

Anabaptist Sixteenth-Century Baptism as Exponent of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Cultural, Social, and Political Breaches

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Abstract

The Reformation was the religious representative of an encompassing breach in European history. In this transition Anabaptism combats infant baptism as being a symbol of the social-religious unity of the *corpus christianum* that was passing by. Hence it introduces believer's baptism as being a major symbol of a new epoch, of which persecution by church and state was the sad and existential consequence. Baptism of itself pertains to a sacrament of transition from old to new, achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Keywords

Anabaptism – infant baptism – church-state relations

If spirituality is conceived of as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate values one perceives”,¹ and as “the growing, changing and developing relationship with a transcendent reality, as it is expressed in daily life”,² then baptism is a case in point. In Christianity, baptism is viewed as an exponent of the relation between the believer's personal life and Christ's death and

1 Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. A.G. Holder (London: Blackwell, 2005), 16.

2 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), 50.

resurrection – the transcendent reality involved.³ Being baptized, one experiences the “conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of the ultimate values,” that is, of dying and rising with Christ. Baptism, then, can be experienced as a breach in a person’s life, particularly if it is administered at the conscious request of the believer and even more so if this takes place in a time of radical cultural, social, or political change.

This essay will investigate how, at the time of the Reformation, baptism came to function as a designation for a breach within history. In Anabaptist experience, breaking with the tradition of infant baptism and replacing it with “believer’s baptism” meant the inauguration of a new, messianic age, heralded by contemporary cultural, social, and political transformations. This essay will focus on two of these breaches: the Reformation – of which the Anabaptist movement was just one part – and the so-called Peasants’ War. Geographically, this study will limit itself to Middle and Southern Germany and to the Swiss city of Zurich. Within the German region, the focus will be on Thomas Müntzer, the “father of the radical reformation”⁴ and on his follower, Hans Hut, who would later become an Anabaptist preacher. As for Zurich, the focus will be on the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli and his Anabaptist opponents, Konrad Grebel and Felix Mantz. The discussion of their theologies will be primarily based upon their own writings.

1 The Reformation and the Peasants’ War as Breaches

The Anabaptist movement can be characterized, at least partially, as a radicalization of the “official” or Magisterial Reformation, which, to a greater or lesser extent, depended on the magistrates – the regional and local authorities that maintained the political and social order.⁵ At the time of the Peasants’ War (*Bauernkrieg*), this order was being challenged not only by the uprising of the peasantry, but also by the burghers of German cities and labourers in

3 George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 130–138.

4 Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 34.

5 George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001); see also Henk van den Belt, “Word and Spirit in the Confessions of the European Reformation”, in this issue.

the growing iron-mining industry of Northern Tyrol in Austria.⁶ The movement did not limit itself to areas in Germany, although the high-profile battles, such as the one at Frankenhausen in Thuringia on 15 May 1525, took place there. It also spilled over the German borders into Austria (North and South Tyrol) and Switzerland.

In Marxist historiography, the Peasants' War is commonly interpreted as a *frühbürgerliche Revolution* (early-bourgeois revolution), that is, as a precursor of the proletarian revolution. Such a characterization is of course disputable, but it is not far-fetched to view the Peasants' War as part of a development that would ultimately lead to the formal establishment of civil rights for each and every person.⁷ The main issue at stake in this war was the social position of the so-called *gemeine Mann*, the common or ordinary person.⁸ He or she could be a farmer, a burgher, or a miner, who stood under the control of a noble lord, a monastery, or a powerful family in town. The *gemeine Mann* was, in fact, a serf, who lacked the freedom to marry someone who "belonged" to a different lord as well as the freedom to leave their lord's territory. Leaving the monastery or the family under whose authority he or she fell would mean a loss of tithes or statute labour for the manor. The prohibition on leaving the lord's territory deprived peasants of the possibility of appealing to judges in other regions. Because of this lack of freedom, peasants in numerous regions organized themselves into militias that roamed the countryside and laid siege upon monasteries, castles, and even cities. Sometimes the nobility or the abbot of a besieged monastery tried to appease them with a settlement in which the peasants' demands were partially met. In other cases, monasteries were plundered and castles burnt to the ground.

