



## *Curb Your Enthusiasm: Martin Luther's Critique of Anabaptism*

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### **Introduction**

Following the events of 1517, reform-minded Christians all over Europe looked to Martin Luther as a source of inspiration in their own efforts to renovate thoroughly sixteenth-century Christianity. While it is true that most sixteenth-century Protestant leaders considered Luther to be the catalyst for religious renewal, the Reformation was anything but a unified attack on late medieval Catholicism. Evangelical movements appeared all over Europe, many of them as different from each other as they were from the Roman Church.<sup>1</sup> Some groups were part of the so-called Magisterial Reformation, which rejected many of the tenets of Catholicism while maintaining a close relationship between church and state. The Magisterial Reformation included Lutherans and their Reformed counterparts, each of which essentially exchanged the universal/visible church of Catholicism for a territorial/visible church that varied from region to region. Other sects took their critique of Catholicism even further, rejecting both medieval Catholic theology and the very notion of a territorial church. These groups were part of the so-called Radical Reformation, a movement that included considerably more diversity than the Magisterial Reformation.

Though Radicals and Magisterial reformers shared a common disdain for the Roman Church, they were often as critical of each other as they were Catholicism. This is illustrated in Martin Luther's interactions with the Radicals and other non-Lutheran movements. This article will examine Luther's critique of one major branch of the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptist movement. It will argue that, despite a lack of precision and a paucity of works devoted specifically to the Anabaptists, Luther did present

<sup>1</sup>This multiplicity of diverse reform movements has led many modern Reformation scholars to suggest that the period is characterized by a variety of "reformations" rather than a single "Reformation." See Carter S. Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), and James R. Payton Jr., *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

an extensive critique of Anabaptism. It will be shown that Luther's appraisal was quite wide-ranging, if not systematic.

The article is divided into two major sections, the first of which will attempt to define Anabaptism as one distinct faction among many in the Radical Reformation (something Luther never attempted to do himself). The second section will outline the various types of criticisms Luther lodged against Anabaptism, which can be grouped into at least five broad categories: a deficient soteriology, a deficient ecclesiology, miscellaneous theological errors, a misunderstanding of the Christian's role in society, and a general spirit of fanaticism (or "enthusiasm," as Luther preferred). Because of Luther's minimal efforts at distinguishing different sects among the Radicals, it will be apparent that many of Luther's criticisms were based upon a misunderstanding of what Anabaptists actually believed. It will be equally clear that even when Luther did understand Anabaptist beliefs and practices, he rejected them.

### Anabaptism Defined

In the past, few historians made the effort to distinguish between the various sects associated with the Radical Reformation. As a result, Anabaptists were often grouped with other movements with which they bore little resemblance other than a rejection of both Catholicism and the Magisterial Reformation. Historian William Estep suggests, "no group within Christian history ... has been judged as unfairly as the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century."<sup>2</sup> The reasons Estep cites for these alleged unfair judgments include anti-Anabaptist polemics written by their contemporaries, the unavailability of primary sources, a lack of interest by European scholars, and unwillingness on the part of American scholars to utilize the primary sources that were available.<sup>3</sup> This lack of specificity in defining Anabaptism understandably led to widespread confusion at both the scholarly and popular levels.

### Rethinking Anabaptism

For most of the last five centuries, the Anabaptists were compared to, rather than distinguished from, other Radical movements. Especially common was the tendency to lump Anabaptists together with those Radicals possessing more violent proclivities.<sup>4</sup> For example, historians regularly considered the Anabaptists to be connected closely to the Peasants War of 1525, claiming Thomas Müntzer to be the principle founder of Anabaptism.<sup>5</sup> This

<sup>2</sup>William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 1–2.

<sup>4</sup>Arnold Koelpin notes that Luther himself made this same assumption. See Arnold Koelpin, "Luther Battles the Fanatics," *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 5.3 (Holy Trinity 1996): 24. See also Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Harold Bender notes that this misconception began with the Lutheran reformers themselves. See Harold S. Bender, "The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and the

often led to the conclusion that Anabaptists were revolutionary by nature.<sup>6</sup> Leonard Verduin notes that, while Conrad Grebel and other Anabaptists did have contact with Müntzer, they made it clear that “cooperation between [Müntzer] and them was contingent upon abandonment of revolutionary tactics.”<sup>7</sup> Though some post-1525 Anabaptists did show revolutionary tendencies, they were an aberration uncharacteristic of the entire movement.<sup>8</sup>

In light of these misunderstandings, a massive scholarly reassessment of the Radical Reformation was undertaken by a variety of religious historians during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Many of these historians were themselves Anabaptists (often Mennonites) or other church historians in Free Church traditions. Others were not confessional church historians, but rather social historians writing from either secular or ecumenical perspectives. The leading historian of this scholarly renaissance was George Huntston Williams, longtime professor at the Harvard University Divinity School. Beginning in the 1950s, Williams began to redefine the terms of debate utilized in Anabaptist studies. With the publication of the first edition of his massive tome *The Radical Reformation* in 1962, Williams popularized a new paradigm for distinguishing the different subgroups that constituted the Radical Reformation.

Williams called the first category of Radicals the “Spiritualists,” which included such mystics and/or revolutionaries as Müntzer, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and the various libertine groups. The second subgroup Williams designated the “Evangelical Rationalists,” whose primary characteristics were individualism and anti-Trinitarianism. The third group was the Anabaptists, who were evangelical in their theology and restorationist in their objectives.<sup>9</sup> To this third group belonged the Swiss Brethren like Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Michael Sattler, the scholastic theologian-turned-Anabap-

Anabaptists,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27.1 (January 1953): 9.

<sup>6</sup>Though somewhat nuanced, this line of argument is still put forth by some modern historians. See C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation in Germany*, Historical Association Studies (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 87–96; Paul P. Kuenning, “Sources of Lutheran Pietism’s Ethical Activism in Anabaptism by Way of Thomas Müntzer,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 47.2 (May 1989): 7; Harry Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals: Another Look at Some Aspects of the Struggle between Luther and the Radical Reformers* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1974), 73–79. Claus-Peter Clasen argues that there were some revolutionary Anabaptists, but there were more differences than similarities between the anarchic peasants and mainstream Anabaptism. He concludes there was no link between the Peasant War and Anabaptism. See Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525–1618* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 152–57.

<sup>7</sup>Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 238.

