

Faith Pulpit

Lessons from the Reformation for Biblical Fundamentalists

Fundamentalists today face the challenge of wanting to reach more people but still guard the purity of their churches. In this article Dr. Ken Rathbun, a graduate of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary and the academic dean of Fairview Baptist Bible College in Jamaica, gives us insights on this matter from the Reformation period. In his second article he applies the lessons from the Reformation to contemporary fundamentalism.

One of the ironies of the Reformation is that though the Reformers had separated from the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers attacked other groups of the time for separating from them. The Reformers had solid reasons to justify breaking the unity of Christendom in sixteenth-century Europe, mainly their proclamation of salvation by grace through faith and not of works as opposed to the works-righteousness system of the Roman Church. However, the Reformers were not willing to allow that right of separation to a third group in the Reformation, a group I call the Sectarians.

I define the Sectarians as a conglomeration of various movements of the time. Some took the Bible (especially the New Testament) as their authority while others used the Bible but considered the leading of the Holy Spirit as revealed to them as the final authority. The groups were known as Anabaptists, Spiritualists, or by the name of their founder or leader. Some practiced believer baptism while others refused to practice any church ordinance. They do not easily fit into our predefined categories.¹ Essentially, Sectarians were those who did not identify with the Roman Church or the Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin). The Sectarians were not a unified movement but rather a mixture of dissenting subgroups active both before and during the Reformation. The Sectarians and their contributions to the Reformation are often the most misunderstood aspect of the entire era because people frequently do not take time to look closely at each individual subgroup to analyze what it believed. In any case, it is certainly not correct to group them all together under one particular name,

such as Anabaptist, like some writers are prone to do.

Contrasting Views

The Reformers and Sectarians held contrasting views in two areas. First, the magisterial Reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin defined churches as made up of those born in a given geographic location who were members by virtue of their infant baptisms. Many Sectarians considered the local church as comprised of professing baptized believers who voluntarily joined together for worship and admonition. Second, because of the differing views on the definition of a church, the Reformers joined their church reform efforts with local civil governments to varying degrees. The Sectarians resisted state control of churches and believed in church-controlled discipline (Matt. 18).

The Reformers' churches were marked by the preaching of the Word and the practice of the sacraments ², but the churches manifested a noticeable lack of personal purity. The Sectarians believed church discipline was an essential part of a true church because it protected its purity.³ Reformers were concerned about this lack of personal purity though they did not always accept responsibility. Martin Luther said:

Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. . . . When the Word remains pure, then the life (even if there is something lacking in it) can be molded properly. . . . With this I have won, and I have won nothing else than that I teach aright.⁴

Calvin expressed similar discouragement when assessing the lives of his people.⁵ The Reformation in England evidenced comparable concerns.⁶

The Role of Martin Bucer

Though Martin Bucer (1491–1551) was not one of the three major Reformers, he dealt head-on with many of these concerns because of the numerous Sectarian subgroups in his city of Strasbourg. He did so to a greater degree than most Reformers because of his firsthand observations and his envy of the holy lives of the Sectarian church members. He wanted that personal purity for his state church. He repeatedly petitioned the city government for permission to implement the “ban” (as church discipline was called)⁷ on unholy living and for control of discipline by the city churches.

However, like all civil governments in Europe, the Strasbourg city council was unwilling to grant control to the churches or even to pursue discipline of church members with any vigor.⁸ This unwillingness eventually led Bucer to rebel against the laws of the city council concerning the operation of the state church (which Bucer himself had helped to establish some years before). In the time just before his exile from the city, after two decades of ministry there, Bucer attempted to establish voluntary assemblies within the state church of Strasbourg. These gatherings met for mutual

encouragement, accountability, and the practice of church discipline.⁹ This practice was illegal in the eyes of the council and no doubt was a contributing factor in their allowing Bucer to be exiled from the city in 1549.¹⁰

Aside from the legalities of the city council, there are several reasons why Bucer's scheme to purify his church in Strasbourg failed. Essentially he was trying to pursue two different views of the church at the same time. The Sectarian churches were voluntary. Professing believers chose to join them, having first submitted to believer baptism. Believer baptism demonstrated to others not only the individual's profession of salvation but also his/her desire to live as a disciple of Christ. In contrast, the state church model mandated everyone born in a given location be presented as infants for baptism, thus extending church membership to those infants. Infant baptism destroyed the vital element of personal decision in both salvation and church membership. Such a situation did not provide for a pure church.

Additionally, upon joining a Sectarian church, an individual was agreeing to the accountability of other members to guard the purity of his/her life. This mutual accountability followed examples of church discipline in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5) and was for the purpose of restoring the erring brother and protecting the body. Again in comparison, the Reformers themselves complained that in their churches known drunkards and fornicators could partake of the Lord's Supper¹¹ because of the continual reluctance of the local governments to prohibit them. Church discipline was in the hands of the civil governments. This state of affairs made purity of the churches impossible to maintain.