The Peasants' War was a protest by the *gemeine Mann* against being without rights, against the limitations on their freedom, and against being liable for high payments of money and services. In addition to this social dimension, the Peasants' War also had a religious or, more precisely, "Reformational" dimension.⁹ Time after time, and in various regions, peasants demanded recognition of a congregation's right to choose for itself a *Pfarrer* (*pastor*) who would preach *das reine Evangelium*: the pure gospel, as they saw it. This demand is also found in the "Twelve Articles," a summary of their complaints and demands, which

6 Peter Blickle, *Der Bauernkrieg: die Revolution des gemeinen Mannes* (München: Beck, 1998), 41.

7 Blickle, *Bauernkrieg*, 114–115.

8 Blickle, *Bauernkrieg*, 41–46.

9 Günter Zimmerman, *Die Antwort der Reformatoren auf die Zehntenfrage. Eine Analyse des Zusammenhanges von Reformation und Bauernkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1982), 33.

went through 28 editions and was circulated in a wide area. In the third article, the remonstrated freedom for each person is connected with the redemption brought about by Christ's death.¹⁰ The concluding article emphasizes that the Holy Scriptures must be normative for the social order.¹¹

The obligation to pay tithes was one of the peasants' complaints and grievances. This theme deserves closer attention because it played a prominent role in Zurich and environs where Anabaptists debated with Zwingli. Tithing had long been the economic and financial backbone of the ecclesiastical system. Originally, tithes were gifts from believers, given out in gratitude to God. The church used them to finance regional curing of souls. In the early Middle Ages, they became a tax on agrarian produce. At the time of Charlemagne, tithing was formally regulated by law so that the church could use government to enforce it. It was not long before laypersons were also given the right to collect tithes. Noble lords were allowed to build "private churches" on their estates, for which they could tithe their serfs. Monasteries often sold their rights to levy tithes to laypersons.¹² Peasants complained about the high rate of this "tax," and the improper use recipients made of it.

The attitudes of Luther and Zwingli differed in part with respect to the peasants' demands for social reform. Luther saw the message of the gospel as a spiritual reality that cannot be embodied politically and socially, but only experienced in the Word and the sacraments. In his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther makes a clear distinction between Christ's kingdom and the worldly kingdom, in which the secular authorities rule. The freedom into which Christ liberates an individual is a spiritual one; it pertains to the relationship with God, and must not be extrapolated to earthly relationships. This view led Luther to reject the peasants' social demands and actions, and to call on the princes to put a forceful stop to the uprising.¹³

In Zwingli's more nuanced view, the content of the gospel could be partially embodied in the social and political reality. As early as 1520, shortly after having taken office in Zurich, he turned against the opinion that tithing was an immutable divine right. In the New Testament, he argued, Christ liberated people from many Old Testament laws regulating social life. Zwingli judged the question of tithes from the perspective of their original intent: enabling regional or local ministry. Practices of tithing that did not serve this end should

10 "[A]ngesehen das uns Christus all mit seinem kostparlichen Blutvergüssen erlöst und erkauft hat." See Blickle, *Bauernkrieg*, 55.

11 Blickle, *Bauernkrieg*, 82.

12 Zimmerman, *Antwort*, 20–30.

13 Zimmerman, *Antwort*, 16–18.

be corrected by the authorities while respecting property rights. Someone who had bought a monastery's right to levy tithes owned this right, and the authorities were obligated to protect the property rights of their subjects. Thus, Zwingli tried to mediate between rebellious peasants, the owners of tithing rights, and the authorities.¹⁴

Anabaptists viewed the Peasants' War as a manifest sign of an imminent radical change of the times – the dawning of a new, messianic age. Their evaluations of the issue at stake differed, depending on their region and their leaders. In the areas where Thomas Müntzer had gained much influence, Anabaptists after him showed a tendency to preach the apocalyptic notions that had led Müntzer himself to join the rebellious peasants, who, in 1525, were preparing for the decisive battle with the army of the princes. There was a difference, however. In Anabaptist preaching, the actual exercise of violence was suspended (Hans Hut will be discussed as an example of this type of Anabaptist thought). This form of Anabaptism must be distinguished from the Swiss form, which rejected the use of all external means of exercising power (weapons), and because of its use of weapons even denounced the government itself as the earthly incarnation of Satan whose days in history were numbered. In the radical change of the times, which would result in the dawning of the messianic age, suffering did not play an active role in Swiss Anabaptism, as it did in Müntzer's thinking and in the actions of the rebellious peasants, but, instead, played a passive one. Anabaptist martyrs had to undergo suffering brought about by those who were in power in this old world. This type of Anabaptism, which has its roots in the Reformation in Zurich, promulgated its views in 1527 with the publication of the *Brüderliche Vereinigung* (Schleitheim Confession).¹⁵

