

The Reformation's Repudiation of Chiliasm **by Prof. Russell J. Dykstra**

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At the end of 1533 the Anabaptist group at Munster in Westphalia, under the leadership of a former Lutheran minister Bernard Rothman, gained control of the city council. Early in 1534 a Dutch prophet and ex-innkeeper named John of Leyden appeared in Munster, believing that he was called to make the city the new Jerusalem. On 9 February 1534 his party seized city hall. By 2 March all who refused to be baptized were banished, and it was proclaimed a city of refuge for the oppressed. Though the Bishop of Munster collected an army and began the siege of the city, an attempted coup within the walls was brutally suppressed, and John of Leyden was proclaimed King of New Zion, wore vestments as his royal robes, and held his court and throne in the market-place. Laws were decreed to establish community of goods, and the Old Testament was adduced to permit polygamy. Bernard Rothman, once a man of sense, once the friend of Melancthon, took nine wives.

They now believed they had been given the duty and the power of exterminating the ungodly. The world would perish, and only Munster would be saved. Rothman issued a public incitement to world rebellion: 'Dear brethren, arm yourselves for the battle, not only with the humble weapons of the apostles for suffering, but also with the glorious armour of David for vengeance...in God's strength, and help annihilate the ungodly.' An ex-soldier named John of Geelen slipped out of the city, carrying copies of this proclamation into the Netherlands, and planned sudden coups in the Dutch cities.... At last, on 25 June 1535, the gates of Munster were opened by sane men within the walls, and the bishop's army entered the city. The cages where the corpses of Anabaptist leaders were hung are still hanging on the tower of St. Lambert's Church. ¹

Such is the record of this shocking uprising of radicals who held to an earthly kingdom of Christ. The revolt at Munster had a profound effect on Europe. The rulers were alarmed at this radical group labeled "Anabaptist," and serious efforts were made everywhere to root out these dangerous fanatics.

Munster had serious consequences for the Reformation as well. Rome did everything in its power to link the Anabaptists with Luther and the whole of the Reformation, and that with considerable success. Catholic rulers used the (real or alleged) presence of Anabaptists in their regions as an excuse to persecute any and all Protestants. For years thereafter, the Protestants would be seeking to distance themselves from "the Anabaptists." ²

The term "Anabaptists" is not the best, because it refers only to those who rejected infant baptism and were therefore *baptized again* (the literal meaning of the term). The more accurate title would be "radicals of the Reformation," of which group, it is true, the Anabaptists made up a large part. These radicals were convinced (often times by reading Luther) of the need to forsake Rome. With some of the doctrines of the Reformation they agreed, but they soon went beyond Luther to one extreme or another. Doctrinally

¹ Chadwick, Owen. *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) pp. 190-191.

² See Calvin's dedicatory letter to his *Institutes*, sent to Francis, King of France, in 1535, and still included in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. See also the Belgic Confession, Articles 18, 34, and 36, written in 1559.

unbalanced, they overemphasized some elements of doctrine to the exclusion of others. Application of their beliefs to life was likewise rigorous and extreme.

These groups were radically different from the Reformers Luther, Calvin, and the rest, both theologically and spiritually. The Reformers faced the teaching and practices of these radicals head on, demonstrated their errors, and rejected them.

The radicals included such diverse men as Menno Simon, the pacifist Anabaptist and father of the Mennonites; the violent John of Leyden described above; and the heretic Michael Servetus, who was condemned and burned in Geneva on account of his denial of the Trinity.

Our interest in this element of the Reformation centers on their chiliastic views, that is, their ardent desire for an earthly kingdom of Christ.

Chiliasm is the belief that Christ will return to establish a glorious kingdom of peace on this earth for one thousand years. The term comes from a Greek word that means one thousand, and arises out of the reference in Revelation 20 to a thousand-year period in which Satan is bound and the souls of martyrs reign with Christ. Chiliasm is distinct from the present day premillennialism in that chiliasm does not teach a secret rapture or emphasize dispensations. Some of the early church fathers held to a form of chiliasm. However, it died out in the church after Augustine came to understand that the millennium is not a literal one thousand-year period, but is the era from Christ's ascension to His second coming.

Chiliasm was resurrected by the radicals of the Reformation. Willem Balke (*Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*) asserts that "in spite of their differences, all of these Anabaptist groups [in Strasbourg, RJD] shared a common, feverish longing for the advent of the kingdom of God." ³ In his comprehensive study, *The Radical Reformation*, George Williams concludes that the expectation of a golden age or kingdom was not only a significant common thread among the radicals, it also accounts for their rash and often violent behavior. He writes that "the churches of the Radical Reformation were sustained and emboldened by the conviction that they and their charismatic leaders were the instruments of the Lord of history in the latter days." ⁴

Luther encountered these radicals in the early days of the Reformation. In 1521-22, while Luther was in hiding in the castle of Wartburg, radicals took over in Wittenberg. Several of the "Zwickau prophets," men identified by the city from which they had come, came to Wittenberg in Luther's absence. Claiming they had special revelations, they heavily influenced Andreas Carlstadt, the friend and colleague of Luther, who began to impose radical changes upon the churches. Luther had been content in those early days to lead the people away from the *practices* of Rome through preaching of true *doctrine*. The radicals were impatient, and began instituting wholesale changes in the liturgy and life of the churches. Wittenberg was in an uproar.

The troubles brought Luther back to Wittenberg. There Luther preached a series of eight sermons in which he patiently and gently reproved the radicals for their haste and instructed them on their errors.

³ (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), p. 126.

⁴ (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 859.

