

‘They had said nothing about rebaptism’: The Surprising Birth of Swiss Anabaptism

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Anabaptism, the major movement of radical dissent in the early Reformation, was born in Zürich in 1525, and soon spread across northern Europe.² Within ten years, three distinct branches or traditions had formed: the Swiss Anabaptists, the South German or Austrian Anabaptists, and the North German or Dutch Anabaptists.³ Despite heavy persecution from both Protestant and Catholic authorities, these Anabaptist communities were able to establish a lasting tradition in Europe and, from the seventeenth century, in North America. The Mennonite Church, the largest group that traces its roots to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, now has around 500 000 members worldwide.⁴

The first Anabaptists challenged the Lutheran and Zwinglian orthodoxies on a number of issues,⁵ but were associated most directly with the practice of adult baptism. In many respects, this association proved beneficial in the early attempts at missionary work. Adult baptism was a readily recognizable public act, by which followers could demonstrate their support for the movement. The simplicity of the act, and the range of possible motives for undergoing adult baptism (theological, social, emotional), which will be further discussed below, may also have helped to cover potential splits in the movement. Whilst the disparate interests of urban and rural radicals

¹ I would like to thank Professor Wolfgang Behringer for his help and support in the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank the staff of the London Mennonite Centre for kind permission to use their library.

² This dissent is broadly surveyed in George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (3rd edn, Kirksville, 2000).

³ On Anabaptism, see C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, 1995). The historiography of Anabaptism has recently been assessed by James M. Stayer, ‘The Significance of Anabaptism and Anabaptist Research’, in Hans-Jürgen Goertz and James M. Stayer (eds), *Radikalität und Dissent im 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 77–88.

⁴ See Cornelius J. Dyck (ed.), *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (3rd edn, Scottsdale, 1993).

⁵ A useful work stressing the independence of Anabaptist theology is Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (3rd edn, Kitchener, 2001).

may have meant that they accepted adult baptism for different reasons, they could at least agree on the need for the act itself.⁶

Nevertheless, the practice brought with it many problems. If adult baptism served as a readily recognizable act for supporters, it also did so for persecuting authorities: the death penalty was attached to the physical act of adult baptism, rather than the theological views behind it.⁷ The practice of adult baptism, and its concomitant rejection of infant baptism, may also have posed something of a conceptual barrier for those who otherwise may have been attracted to the movement. For centuries, the Church had taught that children who died without receiving baptism would not be saved, that baptism was necessary to overcome the punishment for original sin. Much like mainstream Protestant reformers, and many Counter-Reformation Catholics, the Anabaptists struggled to overcome popular superstition and traditional ideas, not least about infant baptism. Lutheran visitors in Saxony-Weimar at the end of the sixteenth century found that some villages still used a traditional form of request for infant baptism as part of their otherwise reformed service. The wording was not only pre-Reformation, but 'suggests that people still accepted the Catholic teaching that baptism was a precondition of safety here and of salvation after death'.⁸

This continuation of traditional beliefs may also have been a problem for the early Anabaptist movement, as the case of Gilg Schneider suggests. Schneider appears to have accepted adult baptism and joined an Anabaptist fellowship whilst still holding a very traditional (pre-Reformation) understanding of the power of the Eucharist.⁹ His case suggests that the appeal of Anabaptism may not have always been strong enough to fully overcome traditional or popular sacramental beliefs.

But where did the practice of adult baptism come from, and why was it attractive to the early Anabaptist leaders? The first adult, believers' baptisms of the modern period took place on the evening of 21 January 1525, amongst a small group of those who had become disillusioned with the course of the Reformation in Zürich.¹⁰ This event, variously described as 'the formal

⁶ On the rural–urban split, see Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism. A Social History, 1525–1618* (Ithaca, 1972), pp. 305–309, where Clasen characterizes the first decade of Anabaptism as primarily urban. On the other hand, Werner O. Packull, 'The Origins of Swiss Anabaptism in the Context of the Reformation of the Common Man', *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 12 (1985), pp. 253–277 stresses that the Zürich movement was from the outset a combination of urban and rural radicals, and that it was a rural ideology that led to the eventual breakdown of the relationship with Zwingli.

⁷ On the persecution of the Anabaptists, see Clasen, *Anabaptism*, pp. 358–422.

⁸ Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual* (London, 1997), pp. 61–62, quotation on p. 62; the whole chapter, 'To beat the Devil: Baptism and the conquest of sin', pp. 43–71, contains much interesting material, although with little reference to Anabaptist practice.

⁹ D. Jonathan Grieser, 'Eucharistic Piety and the Appeal of Anabaptism in Tyrol: The Case of Gilg Schneider', *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte*, 90 (1999), pp. 211–229.

¹⁰ On the origins and early development of Swiss Anabaptism, see Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, pp. 51–65; and G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 160–197. Primary sources are available in translation in Leland Harder (ed.), *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, 1985).

beginning of Anabaptism',¹¹ 'the birthday of the movement',¹² and the point at which 'the first gathered church of sectarian "Protestantism" came into being',¹³ clearly occupies a central place in Anabaptist history. However, historians are yet to come to a consensus about why the baptisms took place.

The most recent full analysis and interpretation of these baptisms came in Walter Klaassen's essay 'The Rise of the Baptism of Adult Believers in Swiss Anabaptism'.¹⁴ Within Klaassen's essay, it is possible to discern two different approaches to understanding the believers' baptisms of January 1525. The first is that which Klaassen himself offers: seeing the baptisms as the result of what had come before, namely the intellectual development of opposition to infant baptism. The second, that which Klaassen identifies in the work of many previous scholars, is to see the baptisms in light of what came after, namely the institutional and theological developments of the believers' churches that have continued to the present day. It is the intention of this paper to suggest a third way of reading the baptisms: by focusing on the event itself and its immediate precursors to assess what these baptisms meant for the participants and why they took place at that particular time.

I: The Event and the Sources

The Reformation in Zürich is unavoidably linked with the arrival of Huldrych Zwingli, and the start of his preaching at the *Grossmünster* in January 1519.¹⁵ His sermons were not based on the set texts of the liturgical calendar, but, starting with the Gospel of Matthew, were expositions of whole New Testament books, 'not only scriptural preaching', but an 'education in the Bible'.¹⁶ Scriptural preaching became a call for reform based on Scripture with the deliberate breaking of the Lenten fast in 1522, when the printer Christoph Froschauer led a group in the eating of some sausages, all watched by Zwingli. His subsequent defence of their actions led to conflict with Hugo von Hohenlandenberg, Bishop of Constance; on 29 January 1523, Zwingli met Johann Faber, the Bishop's representative, in a disputation in Zürich. The result was a Zürich City Council order for clergy to limit their preaching to what could be supported by Scripture.

At this point, Zwingli was holding together a rather uneasy coalition: on the one hand, he had friends and supporters on the city Council who were sympathetic to his aims but were wary of the political problems that could

¹¹ J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Scottsdale, 1987), p. 41.

¹² Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel, c. 1498–1526* (reprinted Scottsdale, 1998), p. xiv.

¹³ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, p. 213.

¹⁴ Walter Klaassen, 'The Rise of the Baptism of Adult Believers in Swiss Anabaptism', in Walter Klaassen (ed.), *Anabaptism Revisited* (Scottsdale, 1992), pp. 85–97.

¹⁵ See Potter, *Zwingli*; for a general survey of the early Reformation in Zürich, see Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 169–181.

¹⁶ Lindberg, *Reformations*, p. 174.

be caused by a break from tradition; on the other, there were also many grass-roots followers who expected radical changes in line with the Scripture he had read with them. Amongst this second group, who would gradually come to resent Zwingli's willingness to compromise with the authorities, were those who would play a leading role in the events of 21 January 1525, most notably Conrad Grebel.¹⁷

The weakness of this coalition was shown at the second Zürich disputation of October 1523, called to decide whether the Mass was a sacrifice and whether images should be allowed in churches. Whilst Zwingli and his radical followers agreed that the answer to both of these questions was no, Zwingli, ever more politically aware, was willing to allow the Council to decide on what action to take in response to this conclusion. The radical group demanded immediate action to restore Scriptural principles of worship to Zürich, but demanded in vain. The coalition eventually fell apart when Zwingli, under pressure from the Council, broke his promise to celebrate a reformed, evangelical communion on Christmas Day, 1523.¹⁸

At some point in the following year, the dispute between Zwingli and his radical opponents sharpened around the issue of baptism. This was not the only point on which they disagreed, but rather this issue, for a number of reasons, came to represent the fundamental theological differences between Zwingli and the radicals. The Council again became concerned about the possible dangers of radical dissent, and, following a number of private meetings between Zwingli and the radicals, a public disputation on baptism was called for 17 January 1525.

