

Year at a Glance	
Nov 9-Dec 14	Early Church Age
Jan 4-Feb 8	Post-Nicene Age
Feb 15-Mar 22	Medieval Age
Mar 29-May 10	Reformation Age
May 17-May 31	Great Awakening to Today

Reformation Age	
Mar 29	"Martin Luther and Protestantism" (chapter 24)
Apr 5	Easter (no class)
Apr 12	"John Calvin" (chapter 26)
Apr 19	"The Anabaptists" (chapter 25)
Apr 26	"The Church of England" (chapter 27)
May 3	"The Catholic Reformation/America and Asia" (chapters 28-29)
May 10	"Puritanism/Denominations" (chapter 30-31)

Last week we focused on the **life** and **theology** of **John Calvin**, seeing how God used an **ordinary man** "a man from the common people" to exert extraordinary influence through faithful preaching, teaching, and writing. We traced Calvin's early education, his "unexpected conversion," and his providential path from Paris to Basel, Geneva, and Strasbourg. Along the way, we noted both the opposition he faced even being expelled from Geneva and the shaping influences in his life, such as **Martin Bucer**, his pastoral ministry to French refugees, and his marriage to **Idelette**. Particularly striking was Calvin's **return to Geneva**, where his commitment to the steady, **verse by verse preaching of God's Word** demonstrated his conviction that the power of ministry lies not in personality but in Scripture.

We also explored **Calvin's role as a reformer**, clarifying **common misconceptions**. **Calvin was not a dictator, nor was Geneva a theocracy**. Rather, he labored as a "minister of the Word," influencing both church and society through biblical principles rather than political control. His impact was seen in church structure, worship, training leaders, and advancing the idea that all of life is to be lived before God "the secularization of holiness." At the same time, we considered the complexities of his context, including the execution of Servetus, reminding us of the challenges and limitations of the 16th century.

In the second half, we turned to Calvin's theology, especially his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. We noted its growth from a small booklet to a massive, carefully structured work and highlighted its key characteristics deeply **biblical**, thoughtfully **organized**, warmly **devotional**, and intensely **practical**. Calvin was not merely a theologian of the mind but of the heart his aim was always worship, obedience, and the glory of God. His emphasis "**We are not our own** we are God's" captures the essence of his theology and the Christian life.

## *The Reformation Age*

### **The Anabaptists (or, Baptists): Reforming the Reformation<sup>1</sup>**

*“There is no other foundation that can be laid but the foundation which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).<sup>2</sup>*

**SET:** Imagine a group of people who rose up at Cornerstone who said they loved the revival of the Gospel they are seeing but the Elders aren't applying the Gospel broadly enough, nor fast enough. They begin attending Care Groups with the purpose of spreading their message. They argue for...

- Not just community, but communal living
- Not just sacrificial giving, but sharing of all resources
- Total pacifism and no owning of weapons of any sort
- All decisions should be made by the whole congregation, not by the pastors/elders
- Some of them begin saying things that others in their group don't agree with:
  - Like Christ will come back in the next few months to establish his kingdom
  - Some of their leaders begin to speak “prophetically” against the leadership at Cornerstone
  - Some of them begin to say that we need to reject pacifism and actually start stock piling weapons for the coming war
  - Some of them begin to argue that since God wants large families we should teach against all forms of contraception

This gives us a sense of the tensions and challenges the so-called “Anabaptists” created for the fledgling Protestant churches of the early 1500s. To understand who they were and why they mattered, we will look at these “Radical Reformers” under four main headings.

#### **I. Identifying the Radical Reformers**

- a. Menno Simons** is usually described as an **Anabaptist**, but that term represents only one part of a much larger and more diverse movement. These were people in the sixteenth century who were **not Catholic, not Lutheran, and not Reformed**. They were something altogether different.
- b. The Yale historian Roland Bainton** referred to these groups as the **“left wing”** of the Reformation. By that, he meant that they had moved **as far away as possible from** the most conservative position, which would have been **Roman Catholicism**. They had traveled across the entire spectrum of reform.

<sup>1</sup> These lecture notes have been compiled from several resources: primarily Dr. David Calhoun, but also Dave Forsythe and Bill Payne.

<sup>2</sup> This was Menno Simons favorite text of Scripture; it shaped everything he wrote. In fact, he prefaced every book with it.

