CHURCH HISTORY
Week Seven: Reforming the Reformation (1525–1689)

The Anabaptists

By 1523, Ulrich Zwingli and many of his followers in Zurich were questioning the validity of infant baptism. Some of Zwingli’s disciples became convinced that the reformation in Zurich was not proceeding fast enough. A group of pastors led by Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, and Felix Mantz tried to convince the Zurich city council to reject the mass, icons, and infant baptism in 1524, but they were unsuccessful. On January 21, 1525, these men and a small group of their followers met at the home of Mantz; following a time of prayer, Blaurock asked Grebel to baptize him by pouring water over his head. Blaurock then baptized everyone else who was present. They called themselves the Swiss Brethren; Zwingli, Luther, and the Catholics called them Anabaptists (literally “re-baptizers”).

The Anabaptists were more radical than the Lutherans and Reformed because they sought to bypass all human traditions and return to what they considered to be pure apostolic Christianity. This meant they rejected both the Catholic Church and the magisterial reformers because these movements continued to embrace views of the church that the Anabaptists considered to be based upon unbiblical traditions. In addition to the aforementioned leaders, other leading Anabaptists included Michael Sattler (who wrote the first Anabaptist confession), Balthasar Hubmaier (who was the first Anabaptist writing theologian), Pilgram Marpeck (who was a leading theologian and church planter), and Menno Simons (who founded the Mennonites).

Though there were lots of bizarre and even heretical sects that got labeled as Anabaptists, mainstream Anabaptists tended to emphasize several key doctrines that they believed were overlooked by the magisterial reformers. Anabaptists rejected the territorial church and argued for congregational freedom and full religious liberty. They advocated regenerate church membership—only professing believers were considered full members of local churches. They rejected infant baptism in favor of various forms of believer’s baptism, though few of them practiced immersion. They practiced church discipline, called and supported their own pastors, and refused to pay tithes to state churches. Most were pacifists, refused to take oaths, and argued that Christians couldn’t serve in government positions. Beyond their core emphases, Anabaptists were very diverse. They were all over the map on justification, from semi-Catholic to consistently Protestant. Some were very legalistic. A few became violent revolutionaries. Most of them held to what would later be called an Arminian view of salvation.

The Anabaptists were fiercely persecuted by Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists. For example, Zwingli imprisoned numerous Anabaptists leaders, including Mantz (who was drowned) and Sattler (who was burned at the stake). Hubmaier was tortured on the rack by Zwingli and eventually burned at the stake by Catholics. Most Anabaptists who weren’t drowned or burned were forced into exile; Marpeck was expelled from the Reformed city of Strasbourg. Even those Anabaptists who managed to die of old age, such as Simons, were forced to spend their lives on the run from authorities. Despite the persecution, it would be fair to say that the Anabaptists were the Reformation movement that most emphasized evangelism and church planting.
Puritans and Separatists

While Anabaptists were pushing back against Continental reform movements, the Puritans were arguing for a further reformation within the Church of England. When Mary Tudor was queen from 1553–1558, she exiled many Protestant pastors to the Continent. Many of these pastors moved to Reformed cities such as Geneva and Strasbourg, where they were mentored by men like John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Martin Bucer. While in exile, they adopted strong convictions about the doctrines of grace, the regulative principle of worship, and presbyterian polity. When Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558 and the exiles returned to England, they were ready to see the Church of England become a Reformed national church. Unfortunately, Elizabeth’s Religious Settlement was too moderate in its Calvinism, retained hints of Catholicism in its worship, and defended episcopal polity. Before long, the exiles and other like-minded Reformed Protestants became known as Puritans because of their desire to purify the Church of England.