Our knowledge of this disputation is based on the record of Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor as leader of the Zürich Reformation.¹⁹ The radical group were represented by Grebel, Felix Mantz and Wilhelm Reublin. Following their presentation, 'Zwingli replied methodically in all of the comprehensiveness of his arguments and answers', and the radicals 'from then on could do nothing with his arguments nor maintain their [own] opinion'.²⁰ The Zürich Council, as had been expected, decided in favour of Zwingli. On 21 January, the Council issued a decree ordering Grebel and Mantz 'to desist from their arguing and questioning' of infant baptism; other leading members of the radi-

¹⁷ On Grebel, see the classic, though rather dated, biography: Bender, *Grebel*; for more recent material, see Heinold Fast, 'Conrad Grebel. The Covenant on the Cross', in Hans-Jürgen Goertz (ed.), *Profiles of Radical Reformers* (Kitchener, 1982), pp. 118–131; and Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Konrad Grebel. Kritiker des frommen Scheins 1498–1526* (Hamburg, 1998); of which 'Conrad Grebel—A Provisional Life', *Conrad Grebel Review*, 17 (1999), pp. 6–17 is a partial translation.

¹⁸ The date was significant: on Christmas Day, 1522 Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt had performed the first evangelical communion service in Wittenberg; see Lindberg, *Reformations*, p. 103.

¹⁹ Heinrich Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte* (1567), quoted in Harder, p. 335; on Bullinger as a historian, see A.G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 19–21; for a brief biography, see David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings* (2nd edn, Oxford, 2001), pp. 93–99.

²⁰ Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte*, quoted in Harder, p. 335.

cal group who were not citizens of Zürich, namely Reublin, Johannes Brötli, Ludwig Hätzer, and Andreas Castelberger, were ‘banished from Milords’ territory’.²¹ It is the events following this Council decree that we must now consider in more detail.

The story of the first believers’ baptisms is told in four surviving sources. Two, those produced by Huldrych Zwingli²² and Johann Kessler,²³ contain relatively little information and were written from what Leland Harder terms ‘the state church perspective’.²⁴ Nevertheless, they are significant in that they give information from outside of the Zürich radical group. There has been some recent debate concerning the other two, very similar, sources, both of which come from within the Anabaptist tradition. The best-known account is taken from the first part of the *Hutterite Chronicle*,²⁵ first compiled from a variety of sources in the second half of the sixteenth century and handed down through generations of Hutterites to the present day.²⁶ However, Leland Harder presents a second, shorter account;²⁷ this, he suggests, is an eyewitness description, contained in a letter sent from Switzerland to Cologne in 1530, and used as the basis, albeit with ‘transparently apologetic’ additions, for the later account in the *Chronicle*.²⁸ Such an accreditation has been vigorously denied by James Stayer.²⁹ He concludes that ‘there *was* a letter about the first baptisms, certainly based on Hutterite chronicle materials, probably composed in the 1560–1590 period’, but that the ‘“Klettgau letter of 1530”’ described by Harder ‘is nothing more than a myth of late twentieth-century scholarship’.³⁰ The differences between these two sources are small, and will be discussed below.

On the evening of 21 January 1525, the radical group met together; Zwingli states that there were fifteen of them.³¹ The account in the *Hutterite Chronicle* records that when ‘fear came over them’, ‘they prayed that God grant it to them to do his divine will and that he might have mercy upon them. Neither flesh and blood nor human wisdom compelled them. They were well

²¹ Quoted in Harder, p. 338.

²² Contained within Zwingli’s *In catabaptistarum strophas eleencus* (1527), quoted in Samuel Macauley Jackson (ed.), *Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531). Selected Works* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 134.

²³ Contained within Kessler’s *Sabbata*, quoted in Harder, p. 338; on Kessler, see Paul L. Nyhus, ‘Kessler, Johann’, in Hans J. Hillerbrand (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols., vol. 2 (Oxford and New York, 1996), pp. 375–376.

²⁴ Harder, p. 338.

²⁵ The Hutterian Brethren (eds.), *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York, 1987), pp. 43–45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xi–xix.

²⁷ Quoted in Harder, pp. 341–342.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 338–339.

²⁹ James M. Stayer, ‘Was there a Klettgau letter of 1530?’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 61 (1987), pp. 75–76; Stayer’s article is based upon, and is a deliberate promotion of, Heinold Fast, ‘Wie doopte Konrad Grebel?’, *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*, 4 (1978), pp. 22–31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³¹ Zwingli, *In catabaptistarum*; quoted in Jackson, p. 134.

aware of what they would have to suffer for this.³² Then Jörg Blaurock, a recent arrival in Zürich and so not mentioned in the Council decree, ‘stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptize him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the truth’.³³ There is some confusion as to the events following Blaurock’s baptism: the Cologne letter suggests that Grebel then baptized the rest of the group;³⁴ the Hutterite account has Blaurock conducting the subsequent baptisms.³⁵ Regardless of which, both sources agree that all those present were baptized.

We know only these basic details of the baptisms, and it would be useful to know more. For instance, we do not know exactly who was present. Clearly Grebel and Blaurock are certainties; likewise Felix Mantz, later to be the first Anabaptist martyr in Zürich, but important here because the venue for the baptisms is believed to have been the house of his mother, Anna Mantz. Other than these three, we can speculate that the four noncitizens mentioned in the Council decree, Reublin, Brötli, Hätzer and Castelberger, were there; the other names mentioned in the letters written by Grebel to Thomas Müntzer in September 1524, that is Hans Ockenfuss, Bartlime Pur, Heinrich Aberli, John Pannicellus and Hans Hujuff, also seem possibilities.³⁶ There may also have been some women present, as there were certainly women amongst the earliest supporters of the Anabaptist movement in the Zürich hinterland.³⁷

However, this excursus goes to show how little we can really be certain of about the first believers’ baptisms. Perhaps this is why, both at the time and since, what details there are have been explained and interpreted in different ways. We shall now consider these varying explanations.

II: An Inevitable Conclusion

An attempt to establish the intellectual and practical origins of Anabaptism has been one of the foremost concerns of scholars, and a large number of individuals have been put forward as possible inspirations for the believers’ baptisms.³⁸ Calvin Augustine Pater has combined a number of previous theories to construct ‘a historical line of influence’: Andreas Carlstadt is ‘credited with

³² Hutterian Brethren, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.* For a brief biography of Blaurock, see John Allen Moore, *Anabaptist Portraits* (Scottsdale, 1984), pp. 69–93.

³⁴ Quoted in Harder, p. 342.

³⁵ Hutterian Brethren, p. 45.

³⁶ Conrad Grebel to Thomas Müntzer, Zürich, 5 September 1524; quoted in Harder, pp. 292, 294.

³⁷ On the earliest known female supporter of the Swiss Anabaptists, see C. Arnold Snyder, ‘Margaret Hottinger of Zollikon’, in C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (eds.), *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, 1996), pp. 43–53.

³⁸ See for example: Hans J. Hillerbrand, ‘The Origins of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: Another Look’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 53 (1962), pp. 152–180; Calvin Augustine Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements* (Lewiston, 1993); James M. Stayer, ‘Saxon Radicalism and Swiss Anabaptism: The Return of the Repressed’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 67 (1993), pp. 5–30; and Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

first opposing the sacramental nature of infant baptism; the Zwickau Prophets with first openly agitating about it'; Carlstadt again appears, for 'first refusing to baptize infants and developing a positive position on adult baptism'; and the Zürich group are at the end of the line, credited 'with initiating the first adult baptisms'.³⁹ Such an account is merely the most elaborate of a number of similar intellectual family trees. Pater's argument appears to run something like this: there was a causal chain of events, with the Zürich baptisms the last phase of the preceding intellectual development. The believers' baptisms of January 1525 are therefore presented as an inevitable conclusion to the growing opposition to the practice of infant baptism.

At this point, it may be useful briefly to clarify some terminology. Infant baptism refers to the baptism of young children, soon after birth, a rite that gradually came to be required by law in Western Europe between the fifth and seventh centuries, which indicated that the child was to grow up a member of the state church.⁴⁰ Theoretically, adult baptism could mean precisely the same thing, but simply delayed this required rite; the state church could still be the only option, but the formal point of entry would be later in life. It was something similar to this that Erasmus suggested in the Preface to his Latin New Testament of 1522: children who had been baptized should, on reaching puberty, be given instruction in the faith and helped to understand what their godparents had promised on their behalf at baptism. With this greater understanding, the teenagers could renew those promises in a public ceremony. It is perhaps unsurprising that this idea was censured for promoting rebaptism by the doctors of the Sorbonne in 1526, by which time rebaptism was clearly a very dangerous subject.⁴¹ Believers' baptism, on the other hand, suggests something quite different. Although the age at baptism is significant, it is perhaps less significant than the element of choice: believers' baptism is not a required rite, but rather a rite that the individual must request, only undertaken after much soul-searching.⁴² The fundamental point for the interpretation of the debate about baptism in the early Reformation is that a rejection of infant baptism does not necessarily mean a call for believers' baptism.