2 Thomas Müntzer: Mystic and Apocalypticist

Müntzer began his career as a spiritual leader in Zwickau. Here he identified with a lay movement of mostly unlettered weavers and artisans, which turned against the sacerdotal power of priests, the ceremonial externalities of the mass, and the bookish learning of theologians. Müntzer's alternative for all these forms of "externality" was the inner working of the Spirit. He was banned

14 Zimmerman, *Antwort*, 16–19; Blicke, *Bauernkrieg*, 52–53.

15 Heinold Fast, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*. Bd. II (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 26–35.

from Zwickau as an agitator and went to Prague where he published his “Prague Manifesto” in 1521. In it he summoned the population to a reformation of the Spirit, which would be the beginning of a new church that was to spread all over the world. Prague, as the starting point of radical change, must have appealed to him because of Johannes (*Jan*) Hus’s attempts at reform in that city a century earlier. He hoped to tap into a vital reformational tradition.

Müntzer was forced to leave Prague, however, and in 1523 he began as a preacher in Allstedt. Here he reformed the Catholic liturgy by replacing Latin with the vernacular, among other things, and committed his theological convictions to writing. These writings show Müntzer’s dependence on mediaeval German mysticism as well as his sensitivity to mediaeval apocalypticism. The latter tradition includes the expectation of a messianic age that is characterized by the work of the Spirit which renews all things and brings them to completion. Müntzer’s apocalyptic insights are expressed clearly in a sermon about the vision in Daniel 2. He preached it in July 1524 before John, Elector of Saxony, under whose jurisdiction Allstedt fell. In Daniel’s well-known vision, a world empire, represented by a statue whose feet consist of a mixture of iron and clay, is destroyed by a small stone that rolls down from a mountain slope without any human involvement. Müntzer interpreted the world empire as one of his own day, a mixture of secular and spiritual power – the coalition of the Roman Empire and the Roman Church. In his view, it would be shattered by a small “heap” of common people who have knowledge of Christ and the Spirit. Müntzer envisioned the Peasants’ War ending in this judgment of God over the rulers of his day and exhorted the duke and his peers to choose the right side. In May 1525, Müntzer joined the rebellious peasants and became their spiritual leader in the battle against the army of princes at Frankenhausen, an event that turned out disastrously for the peasants.¹⁶

3 Müntzer the Mystic: A Breach between External and Internal

Müntzer the mystic distinguished between “external” and “internal,” which he equated with “creature” and “Creator,” respectively. Between these two categories lies the deepest breach imaginable through which a person must pass, which is only made possible by baptism in the Spirit. Investigating Müntzer’s ideas about “external” and “internal,” the focus will be on his *Protestation oder Erbietung* (Protestation or Presentation). “External” has, in Müntzer’s writings,

16 Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 34–39.

a twofold meaning. First of all, it stands for the creaturely aspects of life. Secondly, “external” signifies the “internal”: the work of the Spirit.

By nature, a human being has a bond with the external things, with the creaturely aspects of life. The mystical *terminus technicus* for this is *grob* (German for “coarse,” “raw,” “rough”). A human being sins because he or she is *grob*. He or she focuses his or her desires more on things created than on the Creator. The decisive breach in life consists when a human being is *entgrobet* (de-*grob*-ed), an extremely painful process wherein one becomes detached from all creaturely bonds, certainties, and desires such as avarice, ambition, and pleasure-seeking. Müntzer exhorts his readers to open themselves up to letting God “cast off all the creatureliness with which they are clothed”.¹⁷

According to Müntzer, not only the ceremonies in the Catholic Church, but also the letter of Scripture are “externalities.” Reformational theologians, who were consistently referred to as “scribes,” have an eye only for the letter of the Scriptures. In conceited satisfaction with their knowledge of this external aspect of the Word of Scripture, they shield themselves from getting to know the divine power of the Word, its inner aspect.¹⁸ This power is the work of the Spirit who releases a person from his or her creaturely bonds. Müntzer does not reject the letter of Scripture, but in his view, it must be understood as the announcement of the work of the Spirit in the inward person, that is the second meaning of “external”.¹⁹ The teaching on the relation between the Spirit and the letter of the Scripture marks an important difference between the Magisterial and the Radical Reformations.²⁰

