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LUTHER'S RELATION TO THE ANABAPTISTS.

BY JOHN HORSCH, CLEVELAND, O.

It was at the Leipzig Disputation (July, 1519) that Luther's own convictions became a matter of greater moment to him than the verdict of the Pope and of the Church. In the famous reformatory books of the year 1520 he advocated the most radical anti-romish principles. There is abundant evidence that he upheld at that time the great principle that the Scriptures are the only authority in matters of faith and all teaching and practice that is without Bible authority should be abolished. He emphasized the spiritual priesthood of the believers and contended that no earthly power, either ecclesiastical or secular may rule over a Christian conscience. Pope Leo X. was right when he asserted that Luther was guilty of the heresy that "to burn heretics is against the will of the Spirit". But during his sojourn on the Wartburg, in 1522, Luther's programme of reforms underwent a radical change. He decided upon a uniform reformation of the church to be accomplished by the aid of the civil authorities. He resolved upon a union of the church with the state and, in consequence of this step found himself unable to uphold further the principle that the Scriptures are the only authority in matters of faith. He re-accepted the Romish view that whatsoever is not against the Bible may be accepted although it be without Scripture authority and it is upon this principle that he established his reformation.

When in the peasants' movement for civil and religious liberty which eventually developed into the Peasants' War, in 1525, Luther espoused the cause of the autocratic and tyrannical princes against the liberty loving peasants, and in the same year consented to the organization of an exclusive state church, refusing to give the people as much as the semblance of a voice in the matter and assuming an attitude of utter intolerance to other creeds, he ceased to be the man of the people. The masses, subsequent to the Peasants' War and after all

their hopes that they were to be granted a voice in matters of faith and the affairs of the church, had been shattered, accepted the new order of things with sullen resignation, realizing that the cause of liberty, both religious and civil, had been betrayed by the Wittenberg reformer. But to suppose that all his former adherents would suffer themselves to be brought back into the old yoke of spiritual bondage, was to reckon without the host. There were those who had the courage to stand by the old standard after the Wittenbergers had deserted it—who had religious convictions of their own and refused to accept either Luther or the Elector of Saxony or other rulers as authorities in matters of faith. There arose a powerful popular party that took up the primeval war cry of the Reformation—the Anabaptists.

While a number of Luther's friends unhesitatingly denounced the Anabaptists for their insistence upon liberty of conscience, Luther himself, although he favored stringent measures toward the suppression of "Anabaptism", does not seem to have had the heart to upbraid them for their teaching on the relation of the church to the state. It was their doctrine of the ordinances that furnished the target for his attacks. Luther believed in baptismal regeneration and infant baptism as well as in forgiveness of sins through the observation of the Lord's Supper. The Anabaptists renounced the doctrine that the sacraments are means of salvation or of cleansing from sin. Their teaching on the ordinances was in Luther's view unbearable heresy. Luther fully believed that the Roman Catholic Church, although in need of a reformation and advocating certain teachings which in his opinion were partly harmful and partly unnecessary, did not uphold so vital an error as the doctrine of the Anabaptists on the sacraments. He refused to acknowledge the Anabaptists as a Christian church, while, on the other hand, he urged that Antichrist, according to prophecy, was to "sit, not in the habitation of the devil, but in God's temple",* hence he contends as sure as the Pope is Antichrist, the Roman Catholic Church is the temple of God, dilapidated though it be.

*Erlangen, edition of Luther's Works, 26:258.

Luther wrote a book, *On Anabaptism, to Two Pastors*, in 1528.* He attempts to portray the Anabaptists as "the devil's sure messengers" who by denying that baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace, rob the people of salvation. He says: "If they would accept the right teaching concerning baptism and the sacrament, the Christians under the Pope could escape with their souls and be saved, as heretofore. But now that the people are deprived of the sacraments, they must of necessity be lost, because they are thereby deprived of Christ himself."† It is a noteworthy fact that Luther always recognized faith to be a prerequisite to baptism. Infant baptism he justified on the sophistical ground that infants may have faith, as well as adults. Yet, no one, he asserts, can know that he has saving faith. Not only is the minister left in the dark concerning the real condition of the candidate for baptism, but the latter himself cannot know whether or not he has saving faith;‡ therefore the Anabaptists' insistence on believers' baptism is unreasonable. Luther, in this book, describes the Roman Catholic Church as the temple of God, although in need of a reformation, and asserts that the Anabaptists by disowning the baptism and rejecting the fundamental teachings of the Church of Rome, assail the temple of God. Although he believed that they should not be tolerated in the land, he was at that time not in favor of inflicting capital punishment upon them.