Returning to Pater, he is correct to identify the Zürich group with the intellectual developments going on around them in Central Europe. Grebel himself noted in September 1524 that the group saw Carlstadt and Thomas Müntzer

³⁹ Pater, *Karlstadt*, pp. 107–108; on Carlstadt, see the brief biography, Ronald J. Sider, 'Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: Between Liberal and Radical', in Goertz (ed.), *Radical Reformers*, pp. 45–53; for an analysis of the development of his baptismal theology, see Pater, *Karlstadt*, pp. 92–114.

⁴⁰ For a recent discussion of the development of Christian baptismal practice, see Alan Kreider, 'Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 72 (1998), pp. 5–30.

⁴¹ See Friesen, pp. 34–35.

⁴² In the classic sociological formulation of Ernst Troeltsch, believers' baptism is characteristic of entry into a sect, rather than a church: see Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, 2 vols. (London, 1931), vol. 1, pp. 331–343 for distinction between sect-type and church-type, and vol. 2, pp. 694–729 on the Baptist movement as Protestant sectarianism.

'as the purest proclaimers and preachers of the purest Word of God'.⁴³ However, Pater's theory is also something of a simplification of the situation.⁴⁴ In particular, his analysis does not explain the connection between opposition to infant baptism, as represented by Carlstadt, and the baptism of adult believers, as practised by the Zürich group in January 1525.⁴⁵ Simply seeing the one as a necessary and inevitable conclusion of the other is not sufficient, because it does not appear that the Zürich group or their contemporaries did so.

Pater suggests that Carlstadt suspended the practice of infant baptism in his parish of Orlamünde in the autumn of 1523.⁴⁶ Shortly afterwards, he was followed in this by those members of the Zürich group in a position to do so, that is the serving clerics. In the summer of 1524, the Zürich Council investigated claims that children had not been baptized in the rural parishes of Witikon and Zollikon. It is clear that those parents who failed to have their children baptized had been influenced by Wilhelm Reublin, the pastor at Witikon and a leading member of the Zürich group. By the summer, some of the unbaptized children were six months old, suggesting that Reublin had stopped baptizing infants in early 1524.⁴⁷ Therefore, it appears there was a gap of about a year between the suspension of infant baptism and the introduction of believers' baptism in Zürich.

During this year, there is little documentary evidence to suggest that the Zürich group were planning to initiate believers' baptism as they did in January 1525. The only evidence to support such a claim comes in Bullinger's account of the January disputation on Baptism. According to Bullinger, the radical group argued that baptism 'should be given to believers to whom the gospel had previously been preached', and 'as long as baptism is not done in this manner, infant baptism is not valid and one should have himself baptized again'.⁴⁸ However, it should be noted that Bullinger was writing after the event, with the later justifications of the radicals fresh in his mind.

⁴³ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 Sept. 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 289. For a recent assessment of the historical problem of the links between Swiss Anabaptism and these primarily anti-Luther radicals, see Stayer, 'Saxon Radicalism'. Stayer plays down the tradition that the Anabaptists were followers of the Saxon radicals, but suggests that 'Anabaptism was only one distinctive fraction' of a broad 'dissident radicalism', the earliest examples of which were the Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and Andreas Carlstadt (p. 6).

⁴⁴ Here I write only about Carlstadt's influence or otherwise on the Zürich group's baptismal practice; in his argument that Carlstadt exerted a more general influence over the radical group, Pater is convincing.

⁴⁵ Stayer, 'Saxon Radicalism', p. 8, agrees that 'the Saxon current of anti-pedobaptism was a very important prelude to Swiss Anabaptism', but like Pater does not fully explain the intellectual gap between the two positions.

⁴⁶ Pater, *Karlstadt*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ James M. Stayer, 'Reublin and Brötli: The Revolutionary Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism', in Marc Lienhard (ed.), *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism* (The Hague, 1977), p. 88; see also the brief biography, James M. Stayer, 'Wilhelm Reublin: A Picaresque Journey Through Early Anabaptism', in Goertz (ed.), *Radical Reformers*, pp. 107–117.

⁴⁸ Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte*, quoted in Harder, p. 335.

Indeed, there is no support for Bullinger's claim in Zwingli's contemporary writings. In his account of the baptisms, Zwingli complained that the radicals 'had set up rebaptism without any conference, for during the whole battle about infant baptism they had said nothing about rebaptism'.⁴⁹

The statements of the radicals themselves appear to suggest that we should believe Zwingli. Neither the September 1524 letters to Thomas Müntzer⁵⁰ nor the *Petition of Defence* written by Felix Mantz and given to the Zürich Council in December 1524⁵¹ mention a plan to initiate believers' baptism in this way. In both instances, the concern of the radical group is simply with the link between faith and baptism, which is found lacking in infant baptism. A similar impression comes from a letter written by Zwingli to Franz Lambert,⁵² one of Zwingli's allies in Strasbourg, which has been described as the 'most detailed report available' of the private disputations held between Zwingli and the radical group in December 1524.⁵³ It seems therefore that the Zürich group gave no indication of planning to initiate believers' baptism before 21 January 1525.

Hans J. Hillerbrand has stated that the 'discrepancy between insight and act' displayed by the Zürich group in failing to introduce believers' baptism earlier is surprising.⁵⁴ However, this 'discrepancy' was shared by other opponents of infant baptism: Carlstadt and Müntzer never introduced believers' baptism, whilst Balthasar Hubmaier was only to practice believers' baptism after contact with the Zürich group. Similarly, Klaus Deppermann notes that from autumn 1524 radicals in Strasbourg were refusing to have their children baptized; however, believers' baptism only came to Strasbourg with the arrival of Wilhelm Reublin in early 1526.⁵⁵ It seems that the questioning of infant baptism was relatively common in the early 1520s,⁵⁶ and the suspension of the practice was far from rare, and yet it led to believers' baptism only in Zürich in January 1525. The immediate spread of the practice was

⁴⁹ Zwingli, *In catabaptistarum*; quoted in Jackson, p. 134; I have taken the liberty of replacing Jackson's use of 'catabaptism' with the more common 'rebaptism'.

⁵⁰ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 September 1524, quoted in Harder, pp. 284–294;

⁵¹ Quoted in Harder, pp. 311–315.

⁵² Huldrych Zwingli to Franz Lambert and other Brethren in Strasbourg, Zürich, 16 Dec. 1524; quoted in Harder, pp. 303–310.

⁵³ Harder, p. 303.

⁵⁴ Hillerbrand, 'Origins', p. 176.

⁵⁵ Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffmann. Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 178–179.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, p. 432 notes that even 'the magisterial reformers themselves [referring here to Luther, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Martin Bucer], in their initial emphasis on salvation by faith alone, had to grope for a while before coming down firmly in defense of the traditional practice of infant baptism'. The crucial case is clearly Zwingli, who admitted in 1525 that he had earlier thought that children should not be baptized; however, it is unclear whether he decided in favour of infant baptism before the difficulties with the radicals or only in reaction to their proposals. See W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 194–217 on the development of Zwingli's baptismal thought, mostly after 1524.

the result of the missionary activity of the Zürich group, in particular Reublin and Blaurock.⁵⁷

We need only see a 'discrepancy', as Hillerbrand did, if a causal chain such as that put forward by Pater is followed; without such a teleological approach, the link between the suspension of infant baptism and the initiation of believers' baptism becomes less obvious. If Pater's line of influence ended at the refusal to baptize infants, then believers' baptisms may well have followed, but only some ten, fifteen, or twenty years later, when those who had not been baptized as infants finally came to make their pledge. This is fundamentally different from the events of 21 January 1525, when adults who had been baptized as children nevertheless accepted baptism again: they were not simply adult baptisms, but adult rebaptisms.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is not appropriate to see the Zürich baptisms as the inevitable conclusion to the debate regarding the practice of infant baptism; rather, they were the starting point for a debate concerning the legitimacy of rebaptism.

