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From Where Did the Anabaptists come?

They came from “no where.” Right out of the Dark Ages, out of incredibly corrupt state churches, the Anabaptists (Ludwig Keller and E. H. Broadbent notwithstanding) stepped as a totally new and different movement.

Were they somehow connected to the first Christians?

No, they were not. The early Christians were Jewish, Greek, or Latin people in flowing robes. The Anabaptists were north Europeans in black hats and broadfall trousers.

The Anabaptists, although they respected the early Christians, made no attempt to “reproduce” them exactly. A thousand miles and a thousand years apart, they had little in common except the New Testament *and the secret of the great strength*.

Once this became clear to me I started seeing things in history:

Jewish Christians

After Pentecost, Jews from Parthia, Media, Elam, Babylon, Cappadocia, and other places joined the Jews of Judaea who believed in Christ. Jewish Christians, all of whom could trace their ancestry back to Abraham, were circumcised and wore beards. They ate Kosher foods and kept the Sabbath holy. But

they followed Christ, and Christianity soon broke out of the bounds of Judaism.

Greek Christians

After Paul's conversion and Peter's visit to Cornelius, hundreds and eventually thousands of Greeks from all over Alexander's former realm—Greek merchants and lawyers, Greek doctors, educated Greeks, Greeks given to profound thought, athletic Greeks, Greeks used to idolatry and total abandon to immorality, Greek masters and slaves—repented, believed, and got baptised. They followed Christ, and it wasn't long until Christianity was predominantly Greek, centred in Hellenistic Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor. Paul wrote his letters in Greek and the rest of the New Testament, if not originally conceived in that language, was soon known only in Greek texts.

Greek, the “world language” and “world culture” of the times, gave the Christians a place on the cutting edge of current events. But Christianity soon broke out of the bounds a Greek world.

Latin Christians

With the decline of Greek influence in the western part of the empire, Latin Rome came into its own. Jews from Rome witnessed the birth of Christianity in Jerusalem. Perhaps it was they, or other early missionaries who carried it to Latin Italy and northern Africa. Whatever the case, it wasn't long until thousands of clear-thinking Latins, Europeans at heart and, like the Greeks, uncircumcised, had joined the Jews and the Greeks in following Christ. From these Latin Christians, centred at Carthage and Rome, came such inspired thinkers as the bishop Clement of Rome, Mark Felix, and Tertullian. Latin Christians carried the Gospel throughout the far reaches of the Roman empire: to the Celts in Britain and Ireland, to Iberia (Spain and Portugal), to the Gauls in what later became France, and to

Celtic tribes living in the Alps and down the Danube valley. But Christianity soon broke out of the bounds of the Roman Empire.

German Christians

As early as 1800 B.C. (about the time Jacob fled to Padan-Aram) small bands of families had found their way from Mesopotamia and the Indus valley north through Persia and the Ukraine, through central Europe to the shores of the North Sea. There they called themselves *Teutsch* (German).

The Germans lived a wild life, planting few crops and hunting to make up the slack. The “Indians of Europe,” they thrived in cold forests and wetlands along the sea. They grew rapidly in number, pushing ever southward until they inhabited the Black Forest and the mountains of Swabia. They pushed north (the Vikings) to occupy Scandinavia, west into England, east into Russia, and eventually south into Italy and Asia Minor.

These German raiders had no taste for Latin or Greek culture. They smashed temples, slaughtered ruthlessly, and took children along with their spoil. Through this practice they unwittingly brought home something that changed their ways forever.

On a raid to the south, around the time of Constantine the Great, German tribesmen kidnapped a Cappadocian boy named Ulfilas. He believed in Christ.

Unlike most captives before him, Ulfilas did not lose himself in barbarian ways. Carried north through the Balkan mountains, he crossed the Danube river with his captors and found himself outside the Roman Empire—out in the wilds with a wild people, but he did not lose heart. He learned German and began to tell his captors about Christ. Long blond hair falling around their fur-clad shoulders, rough men with beards and hefty women sitting around campfires listened to him, fascinated. Their hearts responded to the story of Christ. One by one they believed, repented of their sins, and began to follow Christ themselves.

Ulfilas baptised them in water. Before long, a nucleus of Christians developed among the wild people north of the Danube. Ulfilas, using the Greek and Latin he knew, invented for them a German alphabet. He taught them how to read and translated first the Gospels, then the letters of Paul, and finally most of the Old Testament into German.

In 341 A.D. Ulfilas travelled south to his homeland in “civilised” Asia. In Nicomedia, the city where an old bishop, Eusebius, lived, he told of the Germans who had turned to following Christ. Eusebius ordained Ulfilas to be an apostle to the Germans.

The Germans Become Catholic

Ulfilas’s Christian movement did not survive. Already during his lifetime the Latin and Greek Christians of the south had become powerful. What they believed became almost like a national religion under Constantine the Great. Constantine tried to unite all Christians under one great church organization that would cooperate with the Roman government. He called councils to draw up rules and define catholic (universally accepted as genuine) doctrine. In the process of these councils Ulfilas and the German Christians became classed officially as heretics.

Ulfilas taught that Christ was the Son of God, but not exactly like God the Father in every respect. He taught that the Holy Spirit was subordinate to God. In short, Ulfilas preached a Christianity as he knew it before the councils of Constantine. But now it was no longer considered “catholic.”

The new “catholic” Christianity first reached the Germans by way of a man called Remigius. Remigius was a Latin youth who loved to study and spoke well. At the age of twenty-two he became bishop of the catholic congregation at Reims in what is now France.

