

Text: Urs B. Leu **The persecution of the Anabaptists by both Zwingli and Bullinger is bound to prove a contentious issue in this 500th anniversary year. The programme of events therefore includes a one-day symposium devoted exclusively to the baptism controversy to be held on 26 June – an event which Baptists from all over the world have been invited to attend. How should Bullinger's attitude to and treatment of the Anabaptists be judged, bearing in mind the larger historical context? The author of this article is unsparing in his verdict.**

Bullinger and t

The Anabaptists, the fourth of the new churches to emerge from the Reformation after the Lutherans, the Reformed church and the Anglicans, were themselves split into the most diverse factions and groups. This much is evident from comments by one of their leaders, Balthasar Hubmaier of Waldshut, who said that the doctrine of baptism he himself taught differed from that of the Anabaptist mystic, Hans Hut, as did "heaven from earth, east from west, Christ from Belial."

Historians differentiate between the various factions according to either theological (Zealots, Spiritualists, Anitrinitarians etc.) or regional criteria (the Swiss Anabaptists, Austrian-South German Anabaptists, Dutch-North German Anabaptists). Yet there were various theological schools of thought even within these regional groupings.

Because of this heterogeneity, Baptism cannot be traced back to one single person, nor can it be reduced to a socio-revolutionary movement. Those Anabaptists with whom Bullinger was concerned were above all the Anabaptists of Zurich, who belonged to – or rather founded – the so-called Swiss Brethren.

Doctrinal differences

While the Zurich Reformers perceived the church as a *Volkskirche* – a mass church

open to all comers, the Anabaptists argued that a church could only exist where there was a fellowship of true believers who had committed themselves to follow Jesus without compromise. On the question of authority, they both agreed that the church derived its authority from God himself and must therefore be obeyed. Bullinger took this a step further inasmuch as he believed it was the duty of a Christian government not only to obey the church, but even to defend it by force of arms, if necessary – including by the imposition of the death penalty on exceptionally recalcitrant heretics. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, drew a clear distinction between church and state and hence categorically rejected all forms of authoritarian intervention and punishment on matters of faith or conscience.

The main doctrinal bone of contention, however, was of course the question of paedobaptism versus credobaptism. In theological terms, Bullinger did not advance much beyond Zwingli and on the question of infant baptism remained a staunch advocate of his predecessor's views. While not such an original thinker as Zwingli, Bullinger was a brilliant and stimulating teacher, a persuasive writer, efficient organizer and astute politician who succeeded in lending a European dimension to the Reformation that Zwingli had until then centred almost exclusively on Zurich.

The Anabaptists preached the doctrine of credobaptism or baptism of the faithful, as explained in Chapter 6 of the Epistle to the Romans, in which Paul explains that only those who have understood the gospel and who wish to commit themselves to Jesus should be baptized. Even Zwingli once admitted that he, too, had at one time felt that children should not be baptized until they were old enough to understand the meaning of the sacrament.

Zwingli's disputation with the Anabaptists

Zwingli's first disputation with the Anabaptists was in December 1524, when he published his "Wer ursach gebind zu ufruren". After conceding that there was indeed no unequivocal mention of infant baptism in the New Testament, he continued as follows "We therefore have to see whether there is anything on this subject in the Old Testament. And though we find nothing on baptism, we do find something on an equivalent custom, namely that of circumcision. This is a sign of the faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised, as in Romans 4 [Romans 4, 12]. Indeed, this sign was given to infants on the eighth day, who could not of course know anything of faith; and yet circumcision is a sign of faith. That baptism has now been introduced instead of circumcision, continues the custom of giving the faithful a sign. Paul also touches on this in his Epistle to the Colossians, [Colossians 2,

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11]: "In him (Christ) also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism etc." I know very well what Paul is talking about here. I cite this, however, merely as an instance of baptism being regarded as the equivalent of circumcision. As in Old Testament times, therefore, circumcision was given to children and as baptism has come to replace

circumcision, it follows that Christian children should also be baptised."

According to Zwingli, circumcision in Old Testament times was a sign of the covenant, a function that in the New Testament passes to baptism. Bullinger adopted Zwingli's interpretation and began espousing these views himself as early as November 1525, when they formed the subject of a long and detailed letter to Heinrich Simmler of Berne.

Tolerance?