<sup>8</sup>A notable example is the revolutionary Anabaptist “Kingdom” established at Munster in 1533, later destroyed in 1535. Verduin notes, “By making Munster typical of the movement, men were likewise able to blame Anabaptism for the Peasant Revolt.” See *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Williams traces out these three categories of Radicals in the introduction to *The Radical Reformation*. See George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed., Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. XV (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), xxvii–xxxvi.

tist apologist Balthasar Hubmaier, and the Anabaptist theologian Pilgram Marpeck. According to Estep, these men and their compatriots “constituted normative Anabaptism, by which all forms of the movement [are] to be judged.”<sup>10</sup>

### Normative Anabaptism

What Estep refers to as “normative Anabaptism” began on January 21, 1525, when George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him based upon Blaurock’s profession of faith. Following his baptism, Blaurock proceeded to baptize the other dozen or so men who were present.<sup>11</sup> These Anabaptists were not revolutionaries like Müntzer or self-proclaimed prophets like Nicholas Störch and the Zwickau Prophets, but rather were evangelicals who rejected not only medieval scholasticism but also the medieval concept of Christendom. This rejection of Christendom aside, Hans-Jürgen Goertz notes that Anabaptists did not set out to establish autonomous churches; the Swiss Brethren took this step only after Zwingli rejected their program for reform.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Anabaptism arose as an evangelical restorationist movement distinct from the Lutheran and Reformed churches, as well as other Radical sects.

In his book *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, Verduin argues that the Anabaptist rejection of Christendom was not novel, but rather was the latest manifestation of a dissenting impulse that had always existed alongside the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup> Verduin claims that authentic Anabaptism was marked by several distinctives, the sum of which he structures his book around. Among these Anabaptist distinctives were a rejection of christening, a separation of church and state, voluntary faith, a rejection of sacerdotalism, nonviolence, and an emphasis on personal holiness. Interestingly, though credobaptism is often considered a fundamental Anabaptist distinctive, Verduin contends that a rejection of christening may or may not entail a rejection

<sup>10</sup>Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, xi. After accepting William’s threefold division of Radicals, Harry Loewen further subdivides the Anabaptists into three groups. The revolutionary Anabaptists, exemplified by the Münsterites, wanted to apply Old Testament practices to the contemporary setting, often by means of force. The contemplative Anabaptists trusted in mystical experiences for their direction. The evangelical Anabaptists were those who looked to the New Testament for their faith and practice. This latter category is roughly synonymous with what Estep calls “normative Anabaptism.” See Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals*, 23. Estep’s thesis has remained influential among Southern Baptist interpreters of Anabaptism. Note the repeated references to Estep’s legacy among Southern Baptists in Malcolm Yarnell, ed., *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 12–13; see also Hans J. Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided: The Protestant Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 72.

<sup>12</sup>Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Radical Religiosity in the German Reformation,” in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, Blackwell Companions to European History, ed. Po-chia Hsia (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 79.

<sup>13</sup>Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 14.

of paedobaptism itself.<sup>14</sup> Early Anabaptist distinctives were expounded in the Schleithem Confession (1527) and other statements of faith, as well as the apologetic writings of evangelical Anabaptists. Williams notes that the Schleithem Confession in particular, though not a comprehensive statement of faith, became the theological norm for many segments of nonviolent Anabaptism.<sup>15</sup> These distinctives distinguished Anabaptists from other Radicals, making it apparent “that there were fundamental differences between parties and movements within the Radical Reformation.”<sup>16</sup>

Luther himself never made an effort to delineate carefully between the various types of Radicals.<sup>17</sup> He frankly admitted in his 1528 treatise *Concerning Rebaptism* that, “Since there has not been much occasion here for it, I have not, for my part, given much thought to these baptizers.”<sup>18</sup> John Oyer observes that, despite the fact Luther wrote or spoke on many occasions against the Anabaptists, most of what he said was limited to passing comments; *Concerning Rebaptism* is the only “tract which was devoted exclusively to a discussion and refutation of Anabaptism.”<sup>19</sup> Luther’s favorite designation for all Radicals, including Anabaptists, was *Schwärmer*, translated as either “enthusiast” or “fanatic.”<sup>20</sup> Though there were clear differences between Anabaptists and other fanatics, Oyer notes “Luther never had sufficient contact with Anabaptists to induce him to question the transfer of his picture of the *Schwärmer* to Anabaptists.”<sup>21</sup>

In practice, Luther treated all his evangelical opponents with contempt, even though, as Mark Edwards observes, “The only actual connection binding all these opponents was Luther’s view that they were all ‘false brethren,’ minions of Satan, bent on subverting the Reformation from within.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 197.

<sup>15</sup>Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 294.

<sup>16</sup>Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 23.

<sup>17</sup>The same could be said of other reformers, including Calvin. See Benjamin Wirt Farley’s introduction to John Calvin, *Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 20.

<sup>18</sup>Martin Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol 40: *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 230.

<sup>19</sup>John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists: Luther, Melancthon and Menius and the Anabaptists of Central Germany* (The Hague, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 116.

<sup>20</sup>George Williams divides the *Schwärmer* into four different groups. The *revolutionary spiritualists* were roughly equivalent to William’s *spiritualist* category of Radicals, represented by Müntzer, Karlstadt, and the Zwickau Prophets. The *commemorationists* were those whose rejection of Catholicism also entailed a rejection of the real presence in the Eucharist, including Zwingli and Ocoelampadius. The *Täufer* were those who practiced credobaptism, particularly the Anabaptists. The evangelical spiritualizers were the less revolutionary version of the first group, especially Schwenckfeld. See George Huntston Williams, “Sanctification in the Testimony of Several So-called Schwärmer,” *Menmonite Quarterly Review* 42.1 (January 1968): 7–8.

<sup>21</sup>Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists*, 230.

<sup>22</sup>Mark U. Edwards, Jr., “Luther’s Own Fanatics,” in *Seven-headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary, 1483–1983*, ed. Peter Newman Brooks (Oxford: Oxford

Arnold Koeplin notes that Luther considered the fanatics to be comprised of a very diverse group, including Karlstadt, Müntzer, Zwingli, the Anabaptists, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and Erasmus.<sup>23</sup> According to Estep, Luther tended to lump the Anabaptists in with Spiritualists like Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets.<sup>24</sup> Luther's lack of definitional precision, coupled with his admitted unfamiliarity with normative Anabaptism, led the reformer frequently to criticize Anabaptists for the faults of other Radicals.

