

## Who were the Anabaptists?

The term was originally applied to those groups, after the Reformation began, who rebaptised believers by immersion that had originally been baptised as infants. In those days everyone had been baptised as an infant. It is chiefly used to describe radical reforming groups that sprang up in Germany, Holland and Switzerland, which claimed that the Reformation had not gone far enough. Their main concern was with the purity of the church. Even after the Reformation, the church was still closely allied to the state and contained a very mixed congregation. Anabaptists affirmed that only true believers should be in any given congregation and it should have no ties with the state or any other body, being independent and local. In this they were correct, but the time was not ready for such a new and radical advance.

Being disappointed with the progress of church reform many joined the Anabaptist movement and groups emerged of very different character. At one end of the scale were prophetic visionaries, Charismatics and millennialists who proclaimed that a new order had begun and sought to establish heaven on earth in various places. Some success came by tapping into the growing discontentment of the poor. The worst of this sort taught a type of communism led by fanatics such as Munzer, Stubner and others around 1521. They advocated the abolition of magistrates, leadership by prophets, communal ownership of goods, communal living, polygamy, and libertarianism. Munzer, failing to achieve this by visionary persuasion, led an army to establish it by force in 1525. He was defeated by the Elector of Saxony and executed. His followers unsettled Germany, Switzerland and Holland and in 1533 Melchior Hoffman settled at Munster gaining control of the town. The leadership fell to John Matthys and Bockholdt, who seized totalitarian control. Baptism was enforced on pain of death. Matthys was killed and then after a year-long siege the town was taken, the leaders killed and the people slaughtered. The fear of repeated actions like this resulted in widespread persecution of Anabaptists, even though many involved in the insurrection were Catholics and atheists.

At the other end of the scale were genuinely spiritual leaders seeking to apply Biblical truth. They taught the primacy of scripture, the separation of the church and state, a pure church, a denunciation of infant baptism and the importance of a highly moral life. This included such men as Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz in Zurich, Balthasar Hubmaier and Hans Denck in south Germany, the Hutterites in Moravia and the Mennonites in north Germany and Holland. Starting in 1523, a successful following in Zurich led to persecution in 1526; Manz was drowned and his converts exiled, forcing the movement underground. From 1527 the chief location was Strasbourg until eventually opposed by Bucer and Capito because of their separatism. The main fruit of the Anabaptist movement was the Mennonite church, which remains.

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