Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists

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Harold S. Bender, dean of Mennonite Reformation scholars in the 1940's and 1950's, wrote in his 1952 essay, "The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists":

> The more recent conception[2] [concerning the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement] places the origin in Zürich (1525) in the bosom of the Zwinglian Reformation, where the first Anabaptists, zealous adherents of Zwingli, after Zwingli had rejected their demand that he set up a church as a Brotherhood of earnest Christians, went about the task of establishing the church as a completely peaceful, holy church, built on the New Testament and in no wise fanatical or revolutionary and not at all connected with Zwickau or Thomas Müntzer.[3]

The attempt by Mennonite scholars to keep Thomas Müntzer far removed from any involvement in the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement certainly has some merit, especially in light of Heinrich Bullinger's misguided 1560 attempt to bring all the Zürich radicals under the direct influence of the "Satan of Allstedt."[4] Nevertheless, this attitude is also — at least in part — motivated by a Mennonite acceptance of the Lutheran interpretation of Müntzer and the negative connotations ascribed by Luther and the other Magisterial reformers to the term *Schwärmer* — enthusiasts, fanatics. The Enlightenment — with the exception of the *Schwärmer* Jean-Jacques Rousseau — cast further aspersion on the term. Philosophes and Rationalists as such never became enthusiastic about anything — except, perhaps, a little *amour*. And twentieth century scholars, heirs to this "magnificent tradition," have an obligation to keep their heads on straight and never go off the "deep end" — unless it be from Marxist ideology! Ronald Knox some years ago devoted a stately volume to the study of *Enthusiasm*. There he set out to condemn, but ended somewhat muted in his judgments.[5] Perhaps the negative connotations of these terms, combined with the Lutheran interpretation of Müntzer and the Mennonite concern to be "the quiet in the land" — that is, to eschew even the faintest hint of revolution — has kept Mennonite scholars from embracing Müntzer too ardently, if at all.

I reject such fears. My working assumption has long been that the truth alone shall make one free. In our case, it is the truth about Thomas Müntzer that shall make us free — especially those of us who consciously stand in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. Associated with the truth about Thomas Müntzer is also a small matter of justice. The great Renaissance and Reformation scholar, Garrett Mattingly, once said: "It does not matter at all to the dead whether they receive justice at the hands of succeeding generations. But to the living, to do justice, however belatedly, should matter." To affirm such an ideal is a noble act; to implement it, however, immeasurably more difficult. Nonetheless, as Marxists have taught us, we hope to combine theory with practice in this paper, an objective Thomas Müntzer would not only have understood, but thoroughly affirmed. This has also been the goal of a larger study on Müntzer that I am preparing. And the results for Müntzer's relationship to the Anabaptists have been dramatic. Walter Klaassen, for example, after reading the first seven chapters of my manuscript, wrote:

> . . . So far as I can judge the thesis has been adequately supported. It needed to be because it is a new and hitherto unknown view of Müntzer.
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> First of all, it draws attention to a new picture of Müntzer, sharpening the outline of the man and his convictions in a way no other recent study has managed to do. But the implications of this new portrait are of startling relevance to the study of the whole Radical Reformation. Much more than ever before and far more precisely, one can now see Müntzer as a seminal figure, especially for Anabaptists. I suspect that Anabaptists got from him their use of the Parable of the Tares, his interpretation of the fall of the church, the common idea that only the bearing of the cross gives true knowledge of Christ, and that faith is not faith unless it is expressed in action. A pretty formidable list. This work therefore has implications for Reformation studies far beyond Müntzer himself.[6]

While any scholar must appreciate such an affirmation of his work, my concern in this essay is less global and more specific than Professor Klaassen's enunciated above.[7] For I wish to deal with more concrete issues, such as: Müntzer's relationship to the Zwickau Prophets; his understanding of the nature of the Church and its development, in contrast to that of the Swiss Anabaptists; and the import of the famous letter from Conrad Grebel and his friends to Müntzer of September 1524. Before we do that, however, I must apprise the reader of a fundamental premise of this study. That premise is that I consider both the Swiss Anabaptist movement and Müntzer's intellectual development to have arisen independently of one another. In this respect Harold Bender's observation, with which we opened this paper, has been more than amply confirmed. On the other hand, my own work on Thomas Müntzer has led me to a similar conclusion with respect to his development. At critical points, however, during the early years of the Reformation, the two movements came into contact with one another. It is these points of

contact that are important for determining influence in one direction or the other. Yet, while the two may have developed independently of one another, they had one very important concern in common: their rejection of the chasm that existed — and had become ever more apparent — between Christian precept and practice in the late Medieval and Renaissance church. While Thomas Müntzer's rejection of this dichotomy drew its strength from Tauler's theology of regeneration, the Swiss Anabaptists drew theirs from the early reform movement inaugurated by Ulrich Zwingli in Zürich — perhaps from the humanistic influence upon Zwingli.[8]