- c. **George Williams** of **Harvard** preferred to call them the **“radicals”** of the Reformation. He did not use that word simply to mean extreme. He used it to emphasize that they were **trying to get to the root** of the Reformation. They wanted to strip everything down and rebuild the church from what they believed were its most **basic biblical foundations**.
- d. However, they did not agree among themselves about what that root actually was. **Despite that disagreement, they were united in the conviction that the church must be completely and thoroughly reformed away from Roman Catholicism.**
- e. **Four fundamental convictions** tended to characterize many of the Anabaptists, even though they did not all agree on every point. **Each of these directly challenged the established State-Church model that had existed since Constantine.**
  - i. And they held to **Scripture as the ultimate authority**, seeking to order both doctrine and life directly from the Word of God, even though in practice they, like others, could develop their own traditions.
  - ii. They practiced **believer’s baptism**, rejecting infant baptism as invalid and insisting that baptism should follow a personal profession of faith.
  - iii. They insisted on a **voluntary church membership**, teaching that the church should be made up only of those who had been **truly converted**, rather than a mixed body compelled by the state.
  - iv. They emphasized **pacifism**, believing that the **sword belonged to the civil authorities**, not to the church, and that Christians were called to a life of patience and suffering rather than violence.

## II. Three Key Episodes of the Radical Reformation

These episodes reveal Anabaptist **motivations**, their **theology**, and the **tensions** they created within the broader Reformation.

The main questions driving these radical reformers were simple but significant:

- i. How **quickly** should the Reformation move?
  - ii. How **far** should it go?
  - iii. What should the **final shape** of the church actually look like?
- a. **Episode 1: Jena (1524) – Luther, Karlstadt, and Müntzer**
    - i. The **Inn of the Black Bear** in Jena, Germany, on August 22, 1524. This was just a few years after Luther’s stand at Worms and his time translating the New Testament at Wartburg Castle.
    - ii. On that day, Martin Luther preached in Jena, and afterward he went to the inn for refreshment and food. There he **encountered Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt**, a fellow reformer who had begun moving in a very different direction.

iii. **Karlstadt had led the Reformation in Wittenberg during Luther's absence.** Unlike Luther, he was **not patient**. He believed reform should happen immediately.

- a) During his leadership, **images** began to be removed from the churches and the Reformation moved much more quickly.
- b) He also began stressing that the important thing was to **listen to what the Holy Spirit** was saying. He said that the church ought to be reformed according to the directions given by God the Holy Spirit.

iv. That same morning, Luther had preached a sermon in which he referred to radicals like Karlstadt and others as **"rioting, murderous spirits."** Karlstadt had heard that sermon and was not pleased to be grouped together with more extreme figures.

During that same time, in the town of Allstedt, Thomas **Müntzer** had organized an armed **rebellion** of the peasants. They destroyed property, including a Catholic shrine, and promoted political revolution. Müntzer later became something of a Marxist hero. He declared, **"Power shall be given to the common people."**

**Müntzer also spoke harshly of Luther**, calling him **"Brother Fattened-Swine," "Brother Soft-Life," "Doctor Liar,"** and **"the Lutheran Pope of all the Scripture Perverters."** People did not use soft language in those days.

At the inn, Karlstadt confronted Luther and said, *"Why then, Dr. Luther, have you said that there is just one spirit, that is, the murdering spirit of Allstedt?"* Karlstadt denied any connection with Müntzer's rebellion. He acknowledged removing images but said he did so peacefully.

Karlstadt then said, **"If I had erred, you should have reprov'd me in a brotherly way, and not have stabbed me and struck me thus."** Luther replied, **"You stabbed me before I stabbed you."** Karlstadt answered, "No, I did not do that." The discussion stalled, and Karlstadt turned to others and said, "Dear brothers, I pray you, do not pay attention to my harsh speech."

v. This encounter at Jena revealed a major division within the Reformation.

- a) **ONE ISSUE** was **the pace of reform**. The radicals believed reform should be immediate. They said, **"Luther broke the pope's pitcher, but he kept the pieces in his hands."** They wanted to remove everything at once, including the **Mass** and **images**.

Luther, however, believed reform should proceed slowly. He returned to Wittenberg concerned about what had happened in his absence and said, **"The cause is good, but there has been too**

much haste. For there are still brothers and sisters on the other side who belong to us and must still be won.”