### Luther's Critique of Anabaptism

Though the evangelical Anabaptists were only one segment of the Radical Reformation, Luther made little effort to make the fine distinctions among the various Radicals that modern historians do. This led to a variety of criticisms of Anabaptism, some of which could legitimately be applied to normative Anabaptism, others of which were more applicable to other types of Radicals. In respect to classifying Luther's criticisms, Oyer notes that "[Luther's] declarations on the subject of Anabaptism were frequent, but always short; they consisted primarily of miscellaneous comments on baptism, the Christian's relation to the state or how to treat those poor deluded souls."<sup>25</sup> True as this statement is, it fails to take into account the genuine variety present in Luther's various salvos against Anabaptism. Though Luther critiqued many aspects of Anabaptism, most of the reformer's opprobrium was focused upon four broad categories, each of which includes any number of specific criticisms.

#### A Deficient Soteriology

Luther was critical of what he understood to be Anabaptist soteriology. Specifically, he believed that all fanatics adhered to some form of works righteousness, a charge that permeates almost every aspect of Luther's critique of Anabaptism. This accusation is best understood in light of Luther's defense of justification by faith alone. According to Bernhard Lohse, "There is no doubt that the heart and soul of Luther's Reformation theology is the article on justification."<sup>26</sup> Luther's understanding of justification evolved over time,

University Press, 1983), 124.

<sup>23</sup>Arnold J. Koelplin, "Luther Battles the Fanatics," 24. Williams notes that all of Luther's opponents were either dubbed Papists or *Schwärmer*, the latter of which included such diverse individuals as Müntzer, Zwingli, and Ocoelampadius. See George Huntston Williams, "The Radical Reformation Revisited," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34.1 and 34.2 (1984): 1.

<sup>24</sup>Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 4. In a similar vein, John Oyer claims that for Luther, the term "Anabaptist" thus becomes a broad and almost meaningless appellation which attempts to include all deviants from the Lutheran movement." See John S. Oyer, "The Writings of Luther Against the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27.2 (April 1953): 103.

<sup>25</sup>John S. Oyer, "Luther and the Anabaptists," *Baptist Quarterly* 30.4 (October 1983): 166.

<sup>26</sup>Berhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 258.

resulting in an ongoing scholarly debate over when Luther arrived at his so-called “Reformation breakthrough.”<sup>27</sup> But regardless of when Luther reached his mature understanding of justification, by 1517 he was denouncing what he understood to be the works righteousness associated with the nominalist tradition in which he had been educated.<sup>28</sup>

In numerous places Luther made clear that, in his interpretation, justification was not dependent upon good works. In *The Disputation Concerning Justification* (1536), Luther clearly stated, “Faith without works justifies. Therefore, justification takes place without works.”<sup>29</sup> In his lecture on Galatians 3:6, Luther claimed, “But the doctrine of justification is this, that we are pronounced righteous and are saved solely by faith in Christ, and without works.”<sup>30</sup> Luther criticized the Jews for rejecting justification by faith.

They understand nothing about grace and justification by faith . . . but they wish to be holy by nature and by blood, as the heathen try to be by the will of the flesh. However, the papists look for a middle way. They wish to be righteous neither by the will of the flesh nor by blood but by the will of man. But all these ways are rejected, and John says that we must be born of God.<sup>31</sup>

Luther was even aware that his doctrine of justification set him apart from Augustine. In a tabletalk recorded by Veit Deitrich, Luther claimed, “Ever since I came to an understanding of Paul, I have not been able to think well of any doctor [of the church]. They have become of little value to me. At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine. But when the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine.”<sup>32</sup> In Luther’s theology, justification *by* faith was foundational to *the* faith. As Lohse notes, “For Luther, then, everything depended on holding fast to justification by faith alone against ‘works- righteousness.’”<sup>33</sup>

As far as Luther was concerned, Anabaptists and other Radicals rejected justification by faith in favor of justification by works.<sup>34</sup> The first fa-

<sup>27</sup>For a summary of this debate, see *Ibid.*, 85–88.

<sup>28</sup>For a brief description of the nominalist understanding of justification, see Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 63–66.

<sup>29</sup>Martin Luther, “The Disputation Concerning Justification,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 193.

<sup>30</sup>Martin Luther, “Galatians 3:6,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 232.

<sup>31</sup>“Tabletalk No. 4493: Jews Seek Salvation in their Observances, April 12, 1539,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 54: Table Talk*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 348.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>33</sup>Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 265.

<sup>34</sup>Egil Grisliis argues that most Anabaptists were in essential agreement with Luther on the proper place of works, but chose to emphasize experience over doctrinal formulations. For their part, Anabaptists accused Luther of rejecting good works as unimportant in the Christian life. See Egil Grisliis, “The Meaning of Good Works: Luther and the Anabaptists,” *Word and World* 6.2 (Spring 1986): 175–77.



natic Luther criticized for works righteousness was his erstwhile colleague, Karlstadt. In his 1528 treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matters of Images and the Sacraments*, Luther took Karlstadt to task over his rejection of images.

For where the heart is instructed that one pleases God alone through faith, and that in the matter of images nothing that is pleasing to him takes place, but is a fruitless service and effort, the people themselves willingly drop it, despise images, and have none made. But where one neglects such instruction and forces the issue, it follows that those blaspheme who do not understand and who act only because of the coercion of the law and not with a free conscience. Their idea that they can please God with works becomes a real idol and a false assurance in the heart. Such legalism results in putting away outward images while filling the heart with idols. I say this so that every one may see the kind of a spirit that is lodged in Karlstadt.<sup>35</sup>

Luther claimed Karlstadt's rejection of externals, like images, is essentially a manifestation of works righteousness.<sup>36</sup>

For Luther, the Anabaptists were just as guilty of works righteousness as Karlstadt. In *That a Christian Should Bear His Cross with Patience* (1530), Luther claimed that suffering should always be imposed on the believer from the outside, not self-imposed; Anabaptists and other promoters of works righteousness seek out suffering.<sup>37</sup> In the last sermon he ever preached, Luther compared the Anabaptists to Pelagians in their alleged efforts to earn their own righteousness.