The place to begin any discussion of the relationship between Müntzer and the Anabaptists, it seems to me, is with Müntzer's relationship to the Zwickau Prophets. For it has long been assumed by scholars that after Luther, these "Prophets" exerted the most powerful intellectual influence upon him.[9] And the unspoken assumption behind the above assumption has been that Müntzer was not able to develop his own theological and reform program. I hold this position to be utterly untenable, being convinced that from May 1519, and centering around the Leipzig Disputation of July 1519, to Easter of 1520, Müntzer worked out his own theological response to the ecclesiastical problems of the sixteenth century.[10] If this is correct, then Müntzer encountered the Zwickau Prophets in early 1521 as one with his own reform program already in hand. He had read Tauler in Orlamünde in May of 1519, had heard the debate over the "deformation" of the Church between Luther and John Eck in July, and had subsequently turned to the reading of Church histories — especially Eusebius — as well as the writings of Augustine and John Hus, all of whom he encountered in a new way at Leipzig. With Tauler's emphasis on a "successful" conversion through the Holy Spirit at the center of his position, Müntzer had drawn his view of a "pure apostolic church" from Eusebius, had divined the reason for its fall from the Hegesippus passages in Eusebius, and had come to see its "rebirth" in the end time — the "time of harvest" — with the help of Augustine's interpretation of the Parable of the Tares. It was a picture in many ways confirmed by his reading of Hus at the Council of Constance. But if Müntzer's program was complete before he came to Zwickau, as we have argued in the first of these lectures, and if it did not change in any substantive fashion thereafter,[11] what kind of influence could the Zwickau Prophets have had upon him? Another explanation, therefore, must be sought for the very apparent attraction Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets initially had for one another.

I cannot here go into the details of the argument I have made in the manuscript; I do, however, wish to present at least the outlines of that argument. It is an argument that has to do with Tauler's already perceived differences between "true" contemplatives, like himself, and false

ones — in this case the adherents of the heresy of the Free Spirit. Thus Tauler wrote in one of his sermons:

> And now we have to consider the fourth kind of illusion which affects certain men calling themselves contemplatives, who resemble but yet differ from the class we have just been treating. The fourth class consider themselves as mere passive instruments of God, set totally free from all activity of their own. God works within them; and they have thereby, so they claim, more merit than others who do good works and whose personal activity is ever inspired by Divine grace. They call their state a divine passivity. Although they do nothing, they yet merit reward, so they affirm, and are by no means to be blamed for their inactivity. They live a life of perfect interior rest in God, as they think; and, cultivating a very humble demeanor, they pay no regard to anything whatsoever, and are quite patient with whatever befalls them — as bright souls which are mere instruments of the Divine will. *They have many points of resemblance with men of sound spirituality.* But here is what proves that they are wrong: Whatever they feel themselves interiorly moved to do, whether it be good or bad, they are persuaded is the work of the Holy Ghost. But the Holy Ghost never inspires men to be idle and useless, least of all, to do evil things, nor to do anything against the life and doctrine of Christ and His holy Scriptures. But it is not easy to detect them, for they are cunning in concealing their vagaries . . . .[12]

Now Müntzer in his basic theological position was Taulerian; the Zwickau Prophets in theirs belonged to the heresy of the Free Spirit. And the latter did indeed have many "points of resemblance with men of sound spirituality." As Gordon Leff, the British scholar of Medieval heresy, has observed: "In essentials it [the heresy of the Free Spirit] sprang from the pantheism latent in Neoplatonism; and to this extent it shared, albeit in a distorted and extreme form, the same sources as that which helped to inspire Meister Eckhart."[13]

In a papal bull of 1311, Clement V singled out eight propositions held by the adherents of the Free Spirit as heretical:

> 1) That a man in this life can attain to such perfection that he is incapable of sinning or surpassing his present degree of grace, since to do so would make him more perfect than Christ.
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> 2) That he no longer needs to fast for he has gained such control over the senses that he can allow them complete freedom.
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> 3) That he is free from all obedience to the Church.
>
> 4) That the free in spirit can obtain full blessedness in this life.
>
> 5) That every man so blessed does not need the divine light of glory to love God.
>
> 6) That the need for virtuous actions belongs to the imperfect man only.
>
> 7) That sexual intercourse is not a sin when desired.
>
> 8) That there is no obligation to rise before Christ's body in the elevation of the host, or to show him any other signs of respect, since this would entail descending from their heights of contemplation, and so mean imperfection.[14]

While both Tauler and the heresy of the Free Spirit made union with God the center of their concern, Tauler clearly pinpointed the difference between them when he remarked that "Whatever they feel themselves interiorly moved to do, whether it be good or bad, they are persuaded is the work of the Holy Ghost. But the Holy Ghost never inspires men to do anything against the life and doctrine of Christ and his holy Scriptures." The adherents of the Free Spirit, however, argued that once one had been purified by the presence of the Holy Spirit, all things were lawful — to the pure all things were pure. This applied in particular to their sexual activities, for ritual sex seems to have been at least widely reported to have accompanied them nearly everywhere.[15]

Into this basic framework the adherents of the Free Spirit added other aspects from differing traditions. In Belgium where they came to be known as Picards they adopted a Joachist eschatology.[16] This was characterized by the tendency to divide the ages of man into those of God the Father (law), God the Son (grace), and the coming age of the Holy Spirit (perfection). By 1418 members of this heresy known as Picards had come to Bohemia. Here they appear to have encountered Waldensians from whom they absorbed the rejection of infant baptism.[17] The Picard heresies spread to Zwickau around 1462.[18] Perhaps influenced in his youth by these ideas, Nicholas Storch, head of the Zwickau Prophets, travelled to Bohemia where it is generally assumed by scholars that he became acquainted with and joined a Picard sect known as the Nicolaitans. (Whether or not it is a coincidence, there are Nicolaitans mentioned in the Bible, and that twice — in the Revelation of John — without indicating what their "sin" was. Church Fathers, however, were nearly unanimous in their assertion that their sin was sexual in nature and constituted gross immorality.)[19]