For two generations, the English crown did all it could to stifle and sometimes suppress Puritanism. Puritans were coerced to conform to the Book of Common Prayer, were forced out of teaching posts at Oxford and Cambridge, and were at times removed from their pulpits. In response to the Puritans, most Anglican leaders moved toward Arminianism, embraced semi-Catholic rituals and sacramentalism, and remained vigorously committed to the rule of bishops. Yet, Puritanism became increasingly popular through an emphasis on expositional preaching, catechizing, and electioneering—Puritans were gradually taking over Parliament. The leading early Puritans were Thomas Cartwright, William Perkins, and William Ames. In Scotland, John Knox and his followers advocated similar reforms against Mary Queen of Scots; the Scottish reformers eventually gave rise to the “capital-P” Presbyterian movement.

Some Puritans became even more radical, arguing that the Church of England was apostate and that the way forward was to form autonomous, congregationally governed churches of presumably regenerate members. These independent evangelicals were called Separatists because, unlike the mainstream Puritans, they left the Anglican Church completely, much as the Anabaptists had left the Reformed and Lutheran churches on the Continent. The first well-known Separatist was Robert Browne, who in 1580 formed a Separatist church in Norwich, which he relocated to the Netherlands in 1581 to escape persecution. In 1582, Browne wrote A Treatise on Reformation without Tarrying for Anie, which was a tract calling upon true reformers to leave the Church of England. Although Browne himself returned to the Church of England in 1591, many other Separatists continued to drift away from the state church.

John Greenwood and Henry Barrow established a Separatist church in London in the early 1580s; both were arrested and imprisoned. In 1583, the new pastor of the Greenwood-Barrow Church, former Cambridge professor Francis Johnson, relocated the entire congregation to Amsterdam, renaming it the Ancient Church. Other Separatists would follow this pattern and relocate their church to the Netherlands, where there was greater religious freedom. For example, in 1607 John Robinson led the Pilgrim Church to Leiden. In the 1620, this group secured a royal charter to relocate to New England, where they founded the Plymouth Colony. After 1620, most Separatists relocated to New England rather than the Netherlands; they wanted to have freedom of worship, but they also wanted to be loyal subjects of the crown.
Though their respective strategies were different, the Puritans and Separatists shared many common emphases. Both groups held to a Reformed understanding of salvation, though there was always some debate over the extent of the atonement. Both advocated the regulative principle of worship and soundly rejected the *Book of Common Prayer*. Both affirmed covenantal pedobaptism—the idea that the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision continues under the New Covenant in the form of baptizing the infants of believing parents. Both emphasized church discipline and, following Martin Bucer, argued that discipline is a mark of a true church. Both rejected episcopalism, though they disagreed over whether presbyterian or congregational polity was the most biblical alternative.

The Baptists

In 1608, John Smyth led his Separatist church to relocate to Amsterdam. The following year, Smyth and his church rejected infant baptism in favor of believer’s baptism by pouring. They had become convinced that infant baptism was a Catholic practice and was one of the last unreformed aspects of Separatism. Smyth’s church is the first Baptist congregation. Smyth was friends with some Mennonites in Amsterdam, and by 1610 he had rejected Calvinism and applied to have his church join the Mennonites. This led to a church split (yes, the first Baptist church split—you can’t make this stuff up). In 1612, Thomas Helwys led the faction that didn’t want to join the Mennonites back to London, where they planted the first Baptist church in England and the first permanent Baptist church. Because Helwys had also rejected Calvinism, his movement is called the General Baptists because of their belief in a general atonement.

In 1616, Henry Jacob planted a underground Separatist church in London, often called the J-L-J Church after the initials of its first three pastors. Between 1630 and 1639, the church split numerous times due to size and theological differences. In 1639, John Spilsbury, the pastor of one of those church splits, led the new congregation to embrace believer’s baptism by pouring. Spilsbury’s church is probably the first Particular Baptist Church, so-called because they were Calvinists who embraced a particular (limited) atonement. In 1642, the J-L-J Church itself came around to Baptist convictions, though they opted for immersion over pouring. By 1650, both General and Particular Baptists had embraced immersion as their standard baptismal practice.

