

Luther Revives Conditionalism at Outset of Reformation

by Leroy Edwin Froom

This digitized edition provided by truthaccordingtoscripture.com

Excerpts from *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* - Volume II

"This magnificent Conditionalist Faith volume is characterized by your customary careful scholarship"

— Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Chapter 4

I. Revival of Conditionalism Gradually Gathers Momentum

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century constituted a progressive revival of lost and largely obscured primitive truths, along with a repudiation of the accretions of papal errors built up to dominance during the Middle Ages. While the restoration was not complete, it was a noble beginning. For example, prominent leaders differed on the nature and destiny of man, as on other doctrines. Reformatory action was resisted here by many, and arrested by certain reactionary forces. However, various leaders broke with several of the flagrant innovations established by the Papacy. And many Reformers went back to fourth-century doctrines and creeds, but not all the way to the original apostolic positions. It was inevitable that the nature and destiny of man—especially in relation to the papal claims of a purifying Purgatory and an unending Hell, and the matter of the consciousness of the soul in death—was sooner or later to come under challenge and repudiation. And as in the early centuries of the Christian Church, so in Reformation times, some of the finest scholars and most conspicuous characters—veritable intellectual and spiritual giants—were the restorers and champions of Conditionalism. They and their successors were so prominent as to constitute an impressive line of witnesses, the peers of any in their day, as the record will show.

This fact is to be particularly noted: The revival of the largely buried truth of the sleep of man in death, and the resurrection awakening at the second coming of Christ, did not spring out of ignorance or arise from extreme quarters. Neither did it come from small minds and obscure characters, as will shortly be seen. Beginning with Luther in Germany and Tyndale in England, it slowly gathered a growing group of brilliant and godly adherents, expanding with each passing century. The climax of the restoration, however, was reserved for modern times.

In Reformation days we are brought back again to the strange theological trilemma that characterized the divided church of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. These were (1) an

aggressive, growing school of Conditionalists; (2) a militant school of Immortal Soulists, still adamantly in the ascendancy; and (3) a developing school of Universalists, in revolt against the dogma of Eternal Torment. The resultant conflicts were intense, and reactions were inevitable. And now we shall trace the initial revival and partial restoration of Conditionalist principles in Reformation and then post-Reformation times.

II. Luther Revives Conditionalism at Outset of Reformation

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546), learned in the classics, eminent in Scripture, and intrepid in action, was the master spirit of the Reformation in Germany. Although he broke with the Papacy by nailing his Ninety-five Theses against indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, it was his appearance before the Diet of Worms, to defend his position from Scripture before the emperor, that made him a national hero. His translation of the Bible into the German tongue ranks him among the masters and molders of the German language. And his doctrine of justification by faith became the battle cry of the Reformation.

Luther overshadowed all other leaders of the Reformation in sheer courage and audacity, boldly taking his battle for spiritual freedom directly to the highest ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and shaking off the pontifical yoke. He was one of the great preachers of his time and one of the most powerful personalities of the Christian Era. He dared to defy the Papacy, with all of its imposing power, pageantry, and perversions, as well as anathemas, by striking at its unscriptural traditions. And he was the first sixteenth-century Reformer to question and reject the papal dogma of the immortality of the soul, particularly the postulate of consciousness in death amid the pains of Purgatory.

Luther lived in a transition hour, preceded by centuries, of blanketing darkness that still profoundly affected the thinking of the time. He received his earlier training at Eisenach, then studied for the law at the famous University of Erfurt, where scholastic philosophy was still the pattern and the dialectic skills were dominant. Here he showed unusual intellectual powers, receiving the highest academic honors. Here, likewise, he was trained in polemics that fitted him for his stormy lifetime of conflict with prelate, pope, and emperor. It was here also that he found a complete copy of the Latin Bible, reading it with intense eagerness. He was stirred tremendously, and as a result there started a struggle within his soul that never ceased until there was not only a new Luther but a widespread Reformation.

The unvarying ecclesiastical emphasis of the Middle Ages had been to instill fear of God and unquestioning reverence for the church. Luther knew that he himself was unprepared to meet God. The monastery, looming as a city of refuge, was obviously the place for him, with penance as the method of performance for reaching heaven. So in 1505 he entered the noted Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, with all its cloistered austerities. Taking the name of Augustine, he gave himself to vigils by night, and labors, prayers, and penances by day.

Thus he sought the forgiveness of God, and salvation through the penitential system. Coarse garments and the begging cup formed part of the picture. Luther, typical example of a pious monk, was ordained a priest in 1507.

III. The Torments of Hell and the Pains of Purgatory

But the awful demands of divine justice and holiness continued to plague him. Death, and the alleviation of its horrors, had been the dominant theme throughout the handbooks of the medieval centuries, and the most sought-after books dwelt on how to escape Hell.

Purgatory had been introduced by way of mitigation, the church offering her sacraments and pilgrimages and her indulgences, and the intercession of saints, as a means of relaxing the pressures of Purgatory and reducing its time. Furthermore, the supererogation merits of the saints could allegedly be pooled, with transfer of credits to reduce the purgatorial pains. But while the saved would enjoy an eternity of bliss, the irrevocably damned would suffer everlasting torment, with no mercy of ultimate extinction. The moans of the lost would continue on forever and ever, amid the sulfurous flames.