What we seem to have then in the encounter between Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets — and Nicholas Storch in particular — is the encounter, in the first place, between Tauler's Mysticism, with its central emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, and the heresy of the Free Spirit. In their claim to possess the Holy Spirit both were alike. But they were not alike in the conclusions they drew from this: the heresy of the Free Spirit leading to libertinism, Tauler's — and Müntzer's — position aiming at a "holy invincible Christian faith" which would lead to the fulfillment of the "doctrine of Christ and his holy Scriptures." Once Müntzer became aware of this — and it seems that he did sometime between his trip to Prague in November of 1521 and his letter of 22 March 1522 to Melanchthon[20] — it could easily, indeed seems to have led to a rupture between them. Secondly, the way they saw the future was different. The Zwickau Prophets, inheriting the Joachist concept of the "Age of the Spirit" from the Picards, saw it differently from Müntzer who, combining Eusebius and Augustine, came to see it in terms of the

rebirth of the Apostolic Church in the "time of harvest."[21] Thirdly, the Picards rejected the real presence in the Eucharist, indeed, showed no respect for the host at all, while Müntzer was the first to translate the Mass into German — ahead even of Luther — making his *Deutsches Kirchenamt* of Easter 1523 the centerpiece of his church services in Allstedt. Fourthly, it is quite apparent that Nicholas Storch rejected infant baptism; Müntzer, on the other hand, never did.[22] He continued to baptize infants in Allstedt long after his encounter with the Prophets. And while he spoke of the early Church as having admitted only instructed adults — catechumens — in his *Protestation,*[23] he does not appear to have changed his ways. Instead, he spoke of siring only "elect children" within the "new apostolic church."[24] Not so Nicholas Storch. Of the latter, Johann Schneesing, Lutheran pastor at Freimar, said: he "was an unchaste person who, . . . when he saw a fine matron or a beautiful young lady, would gladly have had his way with her like a lascivious young buck. With gleaming eyes he would say quite openly: Women were created for everyone's flesh and blood [enjoyment] and should be held in common."[25] However, even Luther knew of Müntzer's puritanical approach to sex, for he said on one occasion: "he taught, concerning marriage that a man may sleep with his wife only when he was assured, through a divine revelation, that a holy child would result from this union."[26] The contrast — at least in this one respect — is so glaring between Müntzer and Storch that the two positions are utterly irreconcilable. Müntzer's position derives from Tauler's puritanism and his own desire to establish a "new apostolic church," while that of Storch derives from the libertinism of the heresy of the Free Spirit.

If the above is correct, why was Müntzer so obviously and so undeniably drawn to these conventiclers as a contemporary history of Thomas Müntzer asserts?[27] The first reason lies in Müntzer's remark, recorded in the above account, that Storch knew his Bible inside and out and could explain one part with passages drawn from another. Now Müntzer had himself read in the *Historia*[28] how, when the Master of Sacred Scripture had received the Holy Spirit, he had come to "possess the holy Scripture in thyself, so wilt thou understand that all Scripture has the same meaning and is never self-contradictory."[29] He had read in Tauler's sermons that "All truth that is ever known or spoken comes from the Holy Ghost."[30] Wisdom drawn from the abyss of the soul was immeasurably more profound than that arrived at by scribes and Pharisees who relied only upon their reason but did not possess the Holy Spirit. He had also read there that even though a person might be unlettered he should not be overly concerned, "but rather be absorbed above all things in striving after the spirit of God, and with pure hearts pray for His holy operation in their souls."[31] For in the high school of the Holy Spirit, Tauler asserted, "the most secret meaning of holy Scriptures

was imparted to them [the disciples], and the truth of God was revealed nakedly to them, and that in a way wholly incomprehensible to all the doctors in the schools."[32] Müntzer must have believed he had precisely such a man standing before him in the person of Nicholas Storch: a man unlearned in the knowledge and wisdom of the *hohe Schule* and yet apparently imbued with the wisdom of God "revealed nakedly" to him.

Whether this observation led to Müntzer's second assertion — that Storch was highly experienced in the Holy Spirit — or whether the latter imparted this information to him directly, is not of major importance. What is of consequence is that Müntzer is reported as having made this assertion about Storch from the pulpit. *Müntzer* is the one who discerns the presence of the Holy Spirit in Storch and proclaims it to his congregation. *He* appears to be the actor rather than the one acted upon. For his third assertion was that he, Thomas Müntzer, "knew for a fact that he possessed the Holy Spirit."[33] This does not sound like a man suddenly learning something new, but more like a man finding in others what he believed to have experienced himself. He had encountered the Holy Sprit in Orlamünde while studying Tauler under the guidance of Master Conrad's cook. Now in Zwickau he found others, and others who had not been educated as he had been.

It was not only their mutual experience of the Holy Spirit that drew Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets together, however. Storch and his followers must have been visible evidence for Müntzer that the Holy Spirit was returning to his church. He had already come to see Luther — after the Leipzig Disputation, Hus *and* Luther — as the restorers of the pure seed, the Word of God, to the Church. He was undoubtedly aware of at least some of Luther's repeated assertions that they were living in the end times; he had himself come to the same conclusion. This must therefore be the time of harvest in which the wheat and the tares would be separated, as Augustine had predicted. He had received the Holy Spirit and now in Zwickau he met others who claimed as much for themselves. As a consequence, all things seemed to be coming into place for the reestablishment of the Apostolic Church.

Confirmation of the above comes from another portion of the same contemporary *History of Thomas Müntzer*. There the author of that piece reported that as a consequence of the growth of the conventiclers, "a rumor had arisen concerning the *Secta Storchiatarum*: for they had increased to such an extent that it was openly reported that they had discussed and actually chosen twelve apostles and seventy two other disciples."[34] At the same time, they began to implement a community of goods in their midst and some of the members began to experience visions and assert that God spoke to them in dreams.[35] Müntzer's attempt to resurrect the twelve apostles already in Zwickau may have rested on his belief that this was the second harvest.[36] Therefore he, like

Christ in the first harvest, would send out his own apostles and disciples. They would go into the various regions with his message of the return of the Holy Spirit and form bands committed to this vision as had taken place in the early Church.