Everything that God does they must improve, so that there is no poorer, more insignificant and despised disciple on earth than God; he must be everybody's pupil, everybody wants to be his teacher and preceptor. This may be seen in all heretics from the beginning of the world, in Arius and Pelagius, and now in our time the Anabaptists and antisacramentarians, and all fanatics and rebels; they are not satisfied with what God has done and instituted, they cannot let things be as they were ordained to be. They think they have to do something too, in order that they may be a bit better than other people and be able to boast: This is what I have done; what God has done is too poor and insignificant,

<sup>35</sup>Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and the Sacrament," in *LW* 40: 84–85.

<sup>36</sup>Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists*, 36.

<sup>37</sup>Martin Luther, "That a Christian Should Bear His Cross with Patience," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 43: *Devotional Writings II*, ed. Gustav K. Wienke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 183.

even childish and foolish; I must add something to it.<sup>38</sup>

Luther also compared Anabaptists with Pelagians (and Jews, Muslims, and pagans) in his 1530 treatise on *The Keys*.<sup>39</sup> As far as Luther was concerned, Anabaptists were no better than Catholics in regard to works. In a lecture on Psalm 45, Luther argued the Anabaptists rejected Roman Catholic works righteousness while promoting a new form of works righteousness, claiming, “Thus the Anabaptists and others reject the heretics under one guise of works and then bring them back under another.”<sup>40</sup>

An essential element of Luther’s doctrine of justification was his understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. Lohse observes that law and gospel were equivalent neither to the Old and New Testament nor to particular biblical passages; rather, both are present throughout Scripture. The law functions through its civic and theological uses, which uphold justice and convict one of his sins, respectively. The gospel brings salvation to the individual under conviction.<sup>41</sup> In light of the centrality to the law-gospel distinction in Luther’s soteriology, it comes as no surprise Luther criticized the Anabaptists for allegedly confusing the two categories. In a lecture on Galatians 2, Luther accused Anabaptists, Catholics, and Zwingli of blurring the lines between law and gospel.

Therefore it is inevitable that the papists, the Zwinglians, the Anabaptists, and all those who either do not know about the righteousness of Christ or who do not believe correctly about it should change Christ into Moses and the Law and change the Law into Christ ... Here immediately Christ is denied and faith is abolished, because what belongs to Christ alone is attributed to the Commandments of God or to the Law. For Christ is, by definition, the Justifier and the Redeemer from sins. If I attribute this to the Law, then the Law is my justifier, which delivers me from my sins before I do its works. And so the Law has now become Christ; and Christ completely loses His name, His work, and His glory, and is nothing else than an agent of the Law, who accuses, terrifies, directs, and sends the sinner to someone else to be justified. This is really the work of the Law.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Martin Luther, “The Last Sermon, Preached in Eisleben, Matt. 11:25–30, February 15, 1546,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51: *Sermons I*, ed. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 384. See also Luther’s comments on Isaiah 55:8, in Martin Luther, “Isaiah 55:8,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 17: *Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 256.

<sup>39</sup>Martin Luther, “The Keys,” in *LW* 40: 364.

<sup>40</sup>Martin Luther, “Psalm 45,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 12: *Selected Psalms I* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 273.

<sup>41</sup>For a summary of Luther’s distinction between law and gospel, see Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 267–76.

<sup>42</sup>Martin Luther, “Galatians 2:17,” in *LW* 26: 142.

This grouping together of such diverse groups is essentially the same as saying that anyone who is not in agreement with Luther's reformation agenda is guilty of confusing law and gospel.

The alleged deficiencies in Anabaptist soteriology understandably led to Luther's questioning whether or not members of the group would be saved. In a tabletalk conversation with Peter Weller, the question was posed regarding the salvation of Anabaptists. Luther responded that the movement was surely in error and their only hope for salvation was for God to act outside his prescribed rules.<sup>43</sup> Because the Anabaptists supposedly rejected justification by faith, and because they supposedly blurred the line between law and gospel, Luther called their very salvation into question.

### A Deficient Ecclesiology

Luther was convinced the Anabaptists misunderstood salvation. But Anabaptism was fraught with errors, and Luther also heartily criticized the Anabaptists for their allegedly deficient ecclesiology. John Oyer claims that neither Luther nor the Anabaptists ever discussed the differences in their respective understandings of the nature of the church.<sup>44</sup> While it is true no major treatises were written on the topic, Oyer is overstating his case. In fact, the majority of Luther's complaints against Anabaptism were related to the doctrine of the church. Luther was critical of the Anabaptist understanding of ecclesiology, especially the sacraments. Luther also castigated the Anabaptist tendency toward sectarianism. All of this resulted in Luther's accusing the Anabaptists of not being a true church.

The aspect of Anabaptism that Luther spilled the most ink criticizing was credobaptism. In fact, the only major work that Luther devoted exclusively to Anabaptists was his 1528 treatise *Concerning Rebaptism*, a short tract originally written as a letter to two pastors in response to Balthasar Hubmaier's teachings on the practice.<sup>45</sup> Space precludes an extended discussion of Luther's doctrine of baptism, but several key elements should be noted about his mature understanding of baptism. First, baptism is closely connected with the Word, which for Luther was the truest sacrament. Second, baptism is essential to salvation, provided that faith is present in either the baptismal candidate or his sponsors. Third, baptism symbolizes the death

<sup>43</sup>"Tabletalk No. 1444: Whether Anabaptists May be Saved, Between April 7 and May 1, 1532," in *LW* 54: 152. Oyer notes that Luther's preface to Justus Menius's 1530 treatise *The Doctrine and Mystery of the Anabaptists* would seem to confirm Luther held out slim hope for the salvation of Anabaptists. In the preface, Luther argued that the source of Anabaptism was the devil, as evidenced by four of the movement's traits: 1) their refusal to preach in open areas, 2) their concern with temporal things at the expense of heavenly things, 3) their revolutionary tendency to see themselves as the executors of God's judgment, and, 4) the fact they accuse Luther of Antinomianism. See John S. Oyer, "The Writings of Luther Against the Anabaptists," 101–02.

<sup>44</sup>Oyer, "Luther and the Anabaptists," 169.

