ANABAPTIST BEGINNINGS (1523-1533)

A Book Review

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for CH 631

by

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December 12, 2008
In an era when the English Separatist descent theory seemingly reigned supreme among Baptists, William Estep was one who kept the flame alive for the Anabaptists. He sought to remind Baptists that they had a theological heritage that extended farther back than four hundred years. To this end, Estep published *The Anabaptist Story*, an excellent book that chronicles the emergence of the Anabaptists in Zurich, later developments among evangelical Anabaptists, and the possible influences of Anabaptism on Baptists.¹ In order to supplement his interpretation of the Anabaptists, Estep later published the volume currently being reviewed.

Estep designed the book “primarily for the student of Anabaptism who lacks the skills to translate the sixteenth century Latin and German sources for himself” (v). Estep therefore undertook the task of assembling some of the most important primary source documents and then translating them into English. Wherever possible, he also utilized translations prepared by others. Nevertheless, half of the works were painstakingly translated by Estep himself. By doing this, Estep made available to many students and armchair historians some of the most important primary sources for the study of Anabaptism.

Summary

Estep begins the work with five documents that reflect the growing tension in Zurich between Ulrich Zwingli and his increasingly combative students. The Second Disputation of October 1523 publicly demonstrated the increasing tension between Zwingli and his prominent student Conrad Grebel. When Grebel subsequently refused to accept the decision of the city council regarding the mass, he began a theological trajectory that took him outside the magisterial Reformation. For Estep, this event marks the beginning of the Anabaptist movement. This record of the disputation is followed by several letters written by Grebel over the course of the next year. These show some of the early developments of Grebel’s thought and demonstrate his independence from both Zwingli and Thomas Müntzer. Also included with the Grebel letters are “Eighteen Theses” written by Balthasar Hubmaier as he began moving his parish of Waldshut in the same direction that Grebel was going.

Hubmaier also features prominently in the over the next several years. First is his “Petitions” to the Austrian authorities where he defends himself against charges of heresy. This is followed by Hubmaier’s “Concerning Heretics” where he defines actual heresy as undermining, not the church’s belief, but the teaching of Scripture. He also denies that the church has the right to use the sword, stating that those who burn heretics are “the biggest heretics of all” (50). Approximately a year later Hubmaier wrote “On the Christian Baptism of Believers,” his defense of Anabaptist practices. This is one of the lengthiest works included in the book, but it remains a classic exposition of biblical baptism. A final work is included from near the end of Hubmaier’s life. “On the Sword” details the relationship between the Christian and the state and reflects Hubmaier’s more
positive view of government. He grants the state a temporal sword that it uses to keep order, while the church is only granted a spiritual sword, the Word of God.

Returning to the original Zurich group in 1525, there is a written defense submitted to the City Council. Most likely written by Felix Mantz, it points out some of the biblical teachings on baptism and opposes the baptismal teachings of Zwingli. Another document from 1525 originated in the Peasants’ Revolts. Twelve articles were drawn up to explain their demands. Included among them is a desire for congregational participation in the selection of pastors along with numerous economic complaints.

Moving forward two years, Estep includes the first Anabaptist Confession of Faith. Written by the “Martyrs’ Synod” of Swiss and South German leaders, The Schleitheim Confession expresses their views on a number of ecclesiological issues, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the ban, and appointing pastors. In contrast to Hubmaier, The Schleitheim Confession specifically argues for pacifism by Christians.

Other documents from 1527 are also included by Estep, one being a “Discipline” from a Tyrolese church. In twelve articles it sets out expectations for church members, carefully substantiating each one with many Scripture verses. In some ways this document looks like the church covenants that would become popular a century later in England. Also dating from the same year is a “Recantation” by the mystical Anabaptist, Hans Denck. Although titled as a recantation, it appears more as a confession of faith. It covers most aspects of theology and clearly demonstrates the spiritualist leanings of Denck.

The next document dates from Hubmaier’s imprisonment and recounts a conversation between a Catholic, John Faber, and Hubmaier. Estep selected two of the
many topics the men discussed, Scripture and infant baptism. In both of these Hubmaier ably explains his position. Estep then includes An Anonymous Anabaptist Pamphlet, which primarily focuses on the relationship of church and state. The author strongly encourages Christians to keep from entangling themselves in sinful human rule.

The final two brief documents are by Pilgram Marpeck and Hubmaier. Marpeck’s brief Confession of Faith touches on most of the significant parts of Anabaptist theology. He particularly addresses the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. A hymn written by Hubmaier serves as the punctuation mark for the book. Proceeding chronologically through major figures of the Old Testament, it then comes to Christ, the four Evangelists, and finally Paul. Every stanza ends with “God’s word stands sure for ever,” which then becomes the theme of the concluding stanzas.

Critical Evaluation

Apart from the tremendous work of translation, Estep also provides helpful introductions to each work. These help locate each work within the narrative of that eventful decade. In addition they enable the more advanced student to more readily find the original language documents.

There are two negative critiques that can be made of this volume. The first is the excessively high price. It is this author’s understanding that this occurred through no fault of Dr. Estep. Unfortunately, it remains substantially cheaper to photocopy the book than to purchase it, a situation that depresses sales and exacerbates the problem. Nevertheless, despite the price the book remains a necessity for anyone engaging in research in early Anabaptism.

A second critique concerns the selection of materials. The book is weighted
heavily towards the theology of Balthasar Hubmaier. More than one-third of the selections come from him, and those include the longest documents in the book. This overemphasis on Hubmaier is reflective of two things: first, Hubmaier was one of the earliest writing theologians of Anabaptism; second, Baptists studying Anabaptism tend to overemphasize his work and influence because he reflects beliefs similar to what Baptists would later develop. Unfortunately for Estep, in the years since he published this book, Hubmaier’s complete writings have been translated and are now widely available in paperback. As a consequence, the importance of this particular volume has been diminished.

**Conclusion**

Despite the shortcomings of this work, it remains a useful tool for students of Anabaptism. It provides translations of documents that cannot be found anywhere else. Therefore it will remain a necessity for every student’s library.