The Spirit turns the letter of Scripture into an event, an experience. In Müntzer’s view, baptismal water is also an externality, an outward sign that points to the inner working of the Spirit. Müntzer quotes John 5:3–4, which tells of the water in the pool of Bethesda, which was moved whenever an angel descended into it thereby turning it into healing water.²¹ Müntzer mentions the reformational slogan “by faith only” (*sola fide*) in one breath with the Catholic

17 “du must alle beleidung, do du von allen creaturn angezogen bist, lassen Got durch sein werck abwerffen,” Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 234.

18 “Und wir schriftgelernten wollen wehnen, ist genug daran, wenn wir die schrift haben und dorften der krafft Gotis nicht gewar werden, wie clerlich zum Römern am ersten steht, das das evangelion ein craft Gotis ...,” Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 235.

19 “Dann Got mit allen buchstabischen zusagen ercleret seine almugende crafft, in allen seinen außerwelten gethan,” Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 236.

20 See also Van den Belt, “Word and Spirit.”

21 Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 229.

ceremonial religion. Both allow persons to close themselves off from the inner work of the Spirit, that is, from the painful *Entgrobung*. The saying that “Christ has accomplished all things” is, for Müntzer, wholly in line with the Catholic practice of indulgences because a sinner receives forgiveness without anything having happened in his or her inner self.²² He characterizes the “faith only” doctrine as a human invention (*getichten glawben*). One of his writings has this theme as its title: *Von dem gedichteten Glauben* (“Of the invented faith”). The “Christ who has accomplished all things” is the “honey-sweet Christ.”²³ Such a belief in such a Christ confirms the creaturely bonds of human beings, who can then simply remain the way they are.

4 Müntzer the Mystic: Spirit Baptism at the Breach

As explained above, baptism of the Spirit lies at the decisive breach between “external” and “internal,” between “creature” and “Creator.” In the sixth point of his *Protestation oder Erbietung*, Müntzer examines the place and significance of baptism. He does so in an exegesis of passages from the Gospel of John in which water plays a role.²⁴ Water and Spirit are connected: water refers to the working of the *Spirit* in the heart of the individual. In the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, Müntzer reads the words “unless he is born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5) as saying “unless he is *baptized* in water and *the* Holy Spirit.” By way of further elucidation, he juxtaposes these words with John 7:37: “Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Holy Spirit ...” Thus, the water of baptism refers to the working of the Spirit, who causes “living water” to flow from within the believer. Shortly before this, Müntzer had mentioned living water that flows in a painful breaking process from “a hard rock,” which refers to the human heart.²⁵ Spirit baptism is a painful event, but one can, through the working of the Spirit, begin to long for it. Müntzer refers at this point to the miracle at Cana, where Jesus changed water into wine (John 2). In his exegesis, he links the water of baptism

22 “Die Römer haben ablaß geben, vortzeit pein und schult, und wir solten nu gleich auff ein solch fundament bawen?” Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 234.

23 Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 217, 226–228, 233–239.

24 Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 228–229.

25 “das ellende, jamerliche seufftzen in euch ... welch einbrunstig seufftzen und sehnen nach Gottes ewigem willen ... quillet aus den harten felßen der lebenigen wasser zur ankunfft und ursprung der außerweltten,” Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 226.

that is moved by the Spirit with the wine of suffering of the Lord's Supper. When the water is moved by the Spirit and thereby becomes wine, the individual is moved by the Spirit to a "desire for suffering."²⁶

Spirit baptism is the painful process of *Entgrobung* in which the individual is detached from his or her creaturely bonds. This process takes one through the nadir of one's existence. Every footing is taken away, even the faith one thought one had.²⁷ The suffering the individual experiences in this process is a suffering with Christ: "The elect must be conformed to Christ in his suffering."²⁸ Spirit baptism is becoming one with the "bitter Christ" whose suffering then becomes the believer's suffering. The "bitter Christ" of suffering is the salvific alternative to the "honey-sweet Christ" of the reformational notion of the vicarious suffering of Christ and "faith alone".²⁹