The question of rebaptism was not a new one, and the practice had a long association with heresy. In particular, it was associated with Donatism, a primarily North African movement, which developed in response to the crisis faced by the Christian Church during the persecution under Emperor Diocletian in 303–305.⁵⁹ After the persecution had ended, the position of those clergy who had compromised with the authorities, in particular those who had handed over the Christian scriptures to avoid punishment, came under threat from the Donatist movement, which stressed the necessity of moral purity for Church leaders. They claimed that baptisms performed by clergy who had later deviated from the faith were not valid, and that people should therefore be rebaptized. This teaching was condemned at the

⁵⁷ On early Anabaptist missionary activity, see Hans Kansdorf, 'The Anabaptist Approach to Mission', in Wilbert R. Shenk (ed.), *Anabaptism and Mission* (Scottsdale, 1984), pp. 51–69. This emphasis on the missionary activity of the Zürich group is not meant to deny the influential findings of James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull and Klaus Deppermann, 'From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 49 (1975), pp. 83–121; they stress that although the Zürich baptisms 'have priority in point of time', South German-Austrian Anabaptism and Low German-Dutch Anabaptism 'cannot be regarded as "derived" from the Swiss Brethren' (p. 86). Nevertheless, in the months following the Zürich baptisms, the practice was taken up only after direct contact with Reublin, Blaurock, or the other Zürich missionaries.

⁵⁸ Calvin Augustine Pater, 'Westerburg: The Father of Anabaptism. Author and Content of the *Dyalogus* of 1527', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 85 (1994), pp. 138–163 suggests that Gerhard Westerburg, brother-in-law and early supporter of Andreas Carlstadt, developed a doctrine of rebaptism perhaps as early as December 1522, and passed this doctrine on to the Zürich group during his visit in October 1524, giving Westerburg a 'crucial role . . . in developing basic Anabaptist doctrines' (p. 161). However, Pater does not conclusively link Westerburg to the doctrine of rebaptism before January 1525; even if this were the case, this paper suggests that more attention should be paid to the practice rather than theory of rebaptism. Westerburg was only rebaptized in 1534.

⁵⁹ See W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952).

Council of Carthage in 411, and an Imperial edict of the following year forbade the practice of rebaptism.⁶⁰

Zwingli noted the similarity of the Donatists to the Anabaptists in his *Taufbüchlein* of May 1525: 'Thirteen hundred years ago, rebaptism brought much strife also and caused so much confusion that the present rebaptism is child's play by comparison.'⁶¹ However, the precedent was not referred to by the radicals; indeed, Geoffrey Dipple has concluded that 'One of the most striking features about the early writings of the Swiss Brethren is their almost total lack of concern with history.'⁶² It therefore does not seem likely that the Zürich radicals were consciously following the Donatists in undergoing rebaptism. Certainly, we cannot know for sure their thoughts on the validity of their own infant baptisms. However, whether the radicals believed they had received anything from their infant baptisms or not, we may perhaps conclude that they expected rebaptism to provide them with something, whether that was a first baptism, a second, replacement baptism, or an addition to what they had received in infant baptism.⁶³

It appears that the radical group did not at first recoil from the characterization of their practice as rebaptism, as they were later to do. Indeed, there was scriptural justification for the practice. The key passage was Acts 19.1–7, where Paul baptizes some disciples of John the Baptist, who himself had previously baptized them. When Zwingli, in February 1525, challenged Hans Hottinger, a radical sympathizer, 'that it cannot be found in Scripture that anyone was baptised twice', it was with this passage that Hottinger replied.⁶⁴ Similarly, Zwingli noted that the radicals 'attempted to defend it [their baptismal practice] by the verses in Acts 19'.⁶⁵ It was only later that this justification fell out of favour amongst the radicals, and was replaced by that which Bullinger claimed the radicals used in the January disputation: namely, that infant baptism was not a proper baptism, so their baptism is no rebaptism, but a first true baptism.

This justification was championed by Balthasar Hubmaier, a radical fellow traveller and later a leading Anabaptist, but unconnected to the Zürich

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 275–289; see also Williams, *Radical Reformation*, pp. 360–361, for the later change to the Imperial Law that made rebaptism a capital crime.

⁶¹ Huldrych Zwingli, *Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe*, Zürich, 27 May 1525; quoted in Harder, p. 367.

⁶² Geoffrey Dipple, '“Yet from time to time there were men who protested against these evils”: Anabaptism and Medieval Heresy', in Bruce Gordon (ed.), *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 1: *The Medieval Inheritance* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 127.

⁶³ On other forms of rebaptism, providing something above and beyond what is received in infant baptism, see Edward E. Malone, 'Martyrdom and Monastic Profession as a Second Baptism', in Anton Mayer, Johannes Quasten and Burkhard Neunheuser (eds.), *Vom christlichen Mysterium: Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von Odo Casel, O.S.B.* (Düsseldorf, 1951), pp. 115–134.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Harder, p. 347.

⁶⁵ Zwingli, *Von der Taufe*; quoted in Harder, p. 370.

baptisms.⁶⁶ It is first mentioned in his *On the Christian Baptism of Believers* of July 1525,⁶⁷ but it is stated most clearly in the *Dialogue with Zwingli's Baptism Book*,⁶⁸ written in November 1525 and published in early 1526. Hubmaier writes: 'You accuse us again and again of rebaptism and have, however, not proven with one single word that infant baptism is a baptism.'⁶⁹ This was to become the classic Anabaptist defence of their baptismal practice; however, it was not formulated until after the Zürich baptisms of 1525. Instead, there seems to have been something of an acceptance amongst the radicals that their baptism was indeed a rebaptism.

It therefore seems likely that the baptisms of January 1525 were intended to be rebaptisms, and that they were different from the discussion of a delayed rite of adult baptism that had gone before. It also seems clear that these baptisms were not the inevitable conclusion of the debate concerning the legitimacy of infant baptism.

III: A New Separate Church

In February 1527, the Swiss Anabaptist group that grew out of the Zürich radical movement produced their confession of faith at the Schleithem conference.⁷⁰ Article 4 gives the standard teaching on separation: 'Separation shall take place from the evil and wickedness which the devil has planted in the world'; therefore, members of the church should 'have no fellowship with them [the nonbelievers]' and avoid 'the confusion of their abominations'.⁷¹ Accepting believers' baptism was to be the sign of this separation. Therefore, it may be suggested that the 1525 baptisms were intended to mark the separation of the Zürich radical group from the world, as Anabaptist baptism was later to do. There is some support for this suggestion in the sources, as the account in the *Hutterite Chronicle* concludes: 'This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways.'⁷²

However, it is not possible to prove any unanimity in the Zürich radical group concerning the theory of separation that was later put forward in the Schleithem Confession. It seems clear that in the first months after

⁶⁶ For a brief biography, see Christof Windhorst, 'Balthasar Hubmaier. Professor, Preacher, Politician', in Goertz (ed.), *Radical Reformers*, pp. 144–157; see also H. Wayne Pipkin, 'The Baptismal Theology of Balthasar Hubmaier', in H. Wayne Pipkin (ed.), *Essays in Anabaptist Theology* (Elkhart, 1994), pp. 87–109.

⁶⁷ Balthasar Hubmaier, *Von der christlichen Taufe der Gläubigen* (Waldshut, 1525); quoted in H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (eds.), *Balthasar Hubmaier. Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, 1989), pp. 95–149; the denial of the charge of rebaptism is p. 133.

⁶⁸ Balthasar Hubmaier, *Gespräch auf Zwinglis Taufbüchlein* (Nicolzburg, 1526); quoted in Pipkin and Yoder, *Hubmaier*, pp. 166–233.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; quoted in Pipkin and Yoder, *Hubmaier*, p. 180.

⁷⁰ See Williams, *Radical Reformation*, pp. 289–294.

⁷¹ *Brüderliche Vereinigung etlicher Kinder Gottes sieben Artickel betreffend* (Schleithem, 1527); quoted in John H. Yoder (ed.), *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, 1973), pp. 37–38.

⁷² Hutterian Brethren, p. 45.

the Zürich baptisms there were many amongst the radicals, most notably Reublin and Brötli, who saw their movement not as a separation but as one that might have widespread popularity.⁷³ Arnold Snyder contrasts their approach with that of the Zürich state reformation: ‘Whereas Zwingli was promoting a territorial reform, centrally administered from Zürich, the Anabaptists promoted a territorial reform based on the autonomy of local communities.’⁷⁴ The Zürich group attempted to achieve something like community churches at Zollikon and St Gallen,⁷⁵ and the model was followed more successfully by their friend and supporter Balthasar Hubmaier in his parish of Waldshut. Their aim in early 1525 appears to have been not the separation of the few, but the conversion of the many. Zwingli wrote to Vadian, reformer of St Gallen and Grebel’s brother-in-law, at the end of March 1525: ‘Grebel is among us, everywhere drawing to his faction whomever he can.’⁷⁶ Grebel does not sound like a man separated from the evil world.