Although the conflict did not involve chiliasm directly, it is evident that wrong ideas of the kingdom lay behind this radicalism. Luther made the point in the first sermon, "Dear friends, the kingdom of God – and we are that kingdom...." ⁵

Another of the Zwickau men, Thomas Munzer, established himself in Allstedt in 1523. He began to preach that the ungodly were to be eliminated and that the elect (those who received the Spirit, that is, special revelations) would establish a kingdom of God on earth. Luther warned some by private letter about Munzer, and finally came out publicly with the "Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit." Luther pointed out the evil and unbiblical "spirit" that was guiding Munzer and his ilk. He wrote, "I have already heard from the spirit himself here in Wittenberg, that he thinks it necessary to use the sword to carry out his undertaking." Luther reminded the readers that "before Pilate, Christ rejected such an aim, saying that His kingdom is not of this world. He also taught His disciples not to be rulers of the world." ⁶

All the Reformers contested the teachings of the radical leaders of that day, but none so thoroughly or effectively as John Calvin. In his ministry in Strasbourg (1538-1541) Calvin was used by God to bring a number of Anabaptists back to the fold of the Reformed churches. Calvin's *Institutes* grew and developed over the years in direct response to the contact with the Anabaptists and other radicals.

The main conflicts between the radicals and the Reformed was not over chiliasm, but more often involved doctrines such as infant baptism, the church and covenant, the interpretation of Scripture, and purity of life. Nevertheless, Calvin emphatically rejected the idea of an earthly kingdom in general, and of chiliasm in particular.

In his Commentary on Romans (13:1), he criticized those "tumultuous spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ cannot be sufficiently elevated, unless all earthly powers be abolished...." ⁷

Commenting on Acts 1:8, Calvin pointed out how Jesus rejected the notion of an earthly kingdom and affirmed the heavenly and spiritual.

For hereby [Jesus] meant to drive out of his disciples' minds that fond and false imagination which they had conceived of the terrestrial kingdom, because he showeth unto them briefly, that his kingdom consisteth in the preaching of the gospel. There was no cause, therefore, why they should dream of riches, of external principality, or any other earthly thing, whilst they heard that Christ did then reign when as he subdueth unto himself (all the whole) world by the preaching of the gospel. Whereupon it followeth that he doth reign spiritually, and not after any worldly manner.

In that same context Calvin specifically rejected the chiliast view, and affirmed rather the spiritual kingdom in our hearts. He wrote:

Wherefore, we see that those which held opinion, that Christ should reign as a king in this world a thousand years fell into the like folly. Hereupon, also, they applied all such prophecies as did describe the kingdom of Christ figuratively by the similitude of earthly

⁵ *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Works*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p. 415.

⁶ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 51.

⁷ All quotations from Calvin's Commentaries are taken from the translation by John Owen, published by Baker Book House.

kingdoms unto the commodity of their flesh; whereas, notwithstanding, it was God's purpose to lift up their minds higher. As for us, let us learn to apply our minds to hear the gospel preached...which prepareth a place in our hearts for the kingdom of Christ.

Calvin considered the chiliasts' errors too childish even to need refutation because they were without scriptural support. He wrote, "Nor do they receive any countenance from the Apocalypse, ... since the thousand years there mentioned refer not to the eternal blessedness of the Church, but only to the various troubles which await the Church militant in this world." He insisted that "the whole Scripture proclaims that there will be no end either to the happiness of the elect, or the punishment of the reprobate" (*Institutes* (III, 25, 5).⁸

Commenting on 1Thessalonians 4:17, Calvin insisted that the kingdom of Christ may not be limited to a thousand years.

To those who have been once gathered to Christ he promises eternal life with him, by which statements the reveries of Origen and of the Chiliasts are abundantly refuted. For the life of believers, when they have once been gathered into one kingdom, will have no end any more than Christ's. Now, to assign to Christ a thousand years, so that he would afterwards cease to reign, were too horrible to be made mention of.

Calvin elaborated on this in his *Institutes* (III, 25, 5). He considered the blessings of the elect and those of Christ to be inseparable.

Those who assign only a thousand years to the children of God to enjoy the inheritance of future life, observe not how great an insult they offer to Christ and his kingdom. If they are not to be clothed with immortality, then Christ himself, into whose glory they shall be transformed, has not been received into immortal glory; if their blessedness is to have an end, the kingdom of Christ, on whose solid structure it rests, is temporary. In short, they are either most ignorant of all divine things or they maliciously aim at subverting the whole grace of God and power of Christ, which cannot have their full effects unless sin is obliterated, death swallowed up, and eternal life fully renewed.

The issue of chiliasm was sufficiently important that, not only the individual theologians, but also the churches addressed and rejected it. In 1530, the Lutheran Churches adopted the Augsburg Confession. Article 17 condemned those "who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being every where suppressed."

Out of the Reformed camp came the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) which likewise repudiated chiliasm.

We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matthew 24 and 25, and Luke 18, and apostolic teaching in 2Thessalonians 2, and 2Timothy 3 and 4, present something quite different. (Chapter 11)

⁸ All quotations from Calvin's *Institutes* are taken from the Beveridge translation published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

This explicit rejection of chiliasm (and thus of all forms of premillennialism) is the confession of all Reformed churches to the present day who are faithful to the Protestant Reformation. As Calvin affirmed, chiliasm "insults" Christ and His glorious kingdom. It is unthinkable that the Christ, who redeemed His people by sustaining the infinite and eternal wrath of God, that that Christ would be rewarded with a millennial kingdom, and then turn it over to His Father.

<http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/eschatology/reformedchil.html>