In New England, a group of Separatists established the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630. One of the early pastors to settle there was Roger Williams. In 1636, Williams fled the colony after being convicted of heresy and sentenced to return to England. His heresies consisted of arguing for freedom of religion and advocating Native American land rights. Later that year, he founded Providence Plantation (Rhode Island). In 1638, Williams became convinced of believer’s baptism and founded what is now the First Baptist Church of Providence, RI. He soon left the Baptist fold, but the church endured as a mixed congregation of both Calvinists and Arminians. In 1643, John Clarke founded the First Baptist Church of Newport, RI, which also became the first known church in America to practice baptism by immersion.

In many ways, the Baptist tradition represented the culmination of the other more radical Protestant groups. Like their Separatist forebears, they advocated congregational freedom, regenerate church membership, and religious liberty. Through the Separatists, they also inherited mainstream Protestant convictions about the supreme authority of Scripture, justification by faith.
alone, and penal substitutionary atonement. But they combined these emphases with a couple of views championed by the Continental Anabaptists: believer’s baptism and an emphasis on intentional evangelism and church planting. In so doing, they became a new group that was no longer Separatist, but had not necessarily become Anabaptist (they disagreed with Anabaptist views about war and peace, oaths, civil government, etc.). Baptists argued that in combining these views and rejecting bad doctrines and practices, they represented the culmination of the Reformation (the other guys disagreed, of course).

Civil War, Restoration, and Religious Toleration

Puritans finally gained control of Parliament in 1642, resulting in the English Civil War between Parliament and the crown. The Puritans won the war, beheaded Charles for treason in 1649, and exiled his son, Charles II, to the Continent. Between 1649 and 1653, Parliament remade the Church of England into a Presbyterian state church, though they granted toleration to Independents (Separatists), Baptists, and even more radical groups like Quakers. In 1653, a general named Oliver Cromwell dissolved Parliament (which he believed had grown inept) and declared himself the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England. During this time, several well-known Puritan(ish) pastor-theologians were at the height of their careers, most famously the Independents John Owen and Richard Baxter and the Particular Baptist John Bunyan.

After Cromwell’s death in 1659, his son Richard briefly ruled, though he was removed by a group of generals for ineptitude. The exiled Charles II was invited to return to England in 1661. Before being crowned, Charles promised that the religious changes of the Commonwealth would continue under his rule. Unfortunately, the new Parliament was fiercely anti-Puritan and passed a series of restrictive laws that reversed the changes that had occurred over the previous decade. Thousands of pastors lost their pulpits and hundreds were imprisoned. During this time the Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists began to emphasize their commonalities much more than their differences. Collectively, they became known as “nonconformists” or “dissenters.”

Charles supported Parliament’s purge of the nonconformists, though he shocked everyone when he converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed in 1685. When his son James II, also a Catholic, impregnated his wife in 1688, most Englishmen feared they were witnessing the beginning of a new Catholic dynasty in Britain. A group of Protestant nobles encouraged William of Orange, a Dutch nobleman and the king’s son-in-law, to invade England and overthrow James. When William’s forces landed in England, James refused to fight and fled the country. William asked Parliament to determine how the nation should be ruled. It was decided that James had abdicated the throne when he fled and William and his wife Mary (James’s daughter) were the rightful joint rulers of England.

The ascension of William and Mary has been called the Glorious Revolution because it ended a century and a half of political turmoil without any bloodshed. With the urging of the new rulers, in 1689 Parliament passed a new English Bill of Rights that included an Act of Toleration. The Act of Toleration granted religious freedom to all noncomformists (except Catholics and anti-Trinitarians) who agreed to take an oath of allegiance to the crown and pay tithes to the Church of England. Though Puritans had lost the battle for the Church of England, those who held to Puritan beliefs (and many others) were now more or less free to practice their dissenting faith.