# The Eschatology of the Anabaptists

The eschatology of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists was largely premillennial. However, it is hard to generalize about a movement with so many diverse strands, especially if identification is made of Anabaptism in general with the Radical Reformation. William Estep describes three useful categories for discussing the Radical Reformation. First, the Swiss Brethren or Anabaptists coming out of Southern Germany were biblicists, attempting to practice a literal interpretation with primary focus on the New Testament for faith and practice. Included in this group would be men like Conrad Grebel (c. 1498-1526). Second, the Inspirationists were those who placed greater emphasis upon direct revelations from the Holy Spirit. The Zwickau Prophets, Nicolaus Storch, Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525), and Melchoir Hoffman (1495-1543) would be examples. The third group in the Radical Reformation was the usually anti-trinitarian rationalists like Michael Servetus who elevated reason to the place of ultimate authority. This last category is not really helpful in discussing the eschatology of the Anabaptists. So, for the purpose of this article, the continuum between Word and Spirit as it is found in the first two groups will be included in a review of the eschatological perspectives of the Anabaptists.

Contrary to contemporary views of Church and State, the usual Anabaptist expression of the kingdom of God was non-Augustinian. To be sure, the kingdom was viewed as a present reality of Christ’s rule in the lives of those who had been born again. However, it was also viewed relative to future eschatological and earthly hopes. Thus, it encompassed personal dimensions for Christians and provided hope for universal deliverance of societal structures at the coming of Christ.

Estep also outlines three useful categories within the eschatology of the Anabaptist movement. First, following Littell’s characterization, he refers to the “quiet eschatology” of the Swiss Brethren, Hubmaier (c. 1480-1528), Marpeck, the Hutterites, and Mennonites. This outlook accepted an imminent Second Coming of Christ within a premillennial scheme but did not take this position as the dominating center of thought. Second, one can notice many Anabaptists such as Melchoir Hoffman and perhaps Hans Hut who possessed a fervent but nonviolent chiliasm. Third, there were those who held to a militant directive form of chiliasm in which Christians were to take matters into their own hands militarily to upend the existing governmental structures and establish or hasten the advent of the kingdom. Included in this last group would be Thomas Müntzer, Jan Matthys, and Jan of Leyden. This particular group appeared to focus on the Old Testament as a pattern for action more than the other groups that focused on New Testament teaching. For this latter group, the New Testament focus prevented them from taking up the sword even in the noble task of hastening the kingdom. However, what could be said to be true of all of these Anabaptists, following in the historicist spirit of the times, is a belief in the imminent and even immediate Second Coming of Christ.

The “quiet eschatology” Anabaptists wrote infrequently about eschatology although it was not entirely absent. Conrad Grebel emphasized pacifism for Christians, adult baptism, church discipline and such related issues of practical church life. However, in two letters he shows eschatological interest, even noting that Rev. 13:10 (“he that leads into captivity shall go into captivity”) applied to Zwingli. This historicist approach to a prophetic passage would not be uncommon among the Anabaptists.

Likewise, Balthasar Hubmaier in typical historicist fashion believed that he was living during the interim between the two advents of Christ. This interim was 1277 years long and he was living near its end. However, he argued against Hans Hut that no man knows the precise day of the coming of Christ. He was generally less intense in his fervency about end time events. His eschatological statements focused mostly on an everlasting heaven and hell, the final judgment, and resurrection of the body rather than the eschatological hope of the coming kingdom.

Quiet eschatology was also evident in the theology of Menno Simons and Michael Sattler. The case of Simons shows that discussions among various Anabaptist factions were in a state of flux as proponents considered and debated their views. Simons began as part of the Melchoirites (following Hoffman) but came to reject the leanings toward use of the sword common to the radical wing of the group. He tended toward scriptural literalism and maintained apocalyptic hopes with no strong chiliastic schemes. Rather than adopting an end-time mission, he focused on Christian living during the dispensation of grace. Similarly, the courageous Michael Sattler concentrated on personal faith, adult baptism, amendment of life, and the ban. In his writings left to us, he does, however, demonstrate eschatological expectation in his prison letter to Horb. There he reminds his congregation that the "day of the Lord draws nearer" and that they should "be ready for the recompense of the kingdom."