As we have said earlier, however, this relationship was broken sometime between November 1521 and March of 1522. Perhaps it was the trip to Bohemia on which Marcus Stübner — one of the prophets — accompanied Müntzer that the estrangement took place. Müntzer refers to this estrangement only once, and that in a very cryptic fashion in his letter to Luther of 9 July 1523. There, anticipating a rejection of his conciliatory letter because of his association with the Prophets, Müntzer wrote: "What they [the Prophets] are they themselves will see, Galatians 2. I tremble in divine judgments. What they may have told you or communicated to you, I ignore."[37] What can this mean? The reference to Galatians 2 has been taken by Günther Franz and others as referring to verse 6.[38] There St. Paul wrote: "As far as those who seemed important — whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearances — these men added nothing to my message." In other words, scholars have taken the reference to mean that Müntzer asserted the Zwickau Prophets had not influenced him. In this connection, the only difference between myself and the other scholars is that I believe this to be the case, the others do not. The passage itself, however, may have other — and more important — implications.

In the first place, the parallels between Paul's going to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus, and Müntzer's going to Prague with Stübner are interesting. Paul says he went in response to a revelation; did Müntzer do the same, or at least think so? And does Müntzer's reference: "What they are they themselves will see, Galatians 2," really refer to verse 4? He does not here speak of what they have contributed to his teaching — that was not really the issue at this point. The issue, as he saw it, was "what they are." Apparently they did not yet wish to recognize what they really were; but, Müntzer argued, they themselves would soon see what they were. What then were they? Perhaps verse 4 gives us the answer. There Paul says: "This matter [i.e. circumcision of the Gentiles] arose, because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and make us slaves." Did Müntzer intend to imply to Luther that the Zwickau Prophets were "false brothers"? Had he come to see them as such, as Tauler had come to see the heresy of the Free Spirit? He followed up the reference to Galatians 2 with the statement: "I tremble in divine judgments." Such a statement surely is too strong to apply to verse 6 where St. Paul says: "these men added nothing to my message." If we recall how seriously Müntzer took the matter of separating the human from the divine Word, the tares from the wheat, then perhaps the above interpretation makes the most sense. Certainly if he

had come to see the Prophets as "false brothers" — after having praised Nicholas Storch from the pulpit as *also* possessing the Holy Spirit — then he would have been fully justified in saying that he "trembled in divine judgments." Then even he, who claimed to possess the Holy Spirit, had had difficulty separating the tares from the wheat. This was indeed a dangerous business he had embarked upon.

If a new view of Müntzer's intellectual development changes the way in which we must see his relationship to Luther and the Zwickau Prophets, what about Müntzer's relationship to Hans Hut and the whole Austrian-South German Anabaptist movement? Furthermore, if an understanding of Müntzer's thought can only be fully achieved if we know the sources of his ideas, what kind of an understanding could contemporaries have had of that thought if Müntzer continually told them, as he told Hans Zeiss in a famous letter of December 1523, that his teaching had been taken "from the very mouth of God?"[39] Did Hans Hut really understand him? Would a reading of a few of Müntzer's tracts really provide him with much of an understanding in any case? While I cannot go into the matter here, I would nevertheless like to suggest that the relationship between Müntzer and Hans Hut will have to be reassessed. On the other hand, however, as Walter Klaassen has observed, the Müntzer that has emerged from my study takes on a "startling relevance" to the rest of the Radical Reformation. To trace this relevance in detail at this point is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I must content myself with a different approach and that approach is a comparative one.

The comparison I wish to draw is between Müntzer's view of the church and that of the Swiss Anabaptists; for while there are striking similarities, there are also notable differences. In the first of these lectures I tried to make the case for the independence of Müntzer's intellectual development. This is the reason, in large part, for his unique view of the Church, its history and ultimate renewal. There we argued that the two poles of his thought with respect to the Church were his concern for a conversion through the power of the Holy Spirit and his explanation of the fall of the Church through Augustine's interpretation of the Parable of the Tares. The two are related, for if the individual had been converted by the Spirit but did not withdraw from the world thereafter, the Spirit would depart from him. Similarly, as the world entered the Church in the form of tares, the Holy Spirit was forced out. And so it is no wonder that Müntzer could declare in the opening sentence of his *Deutsch-Evangelische Messe* that our redeemer, Jesus Christ, has "proclaimed all the evils in Christendom in Matthew 13 well before they happened, when he said" 'While the people slept (. . .),' the enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat."[40] Here the Parable of the Tares is proclaimed in splendid isolation as exemplifying the central problem within the church.

All the evils Müntzer charges are derived from the fact that the enemy has sown tares among the wheat while the people slept. Such a judgment can only signify that Müntzer had rejected the Constantinian/Augustinian view of the Church. However, he saw its downfall as having come considerably before Constantine, and indeed neither Constantine nor the notorious Donation is mentioned even once by Müntzer, while the Swiss Anabaptists focused on the Constantinian period as the critical turning point in the history of the early Church.[41]

While Christ has "proclaimed all the evils in Christendom in Matthew 13 well before they happened," He had nevertheless, Müntzer continued, initiated a true Christianity. In other words, the Apostolic Church begun by Christ had been a church of pure wheat. It had become polluted, however, "because of the negligence of the indolent elect," who had not heeded St. Paul's warning in the 20th chapter of Acts to "Take heed . . . for the flock" against the "grievous wolves" who were waiting to "enter in among you." It was in this context that the Hegesippus passages in Eusebius' *Church History* took on significance for him, arguing that he has said "that the holy bride of Christ remained a virgin only until after the death of the disciples of the apostles and soon thereafter became an unchaste adulteress."[42]