5 Müntzer the Apocalypticist: The Historical Breach Point

As a mystic, Müntzer seems to be completely preoccupied by the human being's inner self. He focuses all his attention on the individual who goes through a radical breach in Spirit baptism, in which one is painfully detached from creaturely bonds and thus becomes a creature that no longer finds life in creation, but in the Creator. Central to his thinking is not a historical breach but a personal, biographical one – although Müntzer never speaks of his own life in terms of "new" versus "old." Nevertheless, Müntzer the mystic was also an apocalypticist, and apocalypticists tend to have an open eye for contemporary historical events, interpreting them in the light of both the past and the expected future.³⁰ Müntzer's apocalyptic sensitivity is apparent in his aforementioned "Prague Manifesto," in which he announced – writing from the place where Johannes Hus once worked – a future spiritual reformation or revolution. His aforementioned exegesis of Daniel 2 in a so-called "prince's sermon" (*Fürstenpredigt*) for John Elector of Saxony is pure apocalypticism. By joining

26 "Aber im andern capittel werden solche unser wasser zu wein. Unsere bewegung werden lustig zu leyden," Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 226.

27 "Do meint der mensche, er habe keinen glauben uberal," Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 237.

28 "das die außerwelten sollen und müssen christformig werden und mit mancherley leyden und zucht Gottis werck in achtung haben," Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 227.

29 "Wenn man sagt, Christus hats alleine alles außgericht, ist vil, vil zu kurtz ... Also theten wir auch, wenn wir einen honigsussen Christum wolgefellig der morderischen unser natur predigten," Franz, *Thomas Müntzer*, 234.

30 Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 1.

the rebellious peasants at Frankenhausen, he suited apocalyptic action to the apocalyptic word.

How, then, does Müntzer's mysticism relate to his apocalypticism? H.-J. Goertz clarifies this with the terms *innere Ordnung* (internal order) and *äussere Ordnung* (external order). The former is the structure of existential reality that is determined by creaturely bonds, desire, and the self-invented faith in the "honey-sweet Christ." The latter is the structure of the political and social reality that is a consequence of the inner order. The way of salvation out of the internal order – the way of suffering – is also the way of salvation for political and social reality. The world also can only find redemption by going through suffering. Here mysticism acquires an apocalyptic effect. In the hands of an apocalypticist, the mystic's passive suffering can turn into actively practised suffering.³¹ The a-historical breach point found in mysticism then becomes an apocalyptic breach point in history. A new messianic age will dawn if one follows the path of suffering. This has consequences for baptism. The Spirit baptism of redemptive suffering, and water baptism as its outward form, both acquire apocalyptic implications.

6 Hans Hut: Follower of Müntzer and Anabaptist

Whereas the connection between mysticism and apocalypticism in Müntzer's thought is more implicit, in Hans Hut's mindset the connection is more explicit and at the surface of his thinking. Hut was a follower of Müntzer, and peddled his writings. He took part in the battle of Frankenhausen and survived. In 1526, he was baptized and began to preach in the regions where Müntzer had been influential. The transition from mysticism to apocalypticism that Müntzer had practiced acquired a theological structure in Hut. This transition will be investigated based upon Hut's *Von dem geheimnus der tauff* ("Of the mystery of baptism"), his confessions while on trial, confessions of his followers while on trial, and current literature on Hut.

In mystical soteriology, Hut argued, the individual person is saved through suffering. Hut adds that this is also true of the world at large.³² Apocalypticism

31 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Innere und äussere Ordnung in der Theologie Thomas Müntzers* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 142–148.

32 *Von dem geheimnus: "Das kan und mag nun nit geschehen im ganzen, bis die trüebals aller angst und not die ganz welt gedemütiget hat,"* Lydia Müller, *Glaubenszeugnisse oberdeutschen Taufgesinnter I*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, Bd. 20 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1938), 36.

acquires the structure of mysticism. The messianic era shall begin at a turning point characterized by suffering. In the radical changing of the ages, believers need a spirituality that is capable of giving this suffering a place. In line with this view, baptism, as determined by mysticism, acquires an apocalyptic charge. Hut refers to the water of baptism as the *wasser aller trübsal* (water of all tribulation).³³ In his view, this was the water of the Flood, in which all of humanity was baptized but from which only Noah and his family were saved. The Red Sea was baptismal water in which both the people of Israel and the Pharaoh with his army were baptized. The latter perished, but the Israelites passed through, heading towards the future. Behold the function of baptismal water: "The wicked enter into it but do not come out of it ..." Hut ascribes mystical depth to the water, by adding: "... because they have sunk passionately down to the bottom of creatureliness ..." ³⁴ The water of baptism represents the experience of suffering in which not only, as Müntzer saw it, individual human beings but also nations and the entire world are either saved from their creaturely bonds and their desire for them, or perish in it.