Snyder points out that the leaders of what he terms the ‘second wave’ of the Swiss Anabaptist movement, namely Michael Sattler, Hans Kuenzi, Carli Brennwald, and Conrad Winckler, ‘all became fully committed Anabaptists only after the collapse of the peasants’ movement’, later in 1525.⁷⁷ It was, Snyder argues, this second wave that contributed the vision ‘of the separated church of the faithful which was to carry sectarian themes several steps beyond anything seen in 1525’.⁷⁸ It is therefore possible to agree with Walter Klaassen in his conclusion that the 1525 baptisms were not ‘the act of founding a new church’.⁷⁹

It is nevertheless necessary to consider why the opposite opinion was expressed in the *Hutterite Chronicle*. The *Chronicle*, compiled some forty years after the baptisms, sought to present the Anabaptist movement as fully formed at its birth. As the Hutterites, the Mennonites, and other Anabaptist groups were by this time separated from the world, it was necessary for the Zürich group to appear to be so. However, as we have seen, recent research has proved that such a conclusion can no longer be supported.

⁷³ For the breakthrough work on this, see James M. Stayer, ‘Die Anfänge des schweizerischen Taufertums im reformierten Kongregationalismus’ and Martin Haas, ‘Der Weg der Täufer in die Absonderung’, both in Hans-Jürgen Goertz (ed.), *Umstrittenes Taufertum 1525–1975: Neue Forschungen* (Göttingen, 1975), pp. 19–49 and 50–78 respectively; see also Charles Nienkirchen, ‘Reviewing the Case for a Non-Separatist Ecclesiology in Early Swiss Anabaptism’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 56 (1982), pp. 227–241.

⁷⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, 1984), p. 71.

⁷⁵ The Anabaptist community at Zollikon in the weeks following the January 1525 baptisms is described in Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ* (Scottsdale, 1961), pp. 21–42.

⁷⁶ Huldrych Zwingli to Vadian, Zürich, 31 March 1525; quoted in Harder, p. 356.

⁷⁷ Snyder, *Sattler*, p. 87; on the Peasants’ War, see the most recent source collection, Tom Scott and R.W. Scribner (eds.), *The German Peasants’ War: a history in documents* (New Jersey, 1991).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁷⁹ Klaassen, ‘Baptism of Adult Believers’, p. 93.

IV: A Reformed Sacrament

It is common in much recent writing about the 1525 baptisms to state that the Zürich group were simply aiming to reform what had become a debased practice. Denny Weaver describes the baptisms as representing ‘a desire to align baptism with their understanding of the New Testament, to purify another aspect of the order of worship for the mass church when Zurich hesitated’.⁸⁰ Likewise, James Stayer has concluded that the radical group ‘aimed at a reform of the sacraments, to be carried through today in Zurich and tomorrow throughout Christendom’.⁸¹ Arnold Snyder similarly sees in the first baptisms ‘a continuation of earlier concerns to be true to Scripture in the matter of church reforms’.⁸²

In this interpretation, baptism was simply a sacrament in need of reform. This reform was to be conducted on the basis of a particularly strong interpretation of *sola scriptura*, summarized by Grebel in his letter to Müntzer of 1524: ‘Whatever we are not taught in clear statements and examples [in Scripture], we are to consider forbidden.’⁸³ It was in this sense that Felix Mantz wrote in his *Petition of Defence* of December 1524 that infant baptism represented ‘a treading-under-feet of his only true Word’. Infant baptism was not prescribed in the New Testament, so should not be practised. Baptism after education in the faith, logically therefore adult baptism, was present in the Scriptures; therefore this was the act that should be practised in Zürich. Mantz asked his opponents to find, ‘out of true clear Scripture’, evidence ‘that John, Christ, the apostles baptized children or taught that they should be baptized’.⁸⁴ In the absence of such evidence, according to this interpretation, the Zürich group undertook to perform a new, reformed baptism.

There is some support for this interpretation when the Zürich group’s approach to the reform of the Mass is considered. The matter of whether the Mass was a sacrifice was discussed at the second Zürich disputation of October 1523.⁸⁵ On the third day of discussion, Grebel rose to speak: whilst he welcomed the conclusion that the Mass was not a sacrifice, ‘there are still many abuses which the devil has also added to this about which it is necessary to speak’.⁸⁶ The abuses that Grebel went on to list, much to Zwingli’s annoyance, demonstrate the rigid legalism of the Zürich radical group. Grebel ques-

⁸⁰ Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, p. 42.

⁸¹ James M. Stayer, ‘The Swiss Brethren: An Exercise in Historical Definition’, *Church History*, 47 (1978), p. 182.

⁸² Snyder, *Michael Sattler*, p. 71.

⁸³ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 Sept. 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 287. On the Biblicism, specifically the New Testament focus, of Swiss Anabaptism, see Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings. Communitarian Experiments During the Reformation* (Baltimore, 1995), pp. 15–32.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Harder, p. 315.

⁸⁵ *Die Akten der zweiten Disputation vom 26–28 Oktober* (Zürich, 8 Dec. 1523); quoted in Harder, pp. 234–250.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; quoted in Harder, p. 244.

tioned whether the bread should be leavened or unleavened; whether water should be added to the wine; whether the priest should insert the bread into the communicant's mouth.⁸⁷ It therefore seems likely that the Zürich group would have sought the reform of the sacrament of baptism with equal zeal.

This interpretation has much to recommend it, but Weaver, Stayer, and Snyder do not consider the question of which baptismal practice the Zürich radicals were following. This is an interesting issue, as there appears to be something of a paradox in their approach to baptism. Both in their calls for infant baptism to be replaced with adult baptism before January 1525 and their defences of believers' baptism afterwards, the scriptural justifications most commonly used were the baptismal order in the Great Commission (Matthew 28.18–20; Mark 16.15–16) and the baptisms of the early church described in Acts (8.35–39 and 10.44–48, for example). The radical group used these passages to demonstrate the scriptural link between faith and baptism that they believed to have been corrupted by infant baptism.

However, in many respects the baptism that was practised in January 1525 was more similar to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (Matthew 3.13–17; Mark 1.8–10; Luke 3.21–22). Again, we are faced with a contrast between the theological foundation of the baptisms, and their physical practice. In this instance, the practice is particularly interesting: it raises the possibility that, rather than simply reforming a debased practice, the Zürich group were instead instituting baptism as undergone by Christ; that is, baptism as *Imitatio Christi*.⁸⁸ The concept of the imitation of Christ has often been seen as a key aspect of early Anabaptist thought;⁸⁹ it is clear in many elements of their practice, such as their taking communion as a fellowship meal using ordinary bread and wine, and in their emphasis on the acceptance of suffering and persecution.

As George Huntston Williams has noted, this concept of *Imitatio Christi* was equally applicable to baptism, as the radicals 'were confident that they were imitating Christ in their penitential submissions to believers' baptism, which thereupon exposed them to the temptations of the wilderness of a conformist Christendom'.⁹⁰ Michael Servetus would later stress this aspect of imitation to such a degree that he recommended baptism at the age of thirty so as to imitate Christ in every detail.⁹¹ Whilst the first baptisms did

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; quoted in Harder, pp. 247–248.

⁸⁸ The concept of *Imitatio Christi* is best known from the fifteenth century work, Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. L. Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1952); the earlier history of the concept, up to and including Kempis, is discussed in Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 143–248.

⁸⁹ See for example: Harold S. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 18 (1944), p. 76, p. 78, p. 87; and Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, 1973), pp. 27–35, where he describes Anabaptism as 'Existential Christianity', 'a realized and practiced "Christianity of the Gospel"' (p. 29), which, in effect, is much the same as the imitation of Christ.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, p. 438.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 450–457.

not imitate the form of the baptism of Christ, in that they did not use full immersion,⁹² this was a feature of some later Swiss Anabaptist practice.⁹³ Certainly, the Swiss Anabaptist movement was more concerned with repeating the baptism of Christ than were Hans Hut and his followers, who baptized with the eschatologically significant sign of the cross on the forehead.⁹⁴

It is not clear how far this *Imitatio Christi* explanation was true for the Zürich group. As has already been noted, the baptism of Christ was not a crucial scriptural justification; instead, they relied upon examples that made clear the link between faith and baptism. The fact that infant baptism 'is also against the example of Christ, who was baptized at thirty years', comes as almost a last thought in Felix Mantz's *Petition*.⁹⁵ The concept of *Imitatio Christi* may have influenced the Zürich group in their baptismal practice, but there is no clear evidence that it did.