<sup>45</sup>Oyer argues that baptism was the only theological issue Luther ever addressed concerning the Anabaptists. It will be evident below that Oyer is again overstating his case. See Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists*, 132.

and resurrection of both Christ and the believer (spiritually, in the case of the latter). Fourth, the proper candidates for baptism are infants, who are capable of exercising some form of faith. Finally, baptism must be present in order for the church truly to be present.<sup>46</sup> Anabaptists rejected most of Luther's understanding of baptism, making it a voluntary ceremony to be administered following the profession of one's personal faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Not surprisingly, Luther's critique of credobaptism was most clearly articulated in *Concerning Rebaptism*.<sup>48</sup> In that work, Luther equated Anabaptist credobaptism with rebaptism, which is really a *rejection* of true (infant) baptism.<sup>49</sup> He accused Anabaptists of rejecting infant baptism as part and parcel of Popery, which Luther compared to rejecting the Temple rather than the Antichrist who is seated in the Temple.<sup>50</sup> Luther argued that all Christendom testifies to the validity of infant baptism, and that those who reject paedobaptism reject God himself.<sup>51</sup> He chastised the Anabaptists for arguing that faith must precede baptism, because no man can know for sure whether or not another man believes. If surety of faith is necessary before one can be baptized, then no one would ever be baptized; faith comes and goes.<sup>52</sup> Luther also contended it is possible that some infants do possess faith.<sup>53</sup>

Anabaptism's implications for the very concept of Christendom were even more important than its actual baptismal convictions. Because Luther assumed that proper baptism is a mark of the true church, if Anabaptists were right in their rejection of infant baptism, then Luther claimed the church could not have existed during the Middle Ages.<sup>54</sup> In other words, Christendom was an invalid expression of the church. But this could not be; Trigg contends that Luther could not bring himself to believe that the church had been practicing heresy for so long.<sup>55</sup> To Luther, credobaptism

<sup>46</sup>For a more extensive discussion of Luther's baptismal theology, from which the information in this paragraph is drawn, see Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, vol. 26 (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1994), 61–106.

<sup>47</sup>See Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 189–220.

<sup>48</sup>Ironically, with *Concerning Rebaptism*, Luther penned his most comprehensive critique of Anabaptist baptism, despite the fact that he admitted being unsure of what Anabaptists actually believe. See Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," in *LW* 40: 260.

<sup>49</sup>Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," in *LW* 40: 229. Paul Zietlow helpfully outlines sixteen different biblical, theological, and historical arguments Luther marshaled in defense of infant baptism. See Paul H. Zietlow, "Martin Luther's Arguments for Infant Baptism," *Concordia Journal* 20.2 (April 1994): 147–71.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 237, 240.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 239–40, 247.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 240–45. Timothy George observes that this belief was unique to Luther. George summarizes Luther's view of infant baptism by noting that, "Faith, so to speak, is imputed to the infant in baptism even though he is not aware of it. This is all the more a confirmation of God's gratuitous mercy since the infant is helpless to effect his own baptism." See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 94–95.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>55</sup>Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 101.

seemed too novel to be accurate.

Anabaptist ecclesiological errors were intricately connected to their soteriological errors. In a scathing indictment, Luther claimed that by placing so much emphasis on correct baptism, the Anabaptists were exchanging righteousness through faith for works righteousness.<sup>56</sup> As Trigg notes, “The error of the Anabaptists with regard to baptism is that they regard it as nothing unless a person believes, thus making the work of God dependent on the worthiness of man.”<sup>57</sup> Luther could not get past his suspicion that the Anabaptists considered believer’s baptism to be essential to one’s salvation.

*Concerning Rebaptism* was not all Luther had to say on the topic; he also frequently criticized Anabaptist credobaptism in his lectures, sermons, and other writings. In his lecture on Genesis 3, Luther accused the Anabaptists of making baptism a purely physical act, thus undercutting its true spiritual significance.<sup>58</sup> In a lecture on Psalm 118, he argued the Anabaptists teach that sanctification must precede baptism.<sup>59</sup> In his sermons on John’s Gospel, Luther claimed the Anabaptists do not possess authentic baptism because they are heretics.<sup>60</sup> In *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther accused the Anabaptists of rejecting non-Anabaptists as worthy administrators of the sacraments, comparing their belief to Cyprian’s belief that heretics do not possess the true sacraments.<sup>61</sup> In a tabletalk recorded by Veit Dietrich, Luther reiterated the charge that the Anabaptist understanding of baptism amounts to works righteousness.<sup>62</sup>

Luther was convinced that the Anabaptists were as incorrect as Catholics, simply in different respects. Luther believed he represented a middle (correct) way in approaching the sacraments, including baptism.<sup>63</sup> Ironically, with their emphasis on personal holiness and Christian discipleship, the Anabaptists considered their interpretation of baptism to be the best representation of Luther’s idea of baptism as a lifelong dying and rising in Christ.<sup>64</sup> Luther also critiqued the Anabaptist interpretation of the Eucharist, though because his criticisms were not unique to Anabaptists or other Radicals, the subject will not be discussed in this article. Typically, Luther simply grouped Anabaptists in with other *Schwärmer*—both Magisterial and

<sup>56</sup>Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” in *LW* 40: 247.

<sup>57</sup>Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 84.

<sup>58</sup>Martin Luther, “Genesis 3:6,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 1: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 160.

<sup>59</sup>Martin Luther, “Psalm 118,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 38.

<sup>60</sup>Martin Luther, “John 7:44,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6–8*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 285.

<sup>61</sup>Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Churches,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 46.

<sup>62</sup>“Tabletalk No. 650: A Defense of the Baptism of Infants, Fall, 1533,” in *LW* 54: 113.

<sup>63</sup>Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 220.

<sup>64</sup>George Huntston Williams, “‘Congregationalist’ Luther and the Free Churches,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 19.3 (August 1967): 287–88.

not—who denied the real physical presence of Christ in the sacrament.<sup>65</sup>

Luther did not limit his ecclesiological criticisms to the sacraments, but also disparaged the Anabaptists for sectarianism. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther grouped the Anabaptists in with a hodgepodge of heretical sects.