In addition to Bullinger's countless handwritten drafts, notes, tracts and letters of advice, two of those of his published works that have survived also contain attacks on the Anabaptists. The first of these, "Von dem unverschampten fraefel, ergerlichem verwyrren unnd unwarhafftem leeren der selbgesandten Widertoeuffern", appeared first in German in 1531 and then in Latin in 1535, while the second, "Der Widertoeuffer-

he Anabaptists

The disbanding of a nocturnal Anabaptist assembly near Altstetten ZH 1574 (Zurich Central Library, Wickiana, Ms. F23, p. 393 f.)





A look back at the history of the Reformation: The Kappeler Milk Soup, from Bullinger's Chronicle of the Reformation, copied by Heinrich Thomann 1605 (Zurich Central Library, Ms 316, f. 418v)

en ursprung, fůrgang, Secten, waesen", which is considered to be his main work on this subject, was published in 1560 in both German and Latin. When one considers his writings in their entirety, however, it soon becomes clear that the problem posed by the Anabaptists was one the chief pastor wrestled with throughout his theological career, if not for his own church, then on behalf of other Protestant churches and pastors both in Switzerland and abroad.

Bullinger never wavered either in his belief in infant baptism or in his rejection of various Anabaptist doctrines and was equally consistent in his views on how they should be punished. Seen through his eyes, the Anabaptists' refusal to accept church order posed a threat to the social order too, meaning that they were to be regarded not as mere troublemakers, but rather as seditious revolutionaries. As Bullinger well knew, it was the duty of the authorities to take action against such rebels and even to put them to death, if necessary. The Anabaptists in Zurich were indeed persecuted and imprisoned and those too obdurate to recant, even when pastors were dispatched to set them right, could expect banishment at the very least and in some cases even death. Like the civic authorities in Zurich,

Bullinger, too, was still straitjacketed by a medieval way of thinking on this point.

Zurich was certainly not a centre of tolerance, despite claims to the contrary by Delio Cantimori, the famous Italian church historian whose 1949 work on the religious refugees who sought asylum there credits Bullinger himself with having championed their cause. Although only two Anabaptists were executed during Bullinger's time in Zurich – both of them in 1532 –, some of the sources preserved in the city archives suggest that those incarcerated in Zurich's prisons were not just interrogated, but tortured as well.

Not that this was something peculiar to Bullinger's term of office, for the methods in question lingered on for many years thereafter. Sources from the 17th century, for example, tell not only of the execution of the Anabaptists' leader, Hans Landis, but also of other atrocities, such as the use of thumbscrews on children to force them to betray their Anabaptist parents' whereabouts. Those who raised their voices in protest at the practice of condemning people to death on purely religious grounds even as early as the 16th century, one of whom was the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, were largely ignored in Zurich.

The larger historical picture

Bullinger also suspected the Anabaptists of Zurich of being in league with the Thuringian revolutionary, Thomas Můntzer, who in 1525 was beheaded following the collapse of the uprising he had fomented against the established order and hierarchies. While the chief pastor of Zurich had not always held this view and was certainly not alone in his suspicions, there can be no doubt that he was the most influential person to make such false claims concerning the Anabaptists, nor did he have any qualms about publicizing them in the later of his two anti-Anabaptist works. We also know from a list in Bullinger's hand preserved in the city archives that Bullinger had planned to present this work to such illustrious personalities as Queen Elizabeth I of England, King Maximilian II of Bohemia and Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, to mention but a few. Remarkably, the 101 names on the list include not just Protestants, but Catholics too – even as far afield as France, Poland, Austria, Scotland and Lithuania.

This was the work that caused Bullinger's distorted picture of the Anabaptists in general and of the Zurich Anabaptists in particular to be read and – even today – accepted as gospel truth all over Europe. The venerable North American church historian, Donald F. Durnbough, once commented on the spread of this falsehood as follows: "The two movements [Můntzer and the Zurich Anabaptists] can only be placed in the same camp by ignorance or prejudice." Having witnessed the emergence of the Zurich Anabaptists at first hand, Bullinger should have known better!

This year's 500th anniversary of Bullinger's birth is an excellent opportunity for us to take a more self-critical and discriminating look at the various Anabaptist groups than we have done in the past. Not everything that takes place outside the Volkskirche is a sect, as Bullinger – and many of our contemporaries – would have us believe. Church history is full of examples to prove that *bona fide* Christian life need not be confined to the big state churches.

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