From this point of view Müntzer could argue that the Apostolic Church was normative for all time.[43] Adding to this Augustine's assertion that the tares would be removed from the wheat in the Church only in the "time of harvest," Müntzer came to believe that the Holy Spirit — in all His fullness — would return at that point and establish a "new apostolic church." He proclaimed such a church in his *Prague Manifesto*, in his March 22, 1522, letter to Melanchthon, and in late 1524 wrote: "The present church is an old prostitute . . . which has yet to be inflamed with zeal once the tares have been thrown out of it. The time of harvest is at hand, Matthew 9. Dear brothers, the tares everywhere cry out that the harvest is not yet. Ah, the traitors betray themselves. The true Christianity of the present will overcome all evil and find the right path, Matthew 18, for reform will follow the evil once the damage has been undone and the unbelief removed. [Then] the words of Matthew 18:11-12 will be fulfilled even more fully than at the time of the apostles."[44]

While Müntzer recognized that the early Church had allowed only mature and instructed persons into the Church, thus keeping it pure, he does not appear to have associated this with adult or believer's baptism. He does speak of baptism especially in his *Protestation* where the remark concerning catechumens is located. There he observed:

> Ah, what shall I say, in none of the books of the Church Fathers, from their very inception, is there anything said or proven concerning what right baptism is. I beg all scholars of the letter to show me where it is written in the holy Scriptures that a single under-aged child was baptized either by Christ

> and his messengers, or that they attempted to show that our children are to be baptized in the manner now employed. Indeed, because you boast so highly about it, you will not find that Mary, the mother of God, or the disciples of Christ were baptized with water. If our salvation were tied to such a baptism, then we might as well stupidly accept a honied-sweet Christ and be baptized with wine rather than water.
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> The correct baptism has not been understood, therefore admission to the church has become a farce . . .[45]

That the Germans were caught up in so many gross errors, Müntzer continues a little further on, all derived from a misunderstood baptism.

While Müntzer speaks of the illegitimacy of infant baptism, he nowhere speaks of adult or believer's baptism. What he does say repeatedly is that baptism has not been understood correctly and he says this after he has argued that Mary, the mother of God, and the disciples had not even baptized with water. What Müntzer appears to be trying to get at without saying so is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the conversion in the abyss of the soul Tauler had described. But this could take place only in the elect — the children of the "free woman" — who had the potential to receive the Spirit. Thus once the church had been cleansed of the tares the only way that elect children could be produced who had the potential to experience the Holy Spirit would be by the couples in the church having intercourse only when prompted by the Holy Spirit.[46] This is a far cry from what the Swiss Anabaptists had in mind, especially with respect to baptism.

While Müntzer focused on the mixing of the tares with the wheat in the Church as the essential problem, the Swiss Anabaptists — also at first desiring a pure church like Müntzer — eventually focused on the problem of church and state relations. They absorbed their desire for a pure church from Zwingli himself who, in the First Zürich Disputation of January 1523 spoke of "another church which the popes do not wish to recognize; this is no other than all *right Christians,* collected in the name of the Holy Ghost and by the will of God . . ."[47] But when Zwingli, in the process of implementing his reform in Zürich, seemed to his more radical followers to be compromising this pure church away in his concessions to the political establishment, they objected. Somewhat later they apparently came to Zwingli to request that he set up such a church of *right Christians* as he had himself earlier described. Zwingli reported their request in the following words:

> It does not escape us that there will ever be those who will oppose the Gospel, even among those who boast in the name of Christ. We therefore can never hope that all minds will so unite as Christians should find it possible to live. For in the Acts of the Apostles those who believed seceded from the others, and then it happened that they who came to believe went over to those who were now a new church. So then must we do: they beg that we make a deliverance to this effect — they who wish to follow Christ

> should stand on our side. They promise also that our forces shall be far superior to the army of the unbelievers.[48]

What the Swiss Anabaptists wanted was obviously the church Zwingli had himself described in the First Zürich Disputation with the words: "This is no other than *all right Christians*, collected in the name of the Holy Ghost and by the will of God." Since that church had not come into being but seemed rather to be in the process of being compromised away, they were now willing to secede from the unbelievers to achieve it.

Zwingli, however, responded that "the example of the apostles was not applicable here, for those from whom they withdrew did not confess Christ, but now ours did."[49] Now they lived in a Christian society and even though there were those who lived unrighteously, even these "asserted and contended that they were Christians," and the church could endure them. Christ Himself had addressed such new beginnings as theirs, commanding that the "wheat and the tares be allowed to grow until the day of harvest." And he still "hoped boldly [that] more would return daily to a sound mind who now had it not." Even if this were not to happen, however, the pious "might ever live among the impious." In any case, secession was to be avoided because of the confusion it would cause. It would be enough to preach the pure Word "which all ought to know, unless they wished to be wanting to their own salvation."[50]

Zwingli's radical disciples, on the other hand, as their famous letter to Müntzer makes clear, wanted the new Christian insights arrived at by Zwingli and passed on to them to be used to transform and reshape the church and society. Therefore they wrote:

> In respecting persons and in manifold seduction there is grosser and more pernicious error now than ever has been since the beginning of the world. In the same error we too lingered as long as we heard and read only the evangelical preachers who are to blame for all this, in punishment for our sins. But after we took Scripture to hand too, and consulted it on many points, we have been instructed somewhat and have discovered the great and harmful error of the shepherd, of ours too, namely, that we do not beseech God earnestly with constant groaning to be brought out of this destruction of all godly life and out of human abominations, *to attain to the true faith and divine practices. The cause of all this is false forbearance, the hiding of the divine Word, and the mixing of it with the human. Aye, we say it harms all and frustrates all things divine.*[51]

The faith of the apostles had led to apostolic practices and apostolic ordinances and institutions, and if this meant a radical transformation of the *status quo*, then so be it.