One possible criticism of the reforming interpretation is that it fails to answer the question of timing. As explained above, the radical group had been aware for at least six months and maybe as much as a year before January 1525 that baptism, as described in Scripture, was not practiced in Zürich. Why, therefore, did they not introduce the new, reformed practice earlier? Denny Weaver suggests that the Zürich group were waiting to see if the Council would introduce believers' baptism for the whole city, and that they acted only 'when the council's actions of January 1525 dashed any remaining hope of an official baptismal reform'.⁹⁶

Weaver's argument is difficult to assess, not least because he, like Calvin Augustine Pater, does not make a distinction between the postponement of baptism until adulthood, which was discussed at the January disputation, and the rebaptism of those baptized as children, which was not. It was the latter that was initiated by the radical group, who had already undertaken the postponement of baptism until adulthood in Witikon and Zollikon in 1524. They do not appear to have waited for 'official baptismal reform' then, so it is appropriate to question why they would do so in 1525.

Nevertheless, the question of the attitude of the Zürich group towards the possibilities of official reform is an interesting one. On the one hand, Grebel was well aware of the likelihood of official persecution, as will be discussed below, and was also, by 1525, extremely hostile towards Zwingli. In December 1523, he wrote to his brother-in-law Vadian: 'Whoever thinks, believes

⁹² An imaginative telling of the January baptisms has Grebel using 'one of Frau Mantz's small kitchen dippers' to sprinkle water on Blaurock's head; in Moore, *Portraits*, p. 35.

⁹³ For example, the baptism by immersion in the Rhine of Wolfgang Ulimann of St. Gall by Grebel in March 1525, reported in Kessler's *Sabbata*; quoted in Harder, p. 360.

⁹⁴ See Gottfried Seebass, 'Das Zeichen der Erwählten: Zum Verständnis der Taufe bei Hans Hut', in Goertz (ed.), *Umstrittenes Taufertum*, pp. 138–164; and Werner O. Packull, 'The Sign of Thau: The Changing Conception of the Seal of God's Elect in Early Anabaptist Thought', *Memnonite Quarterly Review*, 61 (1987), pp. 363–374.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Harder, p. 315.

⁹⁶ Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, p. 42.

or declares that Zwingli acts according to the duty of a shepherd thinks, believes and declares wickedly.⁹⁷ On the other hand, Felix Mantz delivered his *Defence* to the Council only one month before the January 1525 baptisms took place, surely with the intention of converting the Council to the radical position. It seems possible that the group genuinely believed that their message, which they held to be true to Scripture, would convert the Council, even as late as the January disputation. However, it should be stressed that, as there is no evidence that the radicals were thinking of rebaptism, it is unlikely that they would have expected the Council to reform baptism in this manner, as Weaver appears to suggest.

This sacramental reform interpretation of the Zürich baptisms has also suffered from a more fundamental criticism made by Werner O. Packull.⁹⁸ Packull sees it as a form of 'biblical determinism': it assumes 'that wherever the sacred texts were read with sincerity and with commitment to follow their precepts the outcome would inevitably lead to a reinstatement of the pre-Constantinian believers' church'. The problem with such an approach is that 'the Anabaptists were not the only ones appealing to the Scriptures in the sixteenth century' and yet no other group instituted believers' baptism; the problem cannot be explained 'by ascribing greater sincerity and honesty to the Anabaptists'.⁹⁹ Packull suggests instead 'a broader contextual rereading' which places the developing Anabaptist movement within 'the social-political fibre of sixteenth-century society'.¹⁰⁰

V: An Anti-clerical Act

Such a contextualized, social-political explanation may be found in the attempt to see the 1525 baptisms as an application of an anticlerical position to the practice of baptism. Much recent scholarship has emphasized anticlericalism as a common feature amongst many of the early opponents of Luther and Zwingli.¹⁰¹ In part, this anti-clericalism was the continuation of a late medieval tradition; it was also a reaction to the reformed attack on Catholic clergy, and the failure of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to end a sense of lay subjugation.¹⁰² In most instances, this scholarship has focused on a traditional, economic understanding of anti-clericalism,

⁹⁷ Conrad Grebel to Vadian, Zürich, 18 December 1523; quoted in Harder, p. 276.

⁹⁸ Werner O. Packull, *Rereading Anabaptist Beginnings* (Winnipeg, 1991), pp. 3–4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ See for example Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. T. Johnson (London, 1996), pp. 8–13.

¹⁰² See the range of essays in Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (eds.), *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 1994).

and specifically on the refusal of tithe payment to support the priest.¹⁰³ However, the issue of anti-clericalism in relation to baptism is a different one.

The argument, according to Walter Klaassen, was that 'infant baptism was the sign of the disenfranchisement of ordinary Christians. It pre-empted their own decision and kept them in dependence on the clergy.'¹⁰⁴ The introduction of believers' baptism could be seen as a way of reducing clerical input into the individual believer's religious life. 'The baptism of faith was therefore, by contrast, an anticlerical sign . . . It had to do with the desire for lay control of the church.'¹⁰⁵

The argument that infant baptism disenfranchised lay Christians was one of the most important points put forward by Thomas Müntzer in his *Protestation or Proposition* of December 1523.¹⁰⁶ This text is particularly interesting as it is clear that the Zürich group read the work and used many of Müntzer's ideas.¹⁰⁷ Müntzer noted that 'initiation into the Christian Church has become crude monkey-play'. In the early church, 'only adults were admitted, and after a lengthy period of instruction as church-pupils, being called catechumens because of this teaching'.¹⁰⁸ The ending of adult baptism after instruction was for Müntzer the point of the fall of the Church. 'Ever since immature children have been made Christians and the catechumens abolished, Christians themselves have become children . . . for then all understanding vanished from the church.'¹⁰⁹ Müntzer did not use this argument as a justification to reinstate believers' baptism; inspired by mystic and chiliastic currents of thought, his concern was instead for the inner baptism of the Holy Spirit. Despite the very different conclusion reached by the Zürich group, it seems likely that the claim of disenfranchisement was nevertheless important in the formulation of their position.

The evidence for the Zürich group's use of Müntzer's *Protestation* comes from the two letters written to Müntzer by Grebel, on behalf of the Zürich group, in September 1524.¹¹⁰ These letters also state quite clearly the anti-clerical thought and growing spiritual self-confidence of the group.

¹⁰³ See for example: James M. Stayer, 'Reformation, Peasants, Anabaptist: Northeastern Swiss Anticlericalism', in Dykema and Oberman, *Anticlericalism*, pp. 559–566; and Arnold Snyder, 'Biblical Text and Social Context: Anabaptist Anticlericalism in Reformation Zurich', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 65 (1991), pp. 169–191.

¹⁰⁴ Klaassen, 'Baptism of Adult Believers', p. 94.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Müntzer, *Protestation oder empietung* (Allstedt, 1524); quoted in Peter Matheson (ed.), *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 188–209; for a brief biography, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, 'Thomas Müntzer. Revolutionary in a Mystical Spirit', in Goertz, *Radical Reformers*, pp. 29–44.

¹⁰⁷ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 Sept. 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 286.

¹⁰⁸ Müntzer, *Protestation*; quoted in Matheson, *Müntzer*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; quoted in Matheson, *Müntzer*, p. 193.

¹¹⁰ On the significance of these letters, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "'A common future conversation": a revisionist interpretation of the September 1524 Grebel Letters to Thomas Müntzer', in Werner O. Packull and Geoffrey L. Dipple (eds.), *Radical Reformation Studies* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 73–90.

Grebel explains that the group were previously unaware of the failings of the Zürich church: 'we were only hearers and readers of the evangelical preachers who are responsible for all this error as our sins deserved'. Their point of realization came 'after we took the Scripture in hand and consulted it on all kinds of issues'. Thereby, the group 'gained some insight and became aware of the great and harmful shortcomings of the shepherds'.¹¹¹

This is essentially the same argument as that put forward by Müntzer in relation to baptism: that ordinary Christians can achieve spiritual maturity only by taking control of their own religious life. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz has noted, 'the argument of emancipation played an important role in the thinking of the proto-Anabaptists as well as Müntzer's'.¹¹² It therefore seems likely that the Zürich group may well have been taking an anti-clerical stance by performing the believers' baptisms of 1525.

The main criticism of this interpretation is the same as that noted above for the reforming interpretation: that it explains why the group might introduce believers' baptisms, but not why the practice was introduced on 21 January 1525. It is this question that must now be addressed.

VI: A Spiritual Release

The interpretations of the Zürich baptisms that we have already considered have all sought an explanation in the developments of the years and months leading up to January 1525. However, it seems likely that a plausible explanation for the specific timing of the baptisms may be found in the immediate background to the baptisms, the days leading up to 21 January.