The second category of fervent but nonviolent chiliasm finds representation in the thought of Melchoir Hoffman and Hans Hut. Hoffman followed an Inspirationist approach that relied more on prophetic revelation from the Spirit than many other Anabaptists. In fact, he viewed himself as fulfilling the role of Elijah who was considered to be one of the two witnesses in Revelation chapter eleven. Hoffman’s historicism led him to predict the end of the world in 1533. He believed that there would be a theocratic interim kingdom to prepare for the Second Coming. While this approach perhaps shows a taste of a postmillennial spirit, it is clear that this interim kingdom was considered to be a brief period and that the actual kingdom would start when Christ returned to destroy the wicked. Many of the followers of Hoffman’s movement, called Melchoirites, believed in the need to take up the sword and do violence to the wicked by taking over existing institutions. In particular, they were all looking for the New Jerusalem to descend upon some city. A concern for them was whether human assistance was needed to usher it in. Hoffman rejected this necessity.

Hans Hut earlier than Hoffman predicted the day of the Second Coming of Christ. He viewed it as taking place 3 ½ years after the Peasants War, thus on the day of Pentecost in 1528. He based this upon passages from Daniel twelve and Revelation thirteen. The reign of Antichrist was 3 ½ years and the time of vengeance from God was the late 1520s. He was clearly historicist in his approach, believing the Church to soon experience the sixth seal, which contained the seven persecutions, and to be living in the sixth day or era of the world (like Augustine) which precedes the coming of the Lord. He believed he was living near the end of that era. When Christ came, Christians would judge the world and the wicked civil authorities would lose their place of authority. However, he came to repudiate any belief of a violent ushering in of the kingdom while maintaining his fervent chiliastic mood. It was up to Christ to restore the true Church at His coming followed by the restoration of all things.

The third eschatological view of the Anabaptists, that of a militant directive form of chiliasm, can be found in Thomas Münzter and in the band of Melchoirites involved in the Munster tragedy. The mystical Thomas Münzter was one of the leaders in the Peasants’ War in Germany in 1525. He could be characterized easily as a militant apocalyptic crusader. He believed that the kingdom of God, the rolling stone of Daniel chapter two, began rolling in the days of the Apostles but then was held back due to sin. Then, in his day, he believed with chiliastic expectations that the kingdom was going to be picked up again. Packull noted that Münzter’s views could be partially traced to a mixture of Taborite chiliasm combined with some minor medieval Jochimite tradition. In early 1525, Münzter led a revolt against the council of the city of Mühlhausen and attempted to establish a communal theocracy. However, at the end of the disastrous Peasants’ Revolt later in the year, he was captured and executed.

The band of Melchoirites at Munster were led by Jan Matthijs and later by Jan van Leiden. Paralleling Melchoir Hoffman’s view of himself as fulfilling the role of Elijah, Leiden was considered as fulfilling the role of Enoch, the second of the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation. These two witnesses were forerunners of Christ who was soon to return to establish his kingdom. When the group gained control of the city and all unbelievers were dispelled or chose to leave, the city was set up along the orders of a strict communal society. Prophetic visions were the norm to make decisions and plans. In a sense, the city became viewed as Zion or the New Jerusalem as the Anabaptist group was under siege from mercenaries hired by Bishop Waldeck. Matthijs was killed on Easter, April 4, 1534, when he unwisely took a few men out to scatter the Bishop’s forces. The Anabaptists in the city appeared to believe that they were in the specific time of tribulation predicted by the Bible to occur just before the Lord’s return. After attacking the city on the night of June 24, 1535, the Bishop’s force of three thousand men finally overran the Anabaptist’s eight hundred men thereby ending the deluded chiliastic vision of these militant Melchoirites. In fact, Estep prefers to refer to them as “marginal Anabaptists.”

What is clear by this survey of the varied strands of Anabaptist chiliasm is that there is not yet development along the lines of dispensational premillennialism as found in John Nelson Darby in the early nineteenth century. The Anabaptists were historicists, not futurists in their understanding of most key prophetic passages. The exact nature of the earthly kingdom once Christ returned is also not as clear as in Darby’s system. In fact, there is no clear delineation of the roles of the Jews, the nation of Israel, and the Church as they related to the final destiny brought about by God. However, there can be little doubt that the primary direction of Anabaptist eschatology was premillennial.

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