In 1532 Luther wrote a book, *Against the Sneaks and Hedge Preachers*,§ which is directed against the dissenters, i. e., the Anabaptists. By this time he apparently had forgotten the days of yore when Lutheranism had not yet been "joined to the state" and the spreading of reformatory principles was largely dependent upon the self-denying efforts of what he now chose to designate as sneaks and hedge preachers. He urges the civil magistrates to be ever on the alert for wandering preachers who are not of the established church. If they will not labor in public or duly announce their appointments to preach, they are surely the devil's messengers. "Whoever tolerates and

*Erlangen, 26:255-294.

†Erlangen, 26:260.

‡Erlangen, 26:268.

§Erlangen, 31:213-227.

hears them, should know that he hears the devil himself as if speaking out of a possessed person." Since dissenters were apprehended by the Saxon authorities whenever they could be found, Luther's insistence that their appointments must be publicly announced appeared to them as heartless mockery. Says Melchior Hofmann in the same year in which this book was published: "Many cry out against the hedge preachers and desire to have them come to the light, not with good intention but to drink their blood."*

At the Diet of Speier, in 1529, a decree was passed by the Catholic majority of the Estates, in the name of the Emperor, that all who had been rebaptized should be killed without trial or sentence. "Every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex, above the age of childhood, shall be put to death by fire, the sword or otherwise, without previous trial." Luther, instead of raising his voice in protest against so murderous a decree, advised the Elector to accept it. "Concerning the other point," he wrote in April, 1579, "that His Electoral Grace should be obedient to His Imperial Majesty's command against the Anabaptists and Sacramentarians [i. e., the Zwinglians], it is right that H. E. G. should do this willingly, for of the forbidden creeds none is either found or tolerated in the land of H. E. G., neither are they to be tolerated."†

In 1541, in a document addressed to the Elector of Saxony, Luther expressed himself as favoring the execution of Anabaptists with the sword.‡ Those who fell into the hands of the Saxon authorities were put to death if they could not be persuaded to recant. In one case only, and under peculiar circumstances was an Anabaptist imprisoned for life in Saxony.

Melanchthon, Luther's most renowned co-worker, wrote a number of treatises against the Anabaptists. In the well-known Augsburg Confession he mentions and repudiates some of their principles. The ninth article of the confession contains this sentence: "They [the Lutherans] condemn [literally damn, the Latin word is *damnare*] the Anabaptists who reject

*Cornelius, *Münst Aufruhr*, 2:225.

†DeWette, *Luther's Briefe*, 3:441.

‡Corpus Reformatorum, ed. Brestchnei der. 4:740.

the baptism of infants and teach that infants are saved without baptism." When Melanchthon for the first time was brought face to face with the teaching that infants ought not to be baptized (in 1521, while Luther was on the Wartburg, he found himself at a loss to meet the objections against the baptism of unconscious infants. He knew his Bible well enough to be aware that this practice cannot be established on Scripture authority, and at that time he, as well as Luther, stood for the principle that the Bible is the only authority in matters of faith. Melanchthon was obviously embarrassed. It appeared to him, as he stated in a document addressed to the Elector, that by denying the validity of infant baptism, the enemy "would touch us on a weak spot."* But a few years later he apparently had forgotten this. Mild as he was in his attitude to the Roman Catholics, he was intolerant toward the Anabaptists. He believed their sect to be of the devil and their piety only hypocrisy and a devilish spectre.† Their martyrs, he said, were hardened by Satan.‡ Repeatedly he insisted that they should be put to death.§ To justify their persecution he states that the ancient Emperors Honorius and Theodosius had decreed that rebaptizers are guilty of death.|| He asserts that some of them hold teachings which will lead to violation of civil law, but, says he, even if they were not advocating any other error than what they teach on baptism, the original sin and separation from the (Lutheran) church, the death sentence should be inflicted upon them.¶ He believed it the duty of the civil authorities to put to death heretics.**

A number of times Melanchthon was called to confer with Anabaptist prisoners, and to convert them if possible to the creed of the state church. Early in December, 1535, he met an imprisoned Anabaptist minister, Henry Crouth, at Jena in Saxony. The confessions of this man,†† as written down partly by Melanchthon himself, are interesting. Concerning

*Corp. Ref., 1:534.

†C. R., 3:197.

‡C. R., 3:34.

||C. R., 3:199.

¶C. R., 3:200.

**C. R., 3:199.

§O. R., 2:889;—4:737-740;—3:14-17;—3:195-201.