Our times will also bring this punishment upon Germany. We see how Satan is making haste, how restless he is, and how he tries every means to obstruct the Word of God. How many sects he has stirred up in our lifetime while we exerted ourselves with all diligence to maintain purity of doctrine! What will happen when we are dead? He will surely lead forth whole packs of sacramentarians, Anabaptists, antinomians, followers of Servetus and Campanus, and other heretics, who now are in hiding after being routed for the moment by the purity of the Word and the diligence of godly teachers, but who are eagerly waiting for any opportunity to establish their doctrines.<sup>66</sup>

To Luther, a sectarian was the same as a heretic, and all were more or less the same. In a lecture on Psalm 23, Luther twice accused the Anabaptists of being “schismatic spirits.”<sup>67</sup> In a sermon on John 3:20, Luther claimed Anabaptists were “sectaries” and “schismatics,” and again included them in a list of offenders, this time including the Turks.<sup>68</sup> He criticized Anabaptist ministers in 1532 for preaching without proper credentials from the territorial church.<sup>69</sup> In a tabletalk recorded by Veit Dietrich, Luther complained that one of his problems with sects is that they promote rebaptism.<sup>70</sup> Because of their common belief in credobaptism, in his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, Luther equated Anabaptists with the Donatists, a movement considered schismatic by territorial church advocates.<sup>71</sup> In noting a perception that must have irritated Luther immensely, in his lecture on Titus 1:6, Luther criticized Rome for accusing him of being responsible for the proliferation of sects like the Anabaptists!<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly enough, the early Luther argued for an understanding of

<sup>65</sup>See, for example, Luther’s blanket condemnation of how Radicals misinterpret the Lord’s Supper in Martin Luther, “Brief Confession of the Holy Sacrament,” in *Luther’s Works 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, ed. Martin Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 287–318.

<sup>66</sup>Martin Luther, “Genesis 6:3,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6–14*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 17.

<sup>67</sup>Martin Luther, “Psalm 23,” in *LW 12*: 164, 168.

<sup>68</sup>Martin Luther, “John 3:20,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 22: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 383.

<sup>69</sup>Martin Luther, “Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers,” in *LW 40*: 384, 389.

<sup>70</sup>“Tabletalk No. 515: Easy to Have Doubts about the Lord’s Supper, Spring, 1533,” in *LW 54*: 91.

<sup>71</sup>Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” in *Luther’s Works vol. 37, Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 365.

<sup>72</sup>Martin Luther, “Titus 1:6,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 29: Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 8.

the church not unlike that eventually espoused by Anabaptists and other Free Church evangelicals. In his preface to *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), Luther argued for covenanted assemblies of believers, meeting in small house churches where they could preach the word, observe the sacraments, and practice church discipline. He admitted that in the early church, individuals were baptized only after they were converted and catechized. But Luther did not follow through with this vision, noting that Germans were “a rough, rude, and reckless people, with whom it is hard to do anything, except in cases of dire need.”<sup>73</sup> David Dunbar notes that, “The Anabaptists, for their part, could only be disappointed with Luther’s shift away from the principle of voluntary association to that of the territorial church.”<sup>74</sup>

It is clear that in Luther’s thinking, the Anabaptists were not a true church, but rather a heretical sect. And heretics were deserving of the strictest punishment possible. When Elector John asked the Wittenberg theologians how to punish the Anabaptists in 1531, Melancthon wrote a statement that called for the death penalty. Luther signed the statement, signifying his agreement.<sup>75</sup> Luther was a man of his era, and like Zwingli, Calvin, and the Catholics, he was not above mandating death for those in theological error.

### **A Misunderstanding of the Christian’s Role in Society**

A fourth category of criticisms pertained to various countercultural practices associated with Anabaptism. The Anabaptist rejection of Christendom entailed a re-envisioning of how the Christian participates in the wider culture. It is clear Luther believed Anabaptists gravely misunderstood the Christian’s role in society. He accused them of several practices, all of which were true of many Radicals, including some Anabaptists. Each of these distinctives called into question accepted practice, thus tearing at the fabric of both church and society.

The first charge was that Anabaptists opposed private property. In his lecture on Genesis 13:3, Luther compared the Anabaptists to monks, noting “The Anabaptists, too, think that those who have any possessions of their own are not Christians.”<sup>76</sup> Some Anabaptists did believe that there should be a community of goods which all could draw upon, the most notable example being the Hutterite communities in Moravia.<sup>77</sup> But not all Anabaptists practiced the community of goods. Verduin notes that most Anabaptists were not opposed to private property, but rather emphasized the obligation to share possessions with the needy. He attributes the assumption that all Anabap-

<sup>73</sup>Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53: *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 63–64.

<sup>74</sup>David Dunbar, “Martin Luther and the Early Free Church Tradition,” *Explor: A Journal of Theology* 8 (Spring 1986): 55.

<sup>75</sup>Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists*, 138; Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, 381.

<sup>76</sup>Luther, “Genesis 13:2,” in *LW* 2: 325.

<sup>77</sup>For a brief introduction to the Hutterites and the community of goods, see Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 127–50.

tists practiced the community of goods to the fact this was the practice in the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster.<sup>78</sup> As in so many other cases, the sins of Münster became the sins of all Anabaptism.

Closely connected was the charge that Anabaptists rejected their surrounding culture in favor of ecclesial isolationism. Luther criticized the Anabaptists for forsaking money, goods, marriage, houses, and every other created thing or human institution in their desire to mortify the flesh.<sup>79</sup> Luther accused Anabaptists of establishing a new monasticism in their separatist zeal.

Do not choose separation or the cloister or any other innovation voluntarily ... Years ago, under the papacy, servants deserted the service of their masters, and wives ran from the household of their husbands and from submission to them, went on pilgrimages, and became monks and nuns. Those were real Donatists. The Anabaptists are reviving this practice.<sup>80</sup>

Luther was convinced the Anabaptists wanted to disperse with all the trappings of normal human society, claiming, “They forsake wife and child, house and home; they surrender everything; they act as though they were senseless and mad.”<sup>81</sup> In a 1544 sermon on Luke 14, Luther criticized the Anabaptists for hiding in secret places, out of the public’s view.<sup>82</sup> In a 1532 tabletalk, Luther charged the Anabaptists with teaching those who truly know Christ must separate from society.<sup>83</sup>

Luther’s accusation of separatism was somewhat true of Anabaptists, though it is too simplistic.<sup>84</sup> Some Anabaptists did separate from society because of what they perceived to be wickedness. The Schleitheim Confession of 1527 admonished Anabaptists to separate from the evil and wickedness in their society, comparing their contemporary culture to Babylon.<sup>85</sup> Bruce

<sup>78</sup>Verduin, *Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 237.