The water of baptism receives an apocalyptic significance at the decisive point of the changing of the ages. Baptism was administered by Hut as a sign on the forehead that protected the believer against the *wasser aller trübsal* that would come over the world for three and a half years. Hut thought of himself as the "man clothed in linen," mentioned in Ezekiel 9:2–5, Daniel 12:6, and Revelation 7:3. According to the latter text, a man applies this sign on the foreheads of the 144,000, sealing them against judgment.³⁵ Those who have received the sign of baptism are saved when they go through the *wasser aller trübsal*. This period of tribulation is a time of repentance for sinners and a time of persecution for those who want to live a godly life.³⁶ According to the

33 Rollin Stely Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1966), 82; see also Olof de Vries, *Leer en praxis van de vroege dopers als een leer van de geschiedenis* (Leeuwarden: Gerben Dijkstra, 1982), 89–90.

34 "Die bösen komen wol hinein, gend aber nit wider heraus, weil sie mit lust gantz zu grund in die creaturen gesunken seind," Müller, *Glaubenszeugnisse*, 24.

35 Gottfried Seebass, "Bauernkrieg und Täuferum in Franken," *ZKG* 85 (1974), 149; De Vries, *Leer en praxis*, 89–90.

36 Confession on trial: "Sein maynung sei gewesen, das got der hab geben zu buss vierthalbjar, wie in apokalipsis am 13. anzaigt werde. Wer sich zur buss bekere, der werde verfolgt werden und müsse leiden, wie Timothö am 3 stände: wer gotseliglich leben well, der muss verfolgnus leiden ...," C. Meyer, "Die Anfänge des Wiedertäuferthums in Augsburg. Zur Geschichte der Wiedertäufer in Oberschwaben," *Zeitschrift des historischen Vereins für Schwaben und Neuburg* 1 (1874), 239.

testimony of someone who was baptized by Hut, this time of suffering is, for the believers, a time to live according to the principles of defencelessness that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.³⁷ During this period, the baptized had to keep themselves away from any sort of violence that would have been the order of the day.³⁸ Their suffering was essential for the radical change of the times, but could not be caused by them. After having suffered the *wasser aller trübsal* for three and a half years, the Anabaptists would be called upon to take up the sword and to execute the judgment of God on the godless.³⁹ According to Hut, this violent administration of justice must be understood as a manner in which the believers will then rule the earth.⁴⁰ The decisive breach in history, the great turning point of the ages, is characterized by suffering. Unlike Müntzer, Hut believed that Anabaptists themselves would play no active role in bringing about this breach, but only undergo the suffering.

7 Baptism and the New Social Order in the Zurich Reformation

In January 1523, during the first disputation in Zurich, a decision in favour of reformation was made with the approval of the city council. During the second disputation, in October of that same year, Zwingli declared that the pace of the Reformation should be determined by the city council. From that moment, a group of Zwingli's followers began to distance themselves from him because they wanted a more radical approach to the Reformation. Within a year, an Anabaptist movement would emerge out of this group.

As we saw, Anabaptism in Müntzer's line viewed baptism as the sacrament for the dawning new age. To what extent can the same be said of the Anabaptist movement that emerged in Zurich? We will look into two issues: the introduction of the question of baptism and the question of tithes, which was already under discussion in Zurich.

The question of baptism was not an exclusively ecclesiastical matter. Infant baptism functioned as the symbol of the unity of church and society. Parents'

37 Confession of a follower of Hut on trial: "... wan wurd krieg, so ... heisch ime her ein pfennig an, so soll er ime zwen geben, schluge in einer an ein packen, soll er den andern darreichen," Paul Wappler, *Die Täuferbewegung in Thüringen von 1526–1584* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1913), 243.