Under these circumstances Zwingli's radical followers also began to consider the problem of baptism. Zwingli had himself earlier thought that faith ought to precede baptism, for not only did he concede to Balthasar Hubmaier that instruction ought normally to precede baptism,[52] but in

his first major attack on the Anabaptist position in 1525 he remarked: "We must now examine equally carefully the question of signs in order to expose a mistake which once deceived me as found in certain writers. For some have taught that signs are given for the confirmation of an existing faith in that which we have already learned and to which we are pledged . . ." However, now

> Against those who unthinkingly accept the idea that signs confirm faith we may oppose the fact of infant baptism, for baptism cannot confirm faith in infants because infants are not able to believe. For some time I myself was deceived by the error and thought it better not to baptize children until they came to years of discretion. But I was not so dogmatically of this opinion as to take the course of many today, who although they are far too young and inexperienced in the matter argue and rashly assert that infant baptism derives from the papacy or the devil or something equally nonsensical.[53]

Zwingli's radical disciples, however, struggling with the problem of how to constitute a church of "people who live rightly," as Zwingli had himself put it, and how to implement the biblical practices irrespective of human consequences, could not go back but were compelled to move forward and create a new paradigm of the Christian society that would allow the specific biblical insights derived from Zwingli to retain their integrity. It was no wonder that under these circumstances they wrote Müntzer and Karlstadt seeking confirmation of the legitimacy of their approach to the problem. Nor was it any wonder that, after having written Müntzer that "the Christian church is the congregation of the *few* who believe and live rightly," and having told him that "The Scripture describes baptism for us thus, that it signifies that, by faith and the blood of Christ, sins have been washed away from him who is baptized, changes his mind, and believes before and after that it signifies that a man is dead and ought to be dead to sin and walks in newness of life and spirit, and that he shall certainly be saved if, according to this meaning, by inner baptism he lives his faith,"[54] they moved to rebaptize one another at a Bible study meeting in the house of Felix Mantz's mother on January 21, 1525. This came after a series of last-ditch meetings between Zwingli and the members of the established church and town councils on the one hand, with representatives of the radicals on the other. The last meeting took place on January 17. A few days later the new church had been established.

The subsequent debates between the Swiss Brethren and the Reformed theologians confirm the belief that it was ultimately the model of the Christian society that was at issue. For the brethren, arguing for a responsible as opposed to what they believed to be an irresponsible Christianity, focused their attention not unlike Müntzer on the act of conversion. Their theology of conversion, however, was not mystical as was Müntzer's. The message of Christ and the apostles, they said, had

been a call to repentance and conversion. "Those who are thus converted," they argued in the second of a series of debates with Reformed theologians in Switzerland, "have been buried with Adam and baptized in Christ, raised to newness of life, and have a good conscience. And such people may be recognized by the manner in which they express their faith. We recognize as binding the commission and message of those who have changed their ways, have become better, who believe, have had their sins forgiven, and who witness to these things in their baptism. They have put on Christ, no longer living for themselves, but for Christ. Those who sign such a committment with their own hand are invited to become members of the church. In such a church one may legitimately exercise the ban . . . ."[55]

Conversion therefore led to a changed lifestyle and, consequently, to separation from the world. In this they were in agreement with Müntzer. "Is the church separated from the world," they continued, "and acts according to the precepts of Christ, she is a true church. Is she still in the world, we cannot recognize her as such . . . The Scriptures state that he who is at peace with the world cannot be acceptable before Christ. For in the primitive church only those were joined to and planted in the church who repented and changed their ways." Furthermore, they told the Reformed pastors, "While you boast that you are the church but still retain the temporal regiment mixed in it and even declare this regiment has placed you in office, we declare, in opposition and as revealed to us through the Word of God, that we are the true church according to the order of the time of the apostles, if we separate ourselves from all sin and unrighteousness."[56]

As Walter Klaassen has observed, the Swiss Brethren were emphatic in their total rejection of Constantinian Christendom. And they rejected it not because they desired external freedom of the church from the state, but because they desired internal freedom. "Anabaptists," he argues, "were sure they would never have external liberty, but they regarded internal liberty as being essential to the nature of the church and were therefore most emphatic on the total exclusion of government qua government from the church."[57] Not so Thomas Müntzer. He would have been happy to have had the Zwickau, Allstedt and Saxon authorities on his side. Indeed he told the Saxon princes they needed a new Daniel, and he was their man. In Mülhausen in late 1524 and again in early 1525 together with Heinrich Pfeiffer, he set up an "eternal council" that would impose his view of Christian rule upon society. Like Augustine, Müntzer was not averse to using force. The Swiss Brethren, on the other hand — who may early on have shared somewhat in that attitude — changed their minds, realizing that "true Christians" would always constitute a minority and would in the normal course of world affairs be persecuted. They therefore rejected Müntzer's use of force, as we shall see.