¶¶C. R., 2:997-1003;—3:14-17.

the original sin Henry Crouth said: "All infants, whether they be of Christian, heathen or Turks, are saved. God is not such a God that he would damn a child on account of a little water." "But when one grows up and consents to do sin, it is then that the original sin receives strength. Infants are not without sin, but it will not be counted against them, for they do not understand what is good or evil." He denied emphatically that forgiveness of sins is to be obtained through the Lord's Supper and that the bread of the Supper is the Lord himself.

He was asked who had called him to preach. His reply was: "He was called of God through the knowledge of his Word and did not need the civil authorities to call him, but only the consent of his brethren and of those who received the Word." He declared his willingness to obey the government, except in matters pertaining to religion. On the question why he and others of his sect preached in secret places "and not publicly in the pulpit", he gave the following striking reply: "The divine Word is most severely persecuted and we are not permitted to preach; yet we must come together; this we do openly and not secretly. And while we are forbidden and hindered to preach the Word, we are not suffered to be doers of the Word."

Henry Crouth and his friends who were imprisoned with him, had the courage to reprove Melanchthon severely for favoring their persecution. Melanchthon's reply was that not he but the government was to deal with them, whereupon they said: "Yes, yes, you would wash your hands like Pilate." They were condemned to death on Melanchthon's advice. Crouth and two of his friends suffered martyrdom, January 27, 1536, at Jena. Melanchthon himself accompanied them to the place of execution. His judgments as to their alleged guilt as heretics are remarkable documents.

In one extraordinary case was an Anabaptist imprisoned for life in Saxony. The execution of Frederick Erbe was prevented by peculiar circumstances. In 1531 he was arrested as an Anabaptist by the Saxon authorities in a county which was under the common jurisdiction of Saxony and Hesse. Capital

punishment could therefore in this instance take place only with the consent of the Landgrave of Hesse. The Elector decided that Frederick Erbe should be kept in confinement until New Year, 1532, and if by that time he could not be prevailed upon to recant, he should be put to the sword. But when his time of grace had expired, the Landgrave persistently refused to stain his hands with the blood of one who had the courage of his Christian convictions. The Elector of Saxony made every attempt to convince him of the necessity of inflicting the death sentence, but the Landgrave stood unmovable. "Since this man," he wrote, "is indicted of the error of Anabaptism alone, we will not conceal from you that hitherto we have in such cases inflicted the death sentence upon no man for the sake of matters which concern the faith." Not even after Luther and Melancthon had expressed themselves in favor of execution did the Landgrave yield. Frederick Erbe, after he had been subjected to the torture, was consequently imprisoned for life. And the place of his prison was Wartburg Castle where, a number of years before, Luther had sojourned for some time. While Luther, however, had gone to the Wartburg for protection, Frederick Erbe was thrown into a miserable prison in a tower, for the reason that he would not approve of the teachings which Luther and the Saxon state church had meanwhile accepted. From 1531 until 1548 when death released him of his sufferings, Erbe was a prisoner on the Wartburg. The guardian of the castle gave him the testimony that he had led a good life and had always been obedient.* Among the many historical events for which the Wartburg is famous, the most notable from the Christian point of view is this, that a devoted believer in Christ, a martyr—for such he was although the Landgrave saved him from the scaffold—was a prisoner in a noisome dungeon of this castle for seventeen years, remaining loyal to his conscience and refusing to bow to any other authority in matters of faith, than the Word of God.

In many works on church history by Protestant authors the impression is conveyed that Luther was a staunch defender of religious liberty, that he was the central figure in a move-

*Schmidt, *Justus Menius, der Reformator Thüringens*, 1:161 sq.

ment for freedom of conscience and a thorough reformation of the church and that those toward whom he assumed an attitude of intolerance were revolutionary disturbers of the peace. The attempt to save upon all hazards the name of the leading state church reformers who for victory of their cause leaned so strongly upon the bloody arm of the state, has been a source of confusion in the study of the history of the Reformation. The importance of the leaders in the exclusive state churchly reformation who bent their energy upon the suppression of the popular movement for genuine reformation, imposing upon the head of the state the duty to decide questions of creed for all his subjects and refusing the people any voice whatever in the affairs of the church and thus forcing them into an attitude of indifference, and who therefore represent a temporizing, easy going type of Christianity—the importance of these men has been constantly emphasized at the expense of those who perceived the wrongs of exclusive state churchism and had the courage of their conviction. The failure of the historians to recognize the true import of “Anabaptism” and of the type of Christianity represented by it, has been a source of distinct loss to the Christian cause. Even in America the beaten path of the historians of the prominent religious parties of Europe has been closely followed. A history of the Reformation, going back to the sources, from the point of view of the great principles for which the Anabaptists stood and for which the Baptists stand to-day is yet to be written.