38 Seebass, "Bauernkrieg", 148.

39 Seebass, "Bauernkrieg", 148; Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages*, 38.

40 Confession of a follower of Hut on trial: "... die gerechten werden richten die lender und gewalt haben uber die volcker," Wappler, *Täuferbewegung*, 242.

refusal to allow their new-born child to be baptized was deemed a revolutionary act that threatened the social order. This was an issue in the spring of 1524 when Reublin preached against infant baptism in Wytikon near Zurich, and peasants refused to pay tithes to the Zurich clergy.⁴¹

The question of tithes also touched upon the social order. Strikingly, both questions played out simultaneously in the Zurich Reformation and Zwingli's basic attitude toward both was similar: it was wrong to think that other times were dawning. In his 1523 *Von göttlicher und menschlicher Gerechtigkeit* ("About divine and human justice"), Zwingli discussed the question of tithes.⁴² In his view, one should distinguish between divine and human justice. The latter is imperfect because of human sin, but is ordained by God and delegated to the authorities to maintain the social order. All kinds of social arrangements, such as tithing, can be criticized from the perspective of the divine order. But it is unrealistic to think that the divine order could be established in this world as a new social order. A liveable order is preserved only in historical continuity.

Zwingli explained his view on baptism in his 1525 *Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe* ("On baptism, rebaptism and infant baptism").⁴³ Again, he made a plea for respecting historical continuity. Christian infant baptism, he argued, is the equivalent of Old Testament circumcision.⁴⁴ Both regulate the transmission of faith in the succession of the generations; they are a sign that obligates parents to raise their children in the faith.⁴⁵ Zwingli criticizes Anabaptists for improperly separating believers from unbelievers in the Christian commonwealth of Zurich. Their requirement that faith must precede baptism is valid in a missionary situation, but in a society of Christian families, children are "sanctified in their parents" and count as "sons of God."⁴⁶ For Zwingli, baptism is a symbol of unity, of historical continuity, and is most faithfully expressed in infant baptism.

41 John Yoder, *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz: Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523–1538* (Karlsruhe: EVZ, 1962), 33; Zimmermann, *Antwort*, 77.

42 Emil Egli and Georg Finsler, eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, CR 89 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1908), 484–515.

43 Emil Egli and Georg Finsler, eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. IV, CR 91 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1927), 188–337.

44 Egli and Finsler, *Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, IV, 292–295, 326 ff.

45 "Uß dem ursprung der beschnydung sehend wir eigentlich, das der kindertouff glych dahind dient, dahin ouch die beschnydung dienet hat, namlich, daß die, so in den waren gott vertrauend, ouch ire kinder zu erkantnus und anhangen desselbigen gottes ziehen söllend ..." Egli and Finsler, *Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, IV, 295.

46 "... das die kinder der glöubigen menschen gottes sygind, welchs die ein wesenlich ursach

How did the Zurich Anabaptist movement view itself? Did it, like Hut, view baptism as the sacrament of a new age? To the extent that we can understand Anabaptists from Zwingli's reaction to them, this question can be answered in the affirmative. The Anabaptists' own testimony agrees with Zwingli's view on them. Two years before being put to death on 5 January 1527 as the first Anabaptist martyr in Zurich, Felix Mantz wrote a *Protestation oder Schutzschrift* ("Protestation and apology") to the city council of Zurich, in which he argued that the meaning of Christian baptism differs from Old Testament circumcision because it is the sign of a new salvation-historical order. This order is the order of the crucified and risen Christ who, according to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, has "all power in heaven and on earth."⁴⁷ Baptism is the initiation into a life of imitation of Christ, in the power of Christ.⁴⁸

Characteristic of Swiss Anabaptism is its emphasis on the imitation of Christ, which leads to a confrontation with the old order of this world and, therefore, to suffering; hence, its spirituality of martyrdom. Konrad Grebel, the leader of the Anabaptist movement in and around Zurich, wrote that believers are like sheep among the wolves, led to the slaughter, and must be baptized in "fear and affliction, misery [*trübsal*], persecution, suffering and death."⁴⁹ In a letter to Thomas Müntzer, he encouraged him in suffering.⁵⁰ At the same time, however, he reproved Müntzer for preaching violence against those who are in power.⁵¹ Here we see a fundamental difference between Müntzer's and the Swiss Anabaptist's view on suffering. Both emphasized that it was characteristic of the imminent change of the ages, but whereas Swiss Anabaptism had a

ist, darumb man die kinder touffen sölle," Egli and Finsler, *Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke* IV, 318.