There are a number of other differences that we need to point to. In the first place, the ideas the Swiss Brethren drew upon were different from those Müntzer had been exposed to. Similarly, the political contexts within which they operated were different. Müntzer appears far more strongly influenced by the things he read than by the conditions that surrounded him. The Swiss Brethren, in contrast, established their church out of a dialogue between Zwingli's early biblical insights and the problems of church and state in Zürich. Aside from this, their views of the Scriptures differed: Müntzer, drawing on Tauler and Augustine — especially the anti-Manichean Augustine who defended the unity of Old and New Testaments — was constantly and from the beginning arguing for "a total interpretation of the whole Scriptures" and the necessity to interpret one part with passages drawn from another.[58] The Swiss Brethren, as John Howard Yoder has argued, saw the New Testament — with Christ at its center — as normative. Abraham was to be interpreted through Christ, not Christ through Abraham. And yet there are similarities between the two, especially in their emphasis upon conversion — though with very different theologies of conversion — and their desire for a pure church based on the apostolic model. But perhaps the most striking difference between the two is the context within which the "new apostolic church" is set. Müntzer's view is from its inception — under the influence of Augustine — set into an apocalyptic context. Not so that of the Swiss Brethren. There are few if any apocalyptic overtones to their ecclesiology. This may have been one reason for the greater permanence of the latter. Müntzer's church, by contrast, went up in the smoke of what he thought was the ultimate struggle to separate the wheat from the tares.

If the two perspectives have different sources, different contexts, and major dissimilarities as well as significant similarities, what happened when the two sides came into contact? And they did. I wish here to deal only with one such contact — Grebel's letter of September 1524 to Müntzer — but before I do that permit me to point to a few others. We have already drawn attention to Hans Hut, his connection with Müntzer, and the South German Anabaptist movement. There is also the case of Martin Cellarius[59] and Gerhard Westerburg — the latter the brother-in-law of Karlstadt — who were both strongly influenced by the Zwickau Prophets and both had significant contacts with the Swiss Brethren in late 1524 and early 1525. Since we have argued for a significant difference — even rupture — between Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets, the whole picture becomes more complex but also more intriguing. The role of the latter two have never been adequately investigated in this connection. However, a word of caution: by the time the contacts were made, the Swiss Brethren appear well on the way to the formulation of their own solution which grew essentially out of their early dependence on, but later disagreements with, Zwingli. The question then is: to what extent

could they have been influenced at this late stage of their development?

It appears to me, therefore, that one must take these conflicting intellectual or theological paradigms into consideration, and rather than speak in terms of "influences" as most scholars have, one ought rather to speak in terms of points at which these different perspectives, through various writings and personalities, came into contact, perhaps even conflict, with one another. Let us briefly glance at one such confrontation between Müntzer and the Swiss Brethren which presents us with two clearly demarcated paradigms as well as many points at which the two sides came into contact.

Grebel's letter to Müntzer of September 1524 presents us with evidence for the first contact. In it Grebel observes that he has read Müntzer's *Protestation* as well as some of his liturgical works. Reading this tract with Grebel's eyes must have proven interesting, for Müntzer begins by positing a radical enmity between the Holy Spirit and the world, with an appeal to apostolic Christianity as confirmation of how it had once been and how it should be. He then proceeded to depict how that Apostolic Church had become corrupt, how the right baptism had been forgotten and the correct entrance to Christianity perverted and Christianity betrayed by false teachers who were unable to differentiate between things sacred and profane. Baptizing uninstructed children, they further eroded these lines of demarcation so that it was not long until the Roman Church took over their ceremonies from the heathen. This perverted Christianity came to the Germans, who were not allowed to learn the truth. If, however, our eyes could be opened we would recognize our blindness, especially in matters of a fraudulent faith and a false concept of good works. Rejecting a faith arrived at merely by recalling the words of Christ, Müntzer preached a bitter Christ who required His followers to walk in His footsteps. Therefore Müntzer did not wish merely to patch up the old structure, but rather wished to build a new house. And he concluded by once again pointing to a fraudulent faith and a misunderstood baptism as the twin pillars upon which the deformed church had been built.[60]

From this tract Grebel and his friends could indeed think Müntzer on their side, for they could not have divined the larger and eschatological context within which he wrote. That they suspected something was amiss, at least from their perspective, is quite apparent from their criticisms. Müntzer, they said, should drop the Mass and return to the usage of the apostles; he should establish a "Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule," such as had been instituted in Matthew 18:15–18 and applied in the Epistles; and he should not attempt to protect the Gospel "by the sword." In the second letter they also hint that Müntzer might be rejecting water baptism altogether.[61]

What we have here, it seems to me, is an *Auseinandersetzung* on

the part of the Swiss Brethren with a Müntzer only very partially read and incompletely understood. Rather than showing influence, it demonstrates independence in both its affirmation and criticism, for both derive from *their perspective*, a perspective all but fully formulated by the time they encountered Müntzer.

The point — if any — that this brief excursion into Müntzer's relationship to the Swiss Anabaptists has attempted to make is that the more we get to know the radical players who strut across the stage of the early Reformation, the more they take on distinctive contours. Seminal thinkers like Thomas Müntzer and movements like that of the Swiss Anabaptists must be given their due. Tracing influences under these circumstances must be done with great care. *Nor can it be done by systematic studies!* It must be done historically — that is, the dynamics of history must be given their due. Simply logging similarities in ideas of the various groups proves only that in some ways they shared things in common. With their common Christian background it would have been amazing were this not the case. I submit, therefore, that if we wish to understand the Reformation fully — in our case the Radical Reformation in particular — it must be done dynamically, developmentally, indeed historically.

Notes

[1]This is the third in a series of lectures delivered in October 1985 at Regent College on the University of British Columbia campus. The first on "The Intellectual Development of Thomas Müntzer" is being published in the *Festschrift* for Professor Rainer Wohlfeil of the University of Hamburg. I have not changed the lecture style, preferring to leave it as it was presented.