<sup>79</sup>Luther, “John 6:39,” in *LW* 23: 66.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>82</sup>Martin Luther, “Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church in Torgau, Luke 14:1–11, October 5, 1544,” in *LW* 51: 337.

<sup>83</sup>Luther, “Tabletalk No. 1329: Not Solitude but Social Intercourse Advised Between January 8 and March 23, 1532,” in *LW* 54: 140.

<sup>84</sup>The Anabaptist understanding of how the Christian should relate to society was actually quite diverse. The Anabaptists had an entirely different understanding of the so-called doctrine of the Two Kingdoms than Luther did. Luther claimed God ruled everyone in the world by either Law or Gospel. This application of the Law-Gospel issue was seen as a compromise by the Anabaptists, leading them to emphasize greater conflict between Christians and culture. As Clarence Bauman notes, “The Anabaptists could not comprehend how one person could be in both kingdoms at the same time and in the same way without suffering unbearable conflict.” See Clarence Bauman, “The Theology of ‘The Two Kingdoms.’ A Comparison of Luther and the Anabaptists,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38.1 (January 1964): 48.

<sup>85</sup>“The Schleitheim Confession,” in *The Reformation: Luther and the Anabaptists*, ed.



Gordon argues that, “The crucial tenet of *Schleitheim* was separation,” which presented a healthy middle way between the Magisterial Reformation on the one hand and the Peasant’s Revolt on the other.<sup>86</sup> But spiritual purity was only one reason Anabaptists withdrew from society. Many Anabaptists separated from society to avoid persecution at the hands of both state-church Protestants and the Catholic Church.<sup>87</sup> In the index to *The Radical Reformation*, George Huntston Williams lists dozens of Anabaptist martyrs.<sup>88</sup> The possibility of death was a reality that Anabaptists lived with continually. Separation was never merely for spiritual purposes, but also for the purpose of survival.

A third criticism was that Anabaptists rejected the magistracy. Luther claimed that Anabaptists had little regard for earthly rulers. One form this took was the Anabaptist refusal to take oaths. In his lecture on Genesis 21:25, Luther observed, “For here the authority of the civil government must not be lowered in our estimation, as the foolish mob of the Anabaptists raves. Therefore an oath which is imposed by the government is in agreement with the command of God, who has commanded us to obey the government.”<sup>89</sup> Another form was in the anarchic rejection of civil authority. In a lecture on Psalm 2:12, Luther claimed that Anabaptists wanted to do away with all kings and kingdoms.<sup>90</sup> In the Marburg Articles, Luther and the other participants berated Anabaptists for believing that Christians should not be magistrates.<sup>91</sup> Though he did not call them by name, it seems likely that Luther was referring to the Anabaptists when he claimed “the wicked under the name of Christian abuse evangelical freedom, carry on their rascality, and insist that they were Christians subject neither to law nor sword, as some are already raving and ranting.”<sup>92</sup> To Luther and the other Magisterial reformers, religion was connected closely enough with government that a rejection of the latter constituted a repudiation of the former.<sup>93</sup>

Luther’s criticism regarding oath taking was true of many Anabaptists. Estep argues that the Anabaptist hesitancy with oaths was due to both a literal reading of Christ’s injunction against swearing and the belief that oaths were ultimately unnecessary; one was always obliged to tell the truth.<sup>94</sup> As with the issue of separation, the *Schleitheim* Confession again emerges as a

William R. Estep (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 326.

<sup>86</sup>Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation*, New Frontiers in History (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press; and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 202.

<sup>87</sup>Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, 399.

<sup>88</sup>Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1471.

<sup>89</sup>Luther, “Genesis 21:24,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 4: *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 21–25*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 78.

<sup>90</sup>Martin Luther, “Psalm 2,” in *LW* 12: 74.

<sup>91</sup>“The Marburg Colloquy and the Marburg Articles,” in *LW* 38: 88.

<sup>92</sup>Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it Be Obeyed?” In *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45: *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 91.

<sup>93</sup>See Clasen, *Anabaptists: A Social History*, 179–80.

<sup>94</sup>Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 261.

useful representation of what many Anabaptists believed. Schleithem made it clear that it was inappropriate for Christians to take oaths, for the two reasons indicated by Estep above.<sup>95</sup>

As for the claim that Anabaptists were opposed to all magistracy, most Anabaptists were not interested in political revolution. Luther believed that Anabaptists were anarchists for two reasons. The first was the belief that Anabaptists were cut from the same cloth as the peasants who had instigated the Peasant's Revolt in 1525. Luther considered Anabaptists to be just one more type of *Schwärmer*, another manifestation of the spirit of Thomas Müntzer.<sup>96</sup> But, as noted above, numerous scholars have made the case that there is no real connection between the Peasant's War and Anabaptism.<sup>97</sup>

A second reason Luther assumed that Anabaptists were anarchists is that some were. In 1533, a group of Anabaptists occupied the city of Münster, expelled all Catholic families, and declared it to be the New Jerusalem. Jan of Leiden set himself up as the Davidic king of Münster and, after claiming to receive divine revelation, instituted polygamy. In 1535, Münster was forcibly retaken by a Catholic and Protestant alliance; Jan of Leiden and his lieutenants were tortured and executed.<sup>98</sup> The Münster incident resulted in the widespread association of Anabaptism with revolution, especially in Germany.<sup>99</sup> This was the case for Luther himself. Harry Loewen notes, "The Münster tragedy confirmed Luther's suspicion he had had concerning the whole Anabaptist movement."<sup>100</sup> In reality, Münster was atypical of Anabaptism; the incident is the only example of otherwise evangelical Anabaptists taking such revolutionary measures. Münster represents an anomaly, what Verduin calls "the lunatic fringe of Anabaptism."<sup>101</sup>

Luther himself recognized that not all Anabaptists were revolutionaries; most, like the Swiss Brethren who affirmed the Schleithem Confession, were actually pacifists. Luther was apparently aware of this, and in his lecture

<sup>95</sup>"The Schleithem Confession," in *The Reformation: Luther and the Anabaptists*, 329–31.

<sup>96</sup>See Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists*, 116, 122–23; Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, 153.

<sup>97</sup>See Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, 152–57; Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 41. Williams argues that there is no organic connection between the revolutionary peasants and the Anabaptists, though the former did prefigure the latter in some respects. "Anabaptism would be in part the reaction to the failure of the evangelical socio-constitutional movement of the peasants." See Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 138.