Bucer was unable to free church discipline from the control of the local government, and neither could any of the other magisterial Reformers in sixteenth-century Europe. But he tried more than most to reproduce elements of the Sectarian church model into his state church to try to maintain purity. Another Bucer scholar concluded: "The attempt to pursue two ecclesiologies at the same time, one comprehensive and the other selective, was probably self-defeating. The requirements of the former must undermine the latter."¹²

Unity Versus Purity

The question must be asked: Why did the Reformers in general, or Bucer in particular, not opt for a Sectarian model? This question is especially pertinent since those churches evidenced the fruit in believers' lives that the Reformers sought so much to obtain.

The answer is tied into the issue of unity versus purity that will be applied in the next article. The Reformers wanted to reach as many people as possible with their understanding of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. However, they also tried to accomplish a lot more. They wanted to create a better Christendom¹³ within a cooperating church/state context than the Roman Church had done. The Reformers looked to accomplish this goal by using the civil government to implement their reforms. Within a Christendom context, the Reformers hoped that all the people in a given locality could be

brought into the church through infant baptism, and (their hope was) they could be reached with the gospel at some later point in time.

The Reformers could ensure a presentation of the gospel to the masses by having the civil governments enforce their ecclesiastical regulations, such as mandatory church attendance like many of them required. They rejected the Sectarian model of the church because they would lose a great majority of their congregations if people only came if they wanted to. Thus the Reformers prioritized unity.

The problem many Sectarians saw in such a strategy was the decrease of the purity in the lives of the church members. If everyone in the area was a church member, what distinguished them from the world? In many instances, the Sectarians prioritized the purity of lives and doctrine in their churches as they looked to the New Testament, rather than to an idealized Christendom, as their model for the church. So the Sectarians prioritized purity.

The Reformers asserted that the church had two marks: the Word and the sacraments. While proclaiming the gospel, they allowed worldly elements into their churches by the way they practiced their sacraments. Infant baptism allowed unsaved people to be members of their churches, and they admitted to the Lord's Supper people known to be living in gross sin. Church discipline would have helped purify their churches, but they could not implement it. Pure churches remained a distant dream for them.

Works Cited

1. George Huntson Williams and Angel Mergal, trans. and eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, vol. XXV, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, gen. eds. John Baille, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. van Pausen (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 19–38. This source provides an attempt to classify the Sectarians into three main categories: the Anabaptists proper, the Spiritualists, and the Evangelical Rationalists. Each main category had its own authority and emphases. The first two categories were further divided into three subcategories. The Anabaptists had evangelical, contemplative, and revolutionary varieties; and the Spiritualists had evangelical, rational, and revolutionary ones.
2. Protestant and Catholic churches see baptism and the Lord's Supper as having a sacramental significance, which Baptist churches do not; thus Baptists refer to them as ordinances.
3. Kenneth R. Davis, "No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 43–58, especially 45–49.
4. Martin Luther, "The Central Issue Is Doctrine, Not Life," 1533, *Luther's Works*, vol. 54: Table Talk, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 110. Henceforth, LW: Vol.#, page #. For development in Luther's thinking on the role of the church with the state, see James M. Estes, "Luther on the Role of Secular Authority in the Reformation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 199–225.
5. See the quotes listed from David F. Wright, "Sixteenth-Century Reformed Perspectives on the Minority Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48, no. 4 (1995): 470–472. I have the sources from Calvin that Wright quotes (Calvin's Farewell to the Ministers of Geneva and Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets at Zeph.1:1–3 and Hag. 1:2–4) and have verified each.
6. James C. Spalding, "The *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* of 1552 and the Furthering of Discipline in England," *Church History* 39 (1970): 162–171, especially 162 and 169.
7. In Reformed-controlled areas, the "ban" often meant exile, or banishment, from their territories.
8. For detail, see Jean Rott, "The Strasbourg Kirchenpfleger and Parish Discipline: Theory and Practice," in Martin Bucer: *Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122–128.
9. Gottfried Hammonn, "Ecclesiological Motifs behind the Creation of the 'Christlichen Gemeinschaften,'" in Martin Bucer: *Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 129–143.
10. As Holy Roman Emperor Charles V insisted, based upon his recent military victory over Protestant armies.

11. For instance, see Davis, “No Discipline, No Church,” p. 54. Note also Luther’s intriguing sermon preached to his own church: “. . .

[I]f you are going to go beyond this [self-control] and be a born pig and guzzle beer and wine, then, if this cannot be stopped by the rulers, you must know that you cannot be saved. For God will not admit such piggish drinkers into the kingdom of heaven,” from the sermon: “On Soberness and Moderation,” 1539 in LW 51:293. Though this context does not concern the Lord’s Supper, it does show the kind of members he had and his attitude toward their behavior.
12. David F. Wright, “Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer,” in Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102. See Wright’s discussion of Bucer’s lifelong struggle with “the competing inclusivist and exclusivist tendencies of his ecclesiology” in the context of infant baptism in “Sixteenth-Century Reformed Perspectives,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48, no. 4 (1995): 475.
13. This ideal is rooted in the fourth century when the Roman emperor Constantine decided to have the state support the church and united them in ways that would progressively increase as the centuries went by.

Dr. Ken Rathbun

VP for Academic Services; College Dean at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | rathbunk@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Ken Rathbun (PhD, University of the West Indies) was a Baptist Mid-Missions missionary in Jamaica from 2002–16. He has preached and taught in many areas of the world and has served as vice president for Academic Services and dean at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2016. He and his wife, Cléa, have two young children.