On 17 January, the radical group had failed to convince the Zürich Council that the practice of infant baptism was not based on Scripture and so should be abandoned. The following day, the Council ordered 'all those who have hitherto left their children unbaptized' to 'have them baptized within the next eight days', or face expulsion.¹¹³ This included Grebel and his wife, who had given birth to a daughter in early January; he wrote to Vadian that 'she has not yet been baptized and swamped in the Romish water bath'.¹¹⁴ On 21 January, the Council effectively ordered the break-up of the radical group: Zürich residents were to stop their agitation, and nonresidents were to leave the city. It seems certain that the group were unwilling to allow this. As Grebel had written to Müntzer four months

¹¹¹ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 Sept. 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 286; for a discussion of the development of lay Bible-reading groups in Zürich, see Arnold Snyder, 'Word and Power in Reformation Zurich', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 81 (1990), pp. 263–285.

¹¹² Goertz, 'Grebel Letters', p. 86.

¹¹³ Quoted in Harder, p. 336.

¹¹⁴ Conrad Grebel to Vadian, Zürich, 14 Jan. 1525; quoted in Harder, p. 332.

earlier, they prayed that ‘we may all walk according to our calling and commitment’.¹¹⁵ However, the group had long been aware of what they should expect from the authorities: ‘True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter’, Grebel wrote to Müntzer. ‘They must be baptized in anguish and tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death, tried in fire’.¹¹⁶ Likewise, Grebel wrote to Vadian in December 1524: ‘I do not think that persecution will fail to come. God be merciful.’¹¹⁷

This then was the choice faced by the group following the Council’s decree: should they sacrifice their religious principles and conform to the Council’s orders, or should they remain true to what they believed to be the Word of God, and thereby sacrifice their freedom, and possibly their lives? In these circumstances the group met, illegally and no doubt in fear for their lives, and prayed for inspiration. The result ‘was a dramatic and desperate act of defiance against the established church and government’.¹¹⁸ It was not the first such act of defiance that had occurred in the course of the Reformation in Zürich. We noted earlier the deliberate fast breaking in Easter 1522, which eventually led to the decision of the Council to allow only scriptural preaching. This now appears to have been only the first part of a campaign of public action, which could perhaps be termed ‘ecclesiastical disobedience’, with the aim of promoting evangelical preaching. In July 1522, both Grebel and Zwingli took part in disturbing the preaching of representatives of the traditional church, dramatic acts challenging authority, particularly in the case of Grebel, who was not even a cleric.¹¹⁹ The radical group already had experience of how a dramatic, defiant gesture could lead to change.

However, whilst it is possible that this was the intention of the group, a portrayal of the baptisms as a provocative and public act does not ring true. If this was the intention, why not baptize in public, as they later would? Why not advertise their dramatic challenge to authority? As we have already seen,

¹¹⁵ Grebel to Müntzer, 5 Sept. 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 291.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; quoted in Harder, p. 290. The use of ‘baptized’ here is interesting, and possibly refers to the Pauline theology of baptism as sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4). However, the later Anabaptist movement led by Hans Hut would also stress suffering as a third baptism: the baptisms of water, spirit and blood; see Williams, *Radical Reformation*, pp. 442–446. Grebel may have been responding to hints of such a theology in Müntzer’s work, but it seems unlikely that the mystical implications would have appealed to the biblicist Swiss radicals.

¹¹⁷ Conrad Grebel to Vadian, Zürich, 15 December 1524; quoted in Harder, p. 302. An interesting question that cannot be pursued here is the degree to which this persecution mentality was characteristic of the radical group as a whole, or simply reflected the psychology of Grebel, so often the main spokesperson for the group. See Fast, ‘Conrad Grebel’, pp. 129–130; and Peter Iver Kaufman, ‘Social History, Psychohistory, and the Prehistory of Swiss Anabaptism’, *The Journal of Religion*, 68 (1988), pp. 527–544.

¹¹⁸ Stayer, ‘Swiss Brethren’, p. 183.

¹¹⁹ The report of the disturbances comes from the chronicle of Bernhard Wyss, entry for 7 July 1522; quoted in Harder, pp. 172–176. For a full discussion, see Heinold Fast, ‘Reformation durch Provokation. Predigtstörungen in den ersten Jahren der Reformation in der Schweiz’, in Goertz, *Umstrittenes Taufertum*, pp. 79–110.

it seems likely that the general public were not expecting the baptisms, and that they came as a complete surprise. It could therefore be suggested that the baptisms were not a public but rather a primarily private act, and that the group found in the practice of rebaptism some kind of spiritual reassurance at a time of crisis.

This sense of spiritual reassurance was seen much more clearly in later believers' baptisms, and was one reason why Zwingli found the baptisms so difficult to understand. As W.P. Stephens has noted, 'Zwingli's whole understanding of God and of salvation is bound up in his doctrine of baptism, as well as his understanding of man, which could not allow that the soul could be affected by what is bodily.'¹²⁰ For Zwingli, the act of receiving a water baptism could no more give spiritual reassurance to an adult than it could wipe away the stain of original sin in a child. In his *Taufbüchlein*, he suggested that 'the Anabaptists themselves set too great store by the baptism of water', and thereby 'err just as much on the one side as the papists do on the other'.¹²¹ Zwingli suspected that 'many would be rebaptized not just once but a thousand times. For if water baptism renews, strengthens, and comforts the soul, no one would refrain from being baptized again as often as he was tempted'.¹²²

This sense of spiritual reassurance or release was recognized explicitly by Anabaptists later in 1525. Zwingli noted that 'the Anabaptists cannot lie that they attribute nothing to baptism; for they let it be known that they have received great quickening of the spirit by it, although that is only old-womanish and foolish chatter'.¹²³ Unnamed Anabaptists questioned during the second public disputation on baptism sometime in March 1525 claimed that they had felt such a release. Oswald Myconius, who joined Zwingli in questioning the Anabaptists, suggested that the release 'was simply a cessation of that apprehension which you yourself had created' regarding the possibility of living a sinless life.¹²⁴ Zwingli also downplayed the significance of the reaction, likening it to the release that had previously been felt during confession, when 'the penitent could easily claim that in penance or papal absolution he experienced within himself a great renewal the moment he made his confession'.¹²⁵

This claim has received recent support from George Huntston Williams, who suggests that the radicals were 'putting contritional believers' baptism

¹²⁰ Stephens, *Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, p. 214. For more on Zwingli's understanding of baptism, see Timothy George, 'The Presuppositions of Zwingli's Baptismal Theology', in E.J. Furcha and H. Wayne Pipkin (eds.), *Prophet, Pastor, Protestant. The Work of Huldrych Zwingli After Five Hundred Years* (Allison Park, 1984), pp. 71–87.

¹²¹ Zwingli, *Von der Taufe*: quoted in Harder, p. 354.

¹²² *Ibid.*: quoted in Harder, p. 371.

¹²³ *Ibid.*: quoted in Harder, p. 371.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*: quoted in Harder, p. 354.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted in Harder, p. 355.

into that experiential void in adult life left by the neglect or programmatic rejection of sacramental penance'.¹²⁶ However, although Zwingli was in part correct in his assumption, his argument, perhaps unsurprisingly, fails to appreciate the importance of the act of baptism, and the personal sense of spiritual wellbeing, to the individual believers. This may well have been particularly true in the case of the first believers' baptisms, in light of the fear and apprehension we can imagine the Zürich group to have felt at this time.

A possible explanation for this sense of spiritual reassurance may be found in applying some aspects of the anthropological study of ritual to the practice of believers' baptism. In his classic work on rites of passage, Arnold van Gennep suggested that the rituals accompanying moments of transition in a particular culture could be broken down into three elements: those of separation, transition, and incorporation.¹²⁷ 'So great is the incompatibility', he wrote, 'between the profane and the sacred worlds that a man cannot pass from one to the other world without going through an intermediate stage.'¹²⁸

Edward Muir has described how the medieval form of baptism, practised throughout Christian Europe until the Reformation and still in use in Zürich at the time of the believers' baptisms, can be described in terms of van Gennep's ritual theory. The rite of separation took place at the door of the church, 'the threshold that separated the realm of the devil from the blessings of God', where the priest conducted an exorcism on the child. In the rite of transition, the child was taken by the priest into the church and the main liturgical parts of the ceremony, an elaborate affair involving oil, salt, and spit, were undertaken: the child, no longer physically a part of his or her family was likewise not yet a part of the wider Christian family. This only occurred in the rite of incorporation, when the priest handed the child to the godparents, once more 'incorporating the child into the Christian community'.¹²⁹ The simple ceremony performed by Conrad Grebel in many respects bore little similarity to that outlined above. However, it is nevertheless possible to see it as equally rich in ritualistic significance.