<sup>98</sup>For a brief overview of the Munster incident, see R. Po-Chia Hisa, "Munster and the Anabaptists," in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hisa (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51–57.

<sup>99</sup>Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of "Savage Wolves": Anabaptist Munster and the German Reformation during the 1530s* (Boston and Leiden: Humanities Press, 2000), 150.

<sup>100</sup>Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals*, 100.

<sup>101</sup>Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 237. Even Loewen, who is generally quite sympathetic to Luther's criticisms of Radicals, concedes that Luther was incorrect to attribute revolutionary tendencies to most evangelical Anabaptists. See Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals*, 100.

on Psalm 8:1 he castigated the Anabaptists for their refusal to bear arms.<sup>102</sup> As far as Luther was concerned, pacifism was almost as reprehensible as revolution. Though not always consistent in his criticisms, Luther was convinced the Anabaptists misunderstood the Christian's proper role in "Christian" society. Their Radical theology resulted in an inappropriate rejection of mainstream culture.

### General Fanaticism and Troublemaking

The final criticism Luther lodged against the Anabaptists was a general spirit of fanaticism and a tendency toward troublemaking. In this criticism more than any other, Luther made no real effort to distinguish between the various types of Radicals. What was true of Karlstadt was true of Müntzer was true of pacifistic Anabaptists. In fact, the accusation of fanaticism was rarely a freestanding criticism, but often accompanied the other types of criticisms discussed above.

In discussing Genesis 47:27, Luther criticized the fanatics (*Schwärmer*) who despise the Word and the sacraments, particularly the Anabaptists and sacramentarians.<sup>103</sup> In his comments on Isaiah 60:21, Luther accused the Anabaptists of works righteousness, labeled them enthusiasts, and compared them to Roman Catholics.<sup>104</sup> In his 1535 preface to Galatians, Luther charged the Anabaptists with causing great dissention, calling them "monstrosities" and "wolves," and accusing them of being the agents of Satan himself.<sup>105</sup> In 1532, Luther wrote a letter entitled *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers*, directed against the Anabaptists near Eisenach. In that work, Luther charged the Anabaptists with teaching false doctrine and inciting violence and revolt.<sup>106</sup> In *Against the Antinomians*, Luther traced a line of satanically-inspired troublemakers from Müntzer to Karlstadt to the Anabaptists, accusing the latter of using force, presumable in reference to Münster.<sup>107</sup> Luther claimed that the gospel had been persecuted in Germany, leading to the proliferation of all manners of Anabaptists, fanatics, and sectarians.<sup>108</sup> One presumes that by "gospel," Luther meant his particular pattern of reform.

Closely connected with the charge of fanaticism is Luther's criticism that the Anabaptists did not agree with him. In his comments on Genesis 15:4, Luther criticized the Anabaptists and Müntzer for opposing him. Lu-

<sup>102</sup>Luther, "Psalm 8," in *LW* 12: 87.

<sup>103</sup>Martin Luther, "Genesis 47:26," in *Luther's Works, vol. 8: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 45–50*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Concordia, 1966), 133. Sacramentarians were those who rejected the real presence in the Eucharist, including Zwingli and Oecolampadius.

<sup>104</sup>Luther, "Isaiah 60:21," in *LW* 17: 391.

<sup>105</sup>Martin Luther, "Luther's Preface of 1535," in *Luther's Works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5–6, Lectures on Galatians 1519, Chapters 1–6*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 147.

<sup>106</sup>Martin Luther, "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers," in *LW* 40: 385.

<sup>107</sup>Martin Luther, "Against the Antinomians," in *Luther's Works, vol. 47: The Christian in Society IV*, ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 116, 119.

<sup>108</sup>Luther, "Matthew 7:7," in *LW* 21: 227.

ther lamented, "Müntzer, the Anabaptists, and others similarly opposed us with great zeal, savagely defamed our character, and heaped every kind of abuse upon us."<sup>109</sup> In his remarks on Genesis 41:8, he railed against Catholics, sacramentarians, heretics, and Anabaptists for "harassing" him.<sup>110</sup> Luther accused the Anabaptists and other "enthusiasts" of being "haughty" in their opposition to him.<sup>111</sup> In his lecture on Galatians 4:30, Luther claimed that of all the "fanatical spirits," the Anabaptists oppose him the most harshly, judging him to be worse than the papists.<sup>112</sup>

The Anabaptists could take some comfort in the fact that they were not alone in this particular criticism. When it came to those who differed with him, Luther did not limit his criticism to Radicals. As is apparent throughout his works (and is observable even in the limited number of quotations utilized in this article), Luther criticized everyone who differed with his program for reform. Luther had no patience for competition, whether from his fellow Magisterial reformers or from the Radicals.

### Conclusion

The sixteenth century was a time of religious upheaval, with numerous sects claiming to be the best representation of the true faith. Of these factions, the Anabaptists were perhaps the most misunderstood, in both their time and ours. This article has argued that Luther had a relatively comprehensive critique of Anabaptism, despite both a lack of works devoted primarily to the Anabaptists or any real effort at evenhandedness on the part of Luther. Like his contemporaries, Luther often made no effort at understanding Anabaptism as a distinct movement within the Radical Reformation. Not that his lack of nuance mattered; even when Luther did seem to grasp the teachings of Anabaptism, he roundly denounced the movement.

Luther criticized the Anabaptists for their distinctive ecclesiology, their discipleship-oriented soteriology, their social ethics, and nearly every other practice that set Anabaptists apart from the Lutheran movement. Luther was always convinced that the Anabaptist vision was another manifestation of works righteousness, albeit one quite different than late medieval Catholicism. He was also quite positive that Anabaptism inevitably led to revolution; unfortunately, there were just enough Anabaptists with rebellious tendencies to cement Luther's opinion. It is clear from his criticisms that Luther ultimately misunderstood much about Anabaptism. In this way as in so many others, Luther was simply a product of his age.

<sup>109</sup>Luther, "Genesis 15:4," in *LW* 3: 15.

<sup>110</sup>Luther, "Genesis 41:8," in *Luther's Works, vol. 7: Lectures in Genesis, Chapters 38–44*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 131.

<sup>111</sup>Luther, "Isaiah 41:8," in *LW* 17: 39.

<sup>112</sup>Luther, "Galatians 4:30," in *LW* 26: 454.