

Abraham Friesen. *Reformers, radicals, revolutionaries*. Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 2012.  
Book review by Robert Martens

*“Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.” (KJ, Matt. 13:24-30)*

*“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (KJ, Acts 2:37-38)*

Today, these two biblical passages might not be pulled from Scripture for special consideration, and in fact would appear rather innocuous. But in the years of the Reformation, writes Abraham Friesen in his book, *Reformers, radicals, revolutionaries*, these words were argued over to deadly effect. As a result, Anabaptists died by the hundreds at the hands of both Roman Catholics and Protestants. How could the nuances of Scripture be of such enormous political and social importance? In the five essays that comprise his book, Friesen analyzes some of the great scriptural debates of the Reformation era, and reaches some surprising conclusions. The book is scholarly, and assumes that the reader knows something of the history of that time; it is not for beginners. Those willing to be challenged, however, will be rewarded by Friesen’s creative and provocative thinking – as well as his fearlessness in making ethical judgements based on the historical data.

Friesen’s five essays essentially attack the same issues from different perspectives, but also stand alone. They might best be summarized individually.

#### *1. Erasmus, Reformers, and the Anabaptist “Third Reformation”*

Until the Reformation years, the traditional translation of Scripture, the Latin Vulgate, was Church sanctioned, and hence, it was argued, infallible. But the clamour was rising that scriptural interpretation was being used exclusively to justify the “System” of orthodox doctrine. When the great scholar and humanist Erasmus\* published a revised Latin translation of the New Testament, he did so under clouds of controversy. A key moment occurred with Erasmus’ retranslation of Acts 2:37-8. Whereas in the Vulgate, Jerome had interpreted Peter’s injunction as “Do penance and be baptized,” Erasmus wrote, “Repent, and be baptized.” Why would the modification of a few words make such a difference? Because, Friesen writes, “do penance” was related to the rituals of the medieval Church, while “repent” implied a free and individual choice that would result in transformed lives.

At first Martin Luther welcomed Erasmus as a fellow reformer, and based his attack on the sale of indulgences (essentially, the prevailing practice of paying for one’s salvation – the Church was in need of money) on Erasmus’ translation of the Acts passage. Increasingly, however, Luther grew hostile to his former ally, disliking Erasmus’ emphasis on “good works,” and eventually broke with him completely. Not so the Anabaptists. Erasmus was writing that

baptism that is not followed by a life of love is meaningless; that ceremonies in themselves are inadequate; that nonviolence is integral to the Christian life; and that Peter's command to repent, indeed his entire sermon of Acts 2, was based on Christ's Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20) Finally, Erasmus interpreted his translation of Acts 2 in the light of the Sermon on the Mount. All of this was deeply attractive to the emerging Anabaptists, and they continued to cite Erasmus – who remained in the Roman Catholic fold – long after the early Reformation years were over. "Therefore the original Swiss Brethren were not merely 'radical Bible readers' ... They were very much a part of the intellectual world of the early 'Erasmian' reformation in the South" (61).

Erasmus, like the Anabaptists, emphasized the priority of the New Testament over the Old. The magisterial Reformers – Lutherans and Catholics – had also been admirers of Erasmus, before their break with the Anabaptists. Now, in their public debates with the Anabaptist rebels, they were forced to admit that New Testament teachings were very likely on the side of the Anabaptists, and subsequently turned to the Old Testament for confirmation of their beliefs: for example, infant baptism, they argued, was similar to the practice of circumcision in the Old Testament, a ritual sanctioned by tradition and by God. The result, concludes Abraham Friesen, was that Lutherans and Catholics re-established a "territorial church," sanctioned by the state, and including all the people of a given area. The ensuing corruption, writes Friesen, was quite predictable.

