things. Renewal groups like the Kline Geminde. We will trace them to Canada, America, and South America.

North of the Swiss are the South Germans, whose trial with compromise and renewal we will follow. These things lead to the birth of the Amish.

At last we will bring the Anabaptists to America, and hopefully to you.

My dream is to bring history to life for you. I want to bring the debate, stage the crisis, and have you ask yourself what you would do in their situation.

Our problems are not new. Evangelical theology, materialism, complacency, church standards, separation from the world. These questions are not new to us.

Ana·bap·tist

According to the Webster definition:

"A Protestant sectarian of a radical movement arising in the 16th century and advocating the baptism and church membership of adult believers only, nonresistance, and the separation of church and state"
This definition groups the "Spiritualists," anti-Trinitarians, and political radicals like those involved in Muntzer, with "Anabaptists."

But that definition is neither accurate nor fair.
Is everyone who practices adult baptism an Anabaptist?

The question framed another way:
Are all infant baptizers Catholics?—No, not at all. The Reformers , the Methodists Presbyterians, etc., all are infant baptizers. But they are not all Catholics.

Ana·bap·tists in history

Most history books conclude that the Anabaptists are merely a "movement" of history. This definition is also problematic today as we attempt to claim it for our identity, our people.

In the 1940s and 1950s, professor and historian Harold S Bender defined Anabaptists so tightly that anyone other than the Swiss Brethren were not "true" Anabaptists.

More recently, modern scholarship has identified 3 main starting points of Anabaptism:
1. Swiss Brethren
2. South German-Austrian
3. `North German-Dutch

Excerpt from Harold S. Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision."

- "First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. It was a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ [26] The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective "experience," rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience. Repentance must be "evidenced" by newness of behavior. "In evidence" is the keynote which rings through the testimonies and challenges of the early Swiss Brethren when they are called to give an account of themselves. The whole life was to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ in a covenant of discipleship, a covenant which the Anabaptist writers delighted to emphasize. [27] The focus of the Christian life was to be not so much the inward experience of the grace of God, as it was for Luther, but the outward application of that grace to all human conduct and the consequent

Christianization of all human relationships. The true test of the Christian, they held, is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was not "faith" as it was with the reformers, but "following" (nachfolge Christi). And baptism, the greatest of Christian symbols, was accordingly to be for them the "covenant of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21), [28] the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ, and not primarily the symbol of a past experience. The Anabaptists had faith, indeed, but they used it to produce a life. Theology was for them a means, not an end."

Quote from: (A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700):

- "State church theologians insisted that the topics of debate remain focused on classical formulations of Christian doctrine (the nature of God, the Trinity, sin and the redemptive work of Christ, etc.), and they framed their arguments in the tech- nical, highly-nuanced, language appropriate to their university training. The Swiss Brethren, by contrast, were far more interested in practical questions of Christian ethics, and they defended their positions with a literalist approach to the New Testament that their exasperated opponents regarded as naïve and simplistic. Not surprisingly, the two sides often talked past each other. Thus, when Reformed theologians at Frankenthal pressed the Swiss Brethren minister, Hans Büchel, for his views on the salvific status of the Old Testament patriarchs, he responded: “The Lord knows best when those of old entered heaven. I am not commanded to dispute what took place one or two thousand years ago. I am commanded to do right, and this is my lifelong aim. The secrets which God reserved for Himself, I wish to entrust to God.” “We go too far in proving the Deity,” Diepold Winter argued at the same gathering. “That the created should reason [about] the Creator is too difficult for us. We are not told that any apostles delved into such deep matters.” Unimpressed by these appeals to biblical constraints, the exasperated head of the Reformed delegation responded, “Then why debate? You could have just sent the Bible and said ‘this is our understanding!’”14 (A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700)