[2]There are scholars around who would no longer call the above an "immaculate" conception!

[3]*The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXVII (1953), p. 3.

[4]Heinrich Bullinger, *Reformationsgeschichte* (Frauenfeld: J. J. Hottinger u. H. H. Voegeli, 1838–1840), Vol. I, p. 237.

[5]Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford U. Press, 1950).

[6]Letter to the author of August 20, 1985.

[7]I hope to deal with the broader implications of my study on Müntzer for his relationship to Anabaptism at some future date. Here I present only a very preliminary statement.

[8]See my "The Radical Reformation Revisited," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1984), Vol. 2, pp. 124–176.

[9]See especially Paul Wappler, *Thomas Müntzer in Zwickau und die 'Zwickauer Propheten'*, Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte (Gütersloh, 1966), 2nd. edition. Also Walter Elliger, *Thomas Müntzer* (Göttingen, 1975), pp. 74–77.

[10]I discussed this problem at some length in the first of these lectures.

[11]This is the conclusion I have reached in my manuscript. See also the observation by Leif Grane, "Thomas Müntzer und Martin Luther," in Abraham Friesen und Hans-Jürgen Goertz, hrsg., *Thomas Müntzer* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), p. 75.

[12]Walter Elliott, translator and editor, *The Sermons and Conferences of John Tauler* (Washington, D.C., 1910), p. 189.

[13]Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester & New York, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 292.

[14]Quoted in ibid., pp. 314–315.

[15]See Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1967), p. 356ff.

[16]Ibid., p. 327,

[17]Ibid., p. 353.

[18]Wappler, *Thomas Müntzer*, p. 18.

[19]See for example the following Fathers: Tertullian, "Against all Heresies," Vol. III, *The Anti Nicene Fathers*, edited by Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1978 reprint), p. 650, and "Irenaeus against Heresies," ibid., vol. I, p. 352.

[20]Günther Franz, hrsg., *Thomas Müntzer: Schriften und Briefe* (Gütersloh, 1968), pp. 379–382.

[21]See my forthcoming essay on Müntzer's intellectual development, mentioned above.

[22]Justus Maurer, in his book *Prediger im Bauernkrieg* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1979), observes that "Die Zürcher Wiedertäufer suchten Kontakt mit Müntzer, der damals eine Mittellinie einhielt. Er hatte vorgeschlagen, Kinder, wenn sie verständig geworden seien, in Gruppen zu taufen," p. 53. He cites as evidence Müntzer's letter to Allstedt of 15–9–1524. But that letter says absolutely nothing on the subject. Maurer completely misunderstands Müntzer's prime concern.

[23]Müntzer, *Schriften u. Briefe*, p. 227.

[24]See Müntzer's letter to Melanchthon, cited above.

[25]Wappler, *Thomas Müntzer*, pp. 80–81.

[26]WA, Tischreden, I, 598, Nr. 1204.

[27]Quoted in Elliger, *Müntzer*, p. 122.

[28]The *Historia* was the spurious autobiography of Tauler appended to all 16th century editions of Tauler's sermons, beginning with the first edition at Leipzig in 1498. It was discredited as an authentic autobiography of Tauler by Heinrich Denifle, however, in his "Taulers Bekehrung kritisch Untersucht," *Quellen u. Forschungen zur Sprach-und Culturgeschichte der Germanischen Völker* (Strassburg, 1879), XXXVI, 147pp.

[29]Tauler, Sermons, p. 31.

[30]Ibid., p. 342.

[31]Ibid., p. 353.

[32]Ibid., p. 356.

[33]Quoted in Elliger, *Müntzer*, p. 122.

[34]Wappler, Thomas Müntzer, p. 32.

[35]Ibid., p. 35.

[36]Augustine had spoken of two parallel harvests: the one during the time of Christ; the second at the end of the age.

[37]Müntzer, *Schriften u. Briefe*, p. 391.

[38]Ibid., n. 39.

[39]Ibid., p. 398.

[40]Ibid., p. 161.

[41]See especially Walter Klaassen, "The Anabaptist Critique of Constantinian Christendom," MQR (July 1981), Vol. LV, Nr. 3, pp. 218–230.

[42]Müntzer, *Schriften u. Briefe*, p. 161.

[43]See his March 22, 1522 letter to Melanchthon. Ibid., p. 380.

[44]Ibid., pp. 310–311.

[45]Ibid., p. 228.

[46]See letter to Melanchthon, ibid., p. 380.

[47]Ulrich Zwingli, *Selected Works*, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 85–86.

[48]Ibid., p. 132.

[49]Ibid., p. 133.

[50]Ibid., p. 134.

[51]*Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, translated and edited by George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 74–75.

[52]*Hulrych Zwinglis Saemtliche Werke*, hrsg. von Emil Egli (Leipzig: Heinsius Nachfolger, 1908), Vol. I, p. 260.

[53] *Zwingli and Bullinger,* translated and edited by G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 138–139.

[54] *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers,* p. 80.

[55] *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz,* Vol. VI, *Drei Täufergespräche in Bern und im Argau,* hrsg. von Martin Haas (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), pp. 97–98.

[56] Ibid., p. 95.

[57] Klaassen, "Anabaptists and Constantine," p. 222.

[58] See my forthcoming essay on the intellectual development of Thomas Müntzer.

[59] See my essay in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, editor, *Profiles of Radical Reformers,* Walter Klaassen, English Edition editor (Herald Press: Kitchener & Scottdale, PA, 1982), pp. 234–246.

[60] Müntzer, *Schriften u. Briefe,* pp. 225–240.

[61] Ibid., pp. 437–447.