## 2. *Purity versus Universality*

While the Catholic opponents of Anabaptism were debating doctrine on the basis of tradition, and the Lutherans and Calvinists on systematic theology, Anabaptists clung to doctrine *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone. A key principle for them was the purity of the church, based on choice and rebaptism. The case for a universal church by the Roman Catholics was based on statements of Augustine made around 400 AD. A group of dissidents, the Donatists, in response to the growing corruption of the universal church in which membership was based on simply on birth, were crying out that the weeds (tares) be rooted out of the church. Augustine replied that, since nearly the whole world was presently Christian, what Jesus meant in his parable in Matthew was that the wheat and tares were both now part of the ecclesial community. Thus, ignoring the fact that Jesus had referred to the tares as the "enemy," that is, "the world," Augustine contended that the Holy Spirit had guided the evolution of a universal church, and that the tradition of a universal church now had priority over Scripture.

The Protestant Reformers themselves subsequently took up the cause of a universal church. Such men as Zwingli, Luther and Calvin reacted brutally to the upsurge in Anabaptism. In coming years, their followers would lament the corruption and dissolute Christendom of their own territorial churches. It was, argues Abraham Friesen, the victory of the church of wheat and tares.

## 3. *Anabaptist Origins and the Early Writings of the Reformers*

During the early years of the Reformation, Anabaptists and Protestant reformers had common cause in their new theology. Friesen points out that the Anabaptist Schleithem Confession of 1527 contains no theology at all, because it assumes the same as their Protestant allies; the document is concerned only with the implementation of such practical issues as baptism, the sword, the ban, communion, the oath, and so on. It was not long, however, before the Protestant reformers broke with the Anabaptists. The reason, apparently, was quite simple: fear. In 1522 Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, passed the Nuremberg Edict which stated

that secular authority stood above “the Word of God,” and that the mass was to be immediately reinstated in Protestant churches. Clearly neither Luther, Zwingli, nor Calvin had any wish to suffer the fate of Anabaptist dissidents: torture and execution. So they compromised. The result was the impurity of the territorial church – but, asks Friesen, could the Reformation have succeeded at all without compromise?

#### 4. *Visions of the End of the Age*

Anabaptists have often been dismissed, says Friesen, as violent revolutionaries, given the chance. But is this true? Europe was in the throes of change. By the time of the Reformation, the Catholic Church had been thoroughly discredited as an institution of moral purity, and rebellion was in the air. In addition, the rise of a money economy, creating great inequalities, was disrupting European society. All this fuelled visions that the End Times had arrived. When the Donation of Constantine – a purportedly fourth century document “that asserted the papal claim to temporal rule in all of Western Europe” – was exposed as a forgery, Luther declared the pope to be the Antichrist (161-2). He also apparently saw himself as God’s chosen defender, and likely predicted the end of the world would occur in 1524. His pronouncements added to the general hysteria. Violently inclined revolutionaries, such as Thomas Müntzer and Jan van Leyden, were drawn to the community of Anabaptists, and the suffering church was transformed into a church of vengeance. Luther himself, Friesen contends, was responsible for unleashing a chain of violence with his apocalyptic visions. On the other hand, he says, the Anabaptists were nearly the only group of its time to preach peace.

#### 5. *Catholics, Protestants, and Mennonite “Distinctives”*

Mennonites have often been analyzed by historians as a group having much in common with Catholics and Protestants; the principles on which they differ are referred to as Mennonite “distinctives.” The Anabaptists, argues Friesen, would never have used such a term. They regarded themselves simply as an authentic church: there were no secondary “distinctives.” During the centuries of medieval Europe, the monastic orders had perceived themselves in the same way. With their vows of poverty, refusal to use violence, and initiation rites that were considered a rebaptism, the orders were defined as ideal or true Christianity. In fact, some individuals were now describing the universal Catholic church as the “world.” The Anabaptists were following in the path of the monastic reformers. They never, argues Friesen, saw nonviolence as a “distinctive,” but rather as the authentic command of Christ to his followers. The Anabaptists, he says, now became to Protestants what the monastic orders had been to a corrupt Roman Catholic Church: an “ideal” Christianity. “[T]he Anabaptist radicals,” Friesen concludes, “wanted no halfway measures, no compromises with theologies that had grown out of the accommodation of God’s Word to the fluctuating customs of history. They desired a radical reorientation on the basis of Christ’s teachings alone. That desire proved costly. But then a radical stance always does” (212-13).

\*Erasmus’ masterpiece, *Praise of Folly*, is featured in *Roots and Branches* April 2008.