All Christian baptismal ceremonies are fundamentally based on a rite of transition: the Pauline theology that those undergoing baptism die with Christ, are raised from the dead with Christ, and therefore walk in the newness of life (Romans 6.3–4). In addition to this, the Zürich baptisms can be seen as undertaking a more complete notion of transition. Particularly in Grebel's statements about persecution, it is possible to see what

¹²⁶ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, p. 432.

¹²⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (London, 1960), p. 10.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²⁹ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 21.

Victor W. Turner termed 'the *passage* quality of the religious life', where 'transition has become a permanent condition'.¹³⁰

There is also a sense in which the baptisms can be seen as a rite of separation in preparation for this life: although, as discussed above, the baptisms were not the act of founding a separate church, they were surely undertaken with an expectation of a different future. George Huntston Williams has noted that 'rebaptism in the first days of the movement was almost equivalent to ordination or commission'; Williams also suggested that this added significance was another way in which early Anabaptist baptisms imitated the baptism of Christ.¹³¹ The baptism as a rite of separation may also fit with this theory: an expectation of a different future from those in the world who have not undertaken to follow Christ in the most literal sense.

However, it should be emphasized that the baptisms can equally be seen as an act of incorporation into a group with a common or shared ideology. As the *Hutterite Chronicle* makes clear, the group 'confirmed one another for the service of the Gospel'.¹³² Rollin Stely Armour made much the same point when criticizing what he saw as an over-emphasis on the subjectivity of believers' baptism, on the voluntarism of the act. Whilst this voluntarism is undeniably true, not least in the case of these first baptisms which came about only at Blaurock's request, it is important to recognize 'that there were objective elements in Anabaptist baptism as well as subjective elements.' Armour notes that 'the baptizand not only *gave* a testimony as he witnessed to his faith . . . but he *received* a testimony', the testimony that the community recognized his or her spiritual rebirth.¹³³ In this respect, the Zürich baptisms can be seen as a conscious recognition both of the differences between the individual members of the radical group and the outside world and of the similarities between the individuals and the group there gathered.

It is difficult to attain a clear understanding of the significance of the Zürich believers' baptisms without appreciating the immediate circumstances of the radical group. They were threatened with persecution but had vowed to remain true to divine law. By accepting believers' baptism it seems likely that each individual would have achieved some kind of spiritual reassurance, and that the group as a whole would also have been united together.

VII: Conclusion

This paper has considered three broad schools of interpretation that have been applied to the believers' baptisms that took place in Zürich on 21

¹³⁰ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London, 1969), p. 107.

¹³¹ George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (eds.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (London, 1957), p. 44, fn. 12.

¹³² Hutterian Brethren, p. 45.

¹³³ Rollin Stely Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism* (Scottsdale, 1966), pp. 139–140.

January 1525. Two have commonly been used by scholars: one is to look backwards from the baptisms, and to see their roots in the debate concerning infant baptism; the other is to look forward, and to see in the baptisms hints of the theological and institutional developments of the later believers' churches. A third approach has been suggested in this paper, and that is to consider the immediate background to the baptisms. It has been suggested that when seen in this light, the baptisms are best understood as a spontaneous act, a reaction to the threat of persecution, and a way of spiritually emboldening the besieged group led by Conrad Grebel.

Although the link is, perhaps surprisingly, not made in the sources, the story told in this approach sounds similar to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church at Pentecost (Acts 2.1–5): a small, embattled group finding spiritual relief in the face of adversity. Like the experience of the early church, the baptisms provided the Zürich group with the spiritual energy to undertake a dangerous programme of evangelization in their surrounding area. Interestingly, the coming of the Holy Spirit was also institutionalized by the early church, much as believers' baptism was by later Anabaptists. Geza Vermes describes how this ecstatic enthusiasm, 'a spontaneous happening on the first occasion', was promoted within the Christian movement, and eventually transformed 'into a formalized rite of initiation into Christianity'.¹³⁴ The similarity to the introduction and later spread of believers' baptism is instructive.

Clearly this is not the only story. Although it has been suggested that scholars could pay rather less attention to the intellectual background of opposition to infant baptism, the influence on the Zürich group of Carlstadt and Müntzer, among others, is undeniable. Similarly, the interpretations that suggest the baptisms were an attempt to reform the practice of baptism in light of scriptural requirements, and an anti-clerical stance to empower lay Christians, are both convincing explanations for why the Zürich group would want to institute the practice of believers' baptism. However, these interpretations do not add very much to our understanding of why the January 1525 baptisms occurred at that specific point in history. It has been suggested in this paper that a consideration of the immediate background to the baptisms provides a possible explanation to this question.

It is fair to question why, when this approach appears to provide such an explanation, it has not proved more popular with previous scholars.¹³⁵ The

¹³⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London, 2000), p. 140.

¹³⁵ It should be noted that, in denying the importance of the earlier movement against infant baptism, this approach is superficially similar to that put forward by Harold S. Bender in a number of works: see Bender, *Grebel*, p. 133; and Harold S. Bender, 'The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and the Anabaptists', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 27 (1953), pp. 3–16. However, Bender's primary concern was confessional, to demonstrate that the Swiss Brethren were independent of those radicals, i.e. Carlstadt and Müntzer, whose theologies did not fit with Bender's idea of 'The Anabaptist Vision'. This approach has been strongly criticized in Pater, *Karlstadt*, p. 107, and has not been influential in the writing of this paper.

answer may lie in the domination over the last fifty years of historical scholarship of what is broadly termed social history. This development has been extremely important for Reformation scholarship in general,¹³⁶ and for the study of Anabaptism in particular.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, it may be questioned whether historical scholarship has not lost something during this domination.

Fernand Braudel, in what became an extremely influential approach during the 1950s and 1960s, warned his readers to distrust what he termed *l'histoire événementielle*, the history of events, 'with its still burning passions', and instead to focus on the long-term developments of society and environment. He wrote: 'resounding events are often only momentary outbursts, surface manifestations of these larger movements and explicable only in terms of them'.¹³⁸ To suggest that this may not always prove a useful approach is not to deny the achievements of social history, but simply to suggest that a detailed reading of the event itself should not be overlooked. In part, this is a similar approach to that used by microhistorians: Edward Muir writes that microhistory is a response to Braudel's promotion of the *longue durée*, a return 'to interpreting utterances and beliefs, to describing brief dramatic events', and an attempt to overcome the type of history writing 'which has crushed all individuals to insignificance under the weight of vast impersonal structures and forces'.¹³⁹

What has gone before in this paper should be enough to suggest that an approach that emphasizes impersonal structures and forces is not necessarily successful when dealing with the Zürich believers' baptisms of 21 January 1525. The baptisms are in many respects not explicable in terms of the larger intellectual and social movements of the time, and understanding the burning passions of that January evening may be more useful for the historian than appreciating the developments leading up to it. It may be that scholars should join Zwingli in expressing surprise at the events of 21 January 1525, and recognize that there was less intellectual baggage behind the baptisms than has previously been assumed.

¹³⁶ See for example: Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy (eds.), *The Social History of the Reformation* (Columbus, 1972); Kyle C. Sessions and Phillip N. Bebb (eds.), *Pietas et Societas. New Trends in Reformation and Social History* (Kirksville, 1985); R.W. Scribner, *The German Reformation* (Basingstoke, 1986).

¹³⁷ See for example Clasen, *Anabaptism. A Social History*.

¹³⁸ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (London, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 20–21, the preface to the first French edn (1946).

¹³⁹ Edward Muir, 'Introduction: Observing Trifles', in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1991), pp. vii, xxi; see also Peter Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative', in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 233–248. On the use of this people-centred approach in a different historical field, see the call for 'people, not structures; choices, not determinism' in Eric Selbin, 'Revolution in the Real World: Bringing Agency Back In', in John Foran (ed.), *Theorizing Revolutions* (London and New York, 1997), p. 123.

Abstract

Anabaptism, the major movement of radical dissent in the early Reformation, was born in Zürich on 21 January 1525, when a small group of those who had become disillusioned with the course of reform in Zürich met and rebaptized each other. Historians have usually explained this event in one of two ways: one is to look backwards from the baptisms, and to see their roots in the early Reformation debate concerning the validity of infant baptism; the other is to look forward, and to see in the baptisms hints of the theological and institutional developments of the later Anabaptist movement. This essay suggests that neither approach offers a very satisfactory explanation as to why the baptisms took place, and that such an explanation should in fact be sought in the immediate background to the baptisms, namely the official procedure against the group by the Zürich Council. By applying some aspects of the anthropological study of ritual to the practice of believers' baptism, the essay attempts to show that the baptisms are best understood as a spontaneous act, a reaction to the threat of persecution, and a way of spiritually emboldening the besieged group of Zürich radicals.

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