Karlstadt argued for immediate action using an illustration. He said, “If I should see **a little innocent child holding a sharp pointed knife** in his hand and he wants to keep it, will I show him brotherly love by letting that little child hold that sharp knife and cut himself? Or will I break his will and force that knife out of his hands onto the floor and take it from him? When you take from the child what injures him, you do a fatherly, or brotherly, Christ-like deed.”

- b) **ANOTHER MAJOR ISSUE** was **authority**. Luther insisted that **Scripture alone** should guide the church. The radicals, while not denying Scripture, believed that **the Holy Spirit, who gave Scripture, was now directly guiding them in a higher way.**

Müntzer said, “He who has not the Spirit does not know how to say anything deeply about God, **even if he has eaten through a hundred Bibles.**” Luther responded by saying that **they had “swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all.”**

- c) **A THIRD DIFFERENCE** was **emphasis**. Luther focused on **justification by faith, especially the alien righteousness of Christ**. The radicals were more concerned with **regeneration and holiness** in the Christian life.

## b. Episode 2: Zurich (1525) – The Birth of Anabaptism

- i. Zurich, Switzerland, January 21, 1525. A man named **Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock, who then baptized others.** This marked the beginning of the Anabaptist movement.

This act was controversial because these individuals had already been baptized as infants in the Catholic Church. They did not consider that baptism valid and believed they were being baptized for the first time as true believers.

They **rejected infant baptism strongly**. One called it **“the access and portal of a false Christianity.”** The **Schleitheim Confession** described it as **“The highest and chief abomination of the pope.”**

These men had been followers of **Zwingli**, but they grew impatient with him. Zwingli wanted reform to proceed **in coordination with the city council**. The radicals believed the decision had already been made by God. They said that the Spirit had already spoken, so they acted without waiting.

- ii. They also **rejected church tradition** almost entirely. One radical said, “Foolish Ambrose, foolish Augustine, foolish Jerome, foolish Gregory,

of whom not even one knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of anti-Christ.”

- iii. The radicals emphasized **life and community over doctrine**. They often pointed to the **penitent thief on the cross** as an example. One said that he was “saved without any knowledge of the substance and persons of the Godhead, paedobaptism, consubstantiation, predestination, and so on and so on.”
- iv. These convictions brought **severe persecution**. Catholics often burned them. Protestants often drowned them. They were seen as both heretics and rebels because rebaptism was illegal and their refusal to swear oaths and their pacifism made them appear dangerous.

It is worth noting that their opponents often linked the Anabaptists to the **Donatists** of the fourth century.

What made this comparison persuasive to their opponents was that, like the Donatists, the Anabaptists rejected what they believed to be invalid **sacraments**, insisted on a **visibly pure church** made up of true believers, and separated from the established church—actions that made them appear not only theologically dangerous but socially and politically disruptive.

This association provided both ecclesiastical and civil justification for their persecution, since they were viewed not only as heretical, but as a dangerous revival of earlier schismatic movements.

**c. Episode 3: Münster – Radical Collapse**

- i. The third episode took place in Münster, in Westphalia. In this city, a group of Anabaptists gained control and attempted to establish their vision of a Christian society.

**IMPORTANT:** *Thomas Müntzer* [MOONT-ser] and *Münster* [MOON-ster] are **not the same thing**.

**Müntzer (with a “t”) was a man**, an early radical preacher in the 1520s who stirred up the Peasants’ War in central Germany and called for revolution.

**Münster (with an “s”) was a city**, about ten years later in the 1530s, where a group of Anabaptists took control and set up a radical, chaotic theocracy that eventually collapsed.