During Remigius's time many Germans followed a ruthless chief called Clovis who had a Christian wife. Clovis came to know Remigius and his little church at Reims but he did not care for Christianity. He ignored Remigius's frequent attempts to "convert" him until two things happened to change his mind: His son got sick and was healed, and he won a great victory over his rivals at Zülpich, after praying (as a last resort) to the Christians' God. Then Clovis wanted to get baptised.

Clovis hurried to Reims and had Remigius baptise him, his warrior chiefs, and more than three thousand of his soldiers at once. "Catholic" churches then sprang up all over Clovis's domain. Tribe after tribe of the remaining Germans fell before his "Christian" sword, and thousands were baptised en masse. Missionaries followed (and in some places preceded) the army in its task of conversion. Gall of Down, an Irish Catholic missionary, reached Switzerland in 612. He built a mission at Sankt Gallen. Boniface (Wynfrith of Wessex) followed him in 716, baptizing thousands more—both pagans and those who had belonged to what was left of Ulfilas's "uncatholic" congregations. By doing this Boniface cleaned up what he called a "haphazard Christianity" propagated by "heretical and free living clerics."

Boniface anointed a German chief, Pepin the Short, to rule over all his German converts. Then, to be sure that Pepin's rule would be "catholic," Boniface led him to be crowned by bishop Stephen of Rome.

The Church of the Dark Ages

Pepin the Short had one outstanding son named Karl, later known as *Karl der Große* — Charlemagne. Karl grew up speaking old High German, a language similar to the Pennsylvania Dutch of today's Amish. He was baptised in the "catholic" Christian church and loved to fight. When he became

king he resolved to convert and civilise all the remaining “Indians of Europe”: the German tribes east of the Rhine river.

Karl fought and baptised valiantly. He meant business. But his converts never understood him like they had understood Ulfilas. They could not read the Latin New Testament with which he forcefully replaced Ulfilas’s German translations. The converts said the Lord’s prayer in Latin (law demanded it), but they did not know what it meant. They accepted the sprinkling of baptism, but it looked to them like a magical rite. They ate the sacred bread, but they did not get the mumblings of the priests who consecrated it with words that sounded like “hocus pocus.” In Saxony, where some Germans had second thoughts about accepting these “catholic” traditions, Karl had four thousand, five hundred, massacred in one day. He made his point.

Then, in November, 800 A.D., Karl, the German chieftain, visited his friend Leo, the bishop of Rome. At this time the bishop of Rome was still under the oversight of the Greek church at Byzantium, but he was unhappy. Leo and Karl got to discussing things and came up with a great idea.

On Christmas day, both Karl and Leo entered St. Peter’s church in the middle of town. Thousands of people had come for the Christmas service. The festive atmosphere was exactly right for Leo to anoint and crown Karl as a new Roman Emperor—Charlemagne—and for Karl to take Leo as his religious head of state.

A Christian empire! A *holy, Roman*, empire! Bishop and warrior, church and state became one on Christmas day 800 A.D., and a split between the old *Greek* catholic church and the new *Roman* catholic church became inevitable. Karl felt good with his new role as Roman Emperor—even though he modestly confessed that if he would have known what Leo was going to do, he never would have set foot in St. Peter’s church. Leo, at the same time, exulted in his liberation from Byzantium and

forged a document to prove that Constantine had always wanted the bishop of Rome to be the head of Christendom.

The wedding of the Holy Roman Empire to the Roman Catholic Church, on Christmas day, 800 A.D. drew the curtain of the Dark Ages securely down on Europe.

The Christian movement among the Jews had been glorious. Among the Greeks yet more so. Latin Christians had carried the Gospel west and north. Many Germans had gotten converted. But now, this Christianity of the Dark Ages swallowed everything up and was worse than no Christianity at all. It was the wolf of north European barbarianism decked in the sheep's clothing of Christ's Gospel. What a potent disguise! The church of the Dark Ages might well have been the end of Christianity—had it not been for its preservation of the New Testament.

Anabaptist Christians

Fortunately, not all German converts to Roman Catholicism were totally given to hunting wild pigs and drinking beer. The church, corrupt as it may have been, succeeded in drawing young Germans into the religious life (monasteries and convents). There they learned to read Latin, and there a few of them came across the New Testament in the early 1500's.

Here a German monk (Martin Luther of Wittenberg), there a German priest (Menno Simons of Witmarsum), here and there and everywhere, with the invention of the printing press, educated Germans began to read with alarm the words of Christ and the Apostles. Suddenly they realised that they had been short-changed by the missionaries who had "converted" them. Suddenly it became clear to them that they had been Christians for a thousand years without ever knowing Christianity at all! Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Michael Sattler, and Pilgram Marpeck—German after German rose to the challenge of the outrage. Powerful tracts,



Johannes Gutenberg, working in the German cities of Strasbourg and Mainz, contributed greatly to the spread of published materials, through his invention of movable type, and printing the entire Bible (in Latin) in 1455. Within a century of his time all of Europe was flooded with printed literature—Bibles and spiritual writings (including thousands of Anabaptist writings) among them, but not all of them for the good.

Latin tracts at first, but soon German tracts and German translations of the New Testament swept the entire German populace, from Switzerland to the North Sea and from Scandinavia to East Prussia, into flame. The church of the Dark Ages had totally underestimated the effect that the New Testament could have on an ignorant population.

No longer could the Germans be controlled. No more could they be hoodwinked into believing fantastic stories about the virgin, the saints, baptism, and the mass. Once the Bible was printed and the Germans had it in their hands, the dark days of the apostate “catholic” church in northern Europe were over.

Luther did not go all the way. Neither did Zwingli. But just a few years after the New Testament hit the German world, more than a hundred thousand Germans pressed all the way through to Christ and broke out of the Dark Ages. Because they followed Christ’s example and baptised adults, people called them *Anabaptists* (rebaptisers). In this book you may meet them and consider what they wrote.