47 *Protestation und Schutzschrift*: "wie die apostel den empfelch Christi, da oben erzalt auss dem Mathe, habend verstanden, namlich, das so sy hingangen, soltend leren alle völkler, das Christo aller gwalt in hymel und auff erden gegeben were, eim iegklichen in seinem namen nachlassung der sünden begegnen werden, der an glaubende rechtschaffne werck eins gemuet geenderten thun werde," Leonhar von Muralt and Walter Schmid, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, Bd. 1 (Zürich: Hirzel, 1952), 25.

48 Muralt and Schmid, *Quellen*, 13; De Vries, *Leer en praxis*, 30–31.

49 *Letter to Vadianus*: "Recht gleubige christen sind schaff mitten under den wölfen, schaff der schlachtung, müssend in angst und nott, trübsal, ferfolgung, liden und sterben getoufft werden," Muralt and Schmid, *Quellen*, 17.

50 *Letter to Müntzer*: "Und ob du darumb liden müsztest, weist wol, dasz es nit andersz mag sin. Christus musz noch mer liden in seinem glidern. Er aber wirt sy sterken und fest erhalten bisz zu dem end," Muralt and Schmid, *Quellen*, 20.

51 *Letter to Müntzer*: "du habest wider die fürsten geprediget, dasz man sy mit der funst angriffen sollte," Muralt and Schmid, *Quellen*, 19.

passively undergone martyrdom in mind, Müntzer preached suffering that is actively brought about.

8 Summary and Conclusion

Given a current definition of spirituality, baptismal spirituality from a New Testament perspective is “the growing, changing and developing relationship with the transcendent reality of Jesus’s death and resurrection.” In ecclesiastical tradition, this spirituality focuses first and foremost on forgiveness and reconciliation wrought by Jesus’s death. Another aspect dominates the Anabaptist tradition: the transition from “old” to “new,” from a reality that passed when Jesus died, towards the new reality implicated in Jesus’ resurrection.

The transition from “old” to “new” traverses a breach, which, for Anabaptists, included suffering, both along Müntzer’s line and in the Swiss tradition. Anabaptists broke with infant baptism which had long since symbolized the unity of church and society in the *corpus christianum* and the cohering continuity of history. The standing order reacted accordingly by persecuting them. Their martyr’s spirituality enabled Anabaptists to endure the suffering.

The mystic Müntzer linked baptism – explained as “Spirit baptism,” the inner working of the Spirit – to redemptive suffering. In Müntzer’s view, baptismal water was an outward sign that points to the painful inner working of the Spirit in the heart of the individual. The suffering of this baptismal work of the Spirit is participation in the suffering of the “bitter Christ.”

The apocalypticist Müntzer viewed suffering as the way to salvation, not only for individual human beings but for the world – the social and political reality – as well.

In line with Müntzer, the Anabaptist Hut considered suffering as the way to salvation for the world. But unlike Müntzer’s vision, this suffering should not be brought about by believers. On the contrary, Anabaptists will withdraw from the violent decisive turning point from old towards new, and live according to the principles of defencelessness that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the Zurich Reformation, Zwingli defended infant baptism as a symbol of historical continuity. Over and against his theology, Anabaptist baptism was becoming an expression of a new orientation toward the whole of the ecclesiastical and social reality. In the Anabaptist view, baptism was a sign of the new salvation-historical order of Christ, who turned the old order into the new one, as He preached in the Sermon on the Mount and practised himself. Baptism is initiation into this new order – initiation into the imitation of Christ, characterized by defencelessness and readiness to suffer.

In the course of church history baptism has had many meanings and associated spiritualities belonging to each of these meanings: for example, purification from original sin, prevenient grace (in the Calvinistic tradition), the common ground of ecclesiastical unity (in the ecumenical movement), a ritual marking a birth (in nominal Christianity in a secularized society). Baptismal spirituality can differ in different historical contexts. In this essay, we have investigated the meaning and spirituality of baptism marking the transition from “old” to “new” in the era of sixteenth-century attempts to reform church and society. In the modern context – characterized by individualism and emphasis on experience – many Christians ask for a believer’s baptism in addition to infant baptism, arguing that the experience of a personal renewal of faith calls for a renewal of baptism.

We conclude that within certain contexts baptism can mark the transition from “old” to “new” under the condition that it meets New Testament baptismal theology. The breach from “old” to “new” often includes suffering because of resistant or opposing powers. A “martyr’s spirituality” enables believers to endure this suffering, granting participation in Jesus’s suffering transition from Good Friday to Easter.

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