*So think of it this way: Müntzer was the revolutionary voice early on, and Münster was the later disastrous experiment that made all radicals look dangerous.*



- ii. They **expelled Catholics and Protestants** and established an **Old Testament-style theocracy**. However, the situation quickly

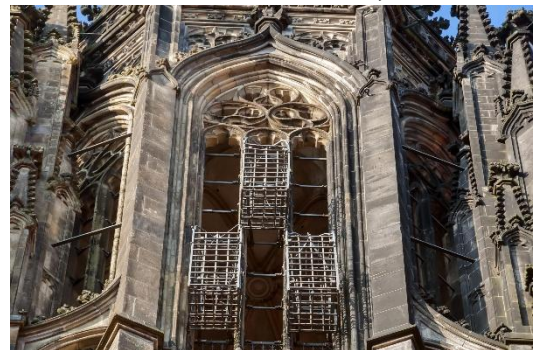
degenerated into fanaticism, terror, polygamy, and the elimination of private property.

a) John Matthys

- A Dutch Anabaptist prophet
- He was the **initial leader** of the movement in Münster (1534)
- Claimed prophetic authority and believed Münster would be the “**New Jerusalem**”
- Led aggressively and predicted God’s imminent judgment
- He was killed early on when he led a small force out of the city against the besieging army

b) John of Leiden

- Took over after Matthys died
- Became the **most famous and dominant leader**
- Declared himself “**King of New Zion**”
- Established a radical **theocratic** rule
- Instituted practices like **polygamy** and strict communal control
- Ruled until the city fell in 1535 when Catholics and Protestants united to besiege the city.
- Leiden and his **leaders were captured and executed.**
- After their execution, the bodies of Jan van Leiden and his associates were placed in iron cages and hung from the tower of St. Lambert’s Church in Münster, where the cages still remain today as a lasting reminder of the failed rebellion.



iii. This event severely damaged the reputation of the Anabaptist movement. When

John Calvin wrote the first edition of his *Institutes* in 1536, he emphasized strongly, “**We are not Anabaptists.**” He needed to make that clear to avoid persecution.

### III. Menno Simons: Restoration of the Movement

- a. Out of the failure at Münster, a new leader emerged, Menno Simons. **His own brother, Peter, was killed in the Anabaptist revolutionary turmoil** surrounding Münster, and his death deeply impacted Menno and helped push him toward a more peaceful, **nonviolent form of Anabaptism**.
- b. He had been a Catholic priest. **He saw the Anabaptists as “sheep without a shepherd.”** Menno left the Catholic Church, became an Anabaptist pastor, and provided stability and leadership. He wrote a book called *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*.
- c. He was **largely orthodox**, though he held one unusual view. He believed in a “heavenly flesh” view of Christ, meaning that Christ’s human nature was not exactly like ours. This view was later rejected by his followers.
- d. Menno emphasized **Scripture, salvation by faith**, and a return to **pacifism**. He said, **“Moses and his successors, with their iron sword, have served out their time, and Jesus Christ has now given us a new commandment.”**
- e. Under his leadership, the movement returned to its earlier emphasis on separation from the world and quiet obedience. **These groups came to be known as “the quiet in the land.”**

### IV. Legacy and Contributions

- a. The direct descendants of the Anabaptists include the **Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ**. There are about a million of these people worldwide.
- b. The **Baptists** are considered **indirect descendants**. While they arose from the English Puritan movement, they share important similarities with the Anabaptists.
- c. The Anabaptists contributed significantly to the development of ideas such as **separation of church and state and religious liberty**.
  - i. They taught that **“the sword of the state is outside the perfection of Christ.”**
  - ii. They also emphasized **religious liberty**, though this may have been partly out of necessity. As a minority, they benefited from freedom. However, there was also genuine conviction that faith should not be forced.
- d. Their **separation** from the world has often been described as an example of “Christ against culture.”
- e. Their greatest contribution, however, was their **suffering**. They became the conscience of the Reformation.

**John Foxe, who wrote Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, said, “I do not agree with them. I do not support their teaching. I think it is wrong and false. But to burn up with fiery flame the living bodies of men who err through blindness of judgment rather than**

deliberate will is a hard thing and belongs more to the spirit of Rome than to the Spirit of the Gospel.”

According to Calhoun, about 85% of executed Anabaptists were killed by Roman Catholics and 15% by Protestants. They were not protected by either side, but opposed and persecuted by both.

### **Conclusion**

The radicals were often mistaken and deeply divided, yet they played an important role in church history. Their suffering exposed the failures of all sides and helped move history toward greater religious liberty. As we reflect on their story, we are reminded to be careful not to confuse zeal with truth, to submit our reforming instincts to Scripture, and to show humility and charity even when we strongly disagree—knowing that the church is always in need of reform, but always according to the Word of God.

**Next Week:** “The Church of England” (chapter 27)