Luther was tormented with doubts springing from these terrifying portrayals. How could one love a God who was preeminently a consuming fire? or an angry Son who was always consigning the damned to the flames of Hell? Only a merciful "Mother" offered hope. God was commonly conceived as so absolute that nothing could be contingent. And moreover, according to St. Augustine, man's fate was decreed from the foundation of the world, with some destined to salvation, others to be irretrievably lost. Luther could not understand it, and revolted against the hopelessness of it.

Having received his B. D., with skills not only in Latin but also in Hebrew and Greek, Luther was encouraged by Staupitz, vicar of the Augustinian Order, to study for a doctorate. This accomplished, he was summoned in 1512 to teach at the new University of Wittenberg, where scholastic philosophy was being replaced by Biblical theology. Luther came to react intensely against the speculative postulates of tradition and philosophy. By this time he was regarded as one of the most highly trained theologians of the Augustinian Order, having been made Doctor of Divinity *ad Biblia* (Doctor of Holy Scriptures). And now, appointed Professor of the Holy Bible, he vowed to defend the Sacred Book and its doctrines against all errors. The Word was set forth in his classroom as the final authority above council, church, and pope.

Thus he was already potentially started on his career as a reformer, preacher, and teacher. And in addition to his university teaching, he now preached daily in the nearby parish church, having selected the book of Romans as one of his early teaching areas. Great numbers came to hear the Bible teachings convincingly expounded in contrast with scholastic speculations, and salvation through Christ in place of man's endeavors to attain righteousness.

1. PROCLAIMS SIMPLICITY OF THE GOSPEL.—It is essential to understand this transition. Upon coming to Wittenberg, Luther had set himself truly to understand and expound Scripture. Christ was clearly in the Old Testament, taking the iniquity of us all and participating in the plight of estranged humanity. The "All-Terrible" was also the "All-Merciful." And in the New Testament, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. Luther was assured that He who gave His Son unto death and raised Him in triumph will also raise us up at the last day—if we are in Christ. Paul's writings clarified the relationship between sin and salvation, justice and justification. And redemption is accomplished by faith in Him, not by our human efforts; as a gift, not by achievement.

Luther took the phrase "justification by faith" as epitomizing the whole process of redemption. His thinking was preeminently Christocentric—the cross resolving the conflict between wrath and mercy, justice and forgiveness, life and death. So he compassed the gospel in a single phrase, "the forgiveness of sins—not the sacraments, but divine forgiveness. We are to cease to look to the church for salvation, but to trust only in Christ's life and victory. Such was the simplicity and the efficacy of the gospel Luther taught. And he would go from the professorial chair to his pulpit in the church on the public square and proclaim the same good news in popular form. Thus his fame and influence spread.

2. CRISIS OVER RELEASING SOULS FROM PURGATORY.— Luther's disillusioning pilgrimage to Rome in 1510 had filled him with doubt and disappointment, and Rome lost its enchantment. But the crisis was precipitated by Tetzels outrageous vending of indulgences to complete the construction of St. Peter's, at Rome, with no mention of repentance and confession—only of payment. Indulgences had been sold for centuries, but the selling of them had now degenerated into a shameful abuse. Remission was promised for sins not yet committed, with the assurance of release from purgatory. And Tetzels, playing upon the credulity of the people, had openly (urged them to save their "immortal" souls"¹

Luther's indignation was aroused. He protested that the pope could not deliver souls from Purgatory. Three times in 1516 in his sermons he had spoken out against indulgences. And now, on October 31, 1517, he posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church, denying the efficacy of indulgences and the power of the pope. He challenged the church authorities to debate his propositions, offering to maintain them against all comers. The boldness of the act startled the populace. And the attack was especially terrifying to the ecclesiastical authorities, for it struck at the source of revenue, and thus at vested interests.

But Luther's Theses were as applicable to the rest of Christendom as to Wittenberg, and within a few weeks they were being printed in France, Holland, Spain, England, Switzerland, yes, and Italy, creating a crisis. People bought Theses instead of indulgences. And the Theses became a household topic of discussion, read not only by the populace but by the monks in their cells, as well as by philosophers and teachers— and even by Leo X

himself. Overnight Luther had become an international figure. And the controversy was soon narrowed to the issue of the Bible as the sole source of authority versus the church and tradition. This very platform would of necessity bring under scrutiny all doctrines that were but human accretions and in conflict with Scripture. Sooner or later such innovation as Purgatory would be exposed as unscriptural and invalid.²

IV. Dramatic Break With the Might of Rome

Meanwhile, on the basis of Bible prophecy, with its eschatological climax, Luther had come to the irrevocable conclusion that the papal system, with the pope as head, was the Antichrist of the prophetic predictions of Daniel, Paul, and John. This added to the seriousness of Luther's revolt. Leo X sought to silence the bold monk by issuing, on June 15, 1520, the bull *Exsurge Domini* (named from the opening words) against the "Errors of Luther," saying a "wild boar has invaded thy vineyard," and giving him six months to submit. Soon he was summoned to Rome to recant, but without a hearing, which was tantamount to condemnation without a trial. But the elector of Saxony and the university faculty demanded that Luther be accorded a hearing on German soil.

1. FINAL RUPTURE BY BURNING "BULL OF ANTICHRIST."— In Luther's eighteen-day disputation with Dr. Johann Eck. of Leipzig, in 1519, the German Reformer's convictions had been deepened. He held it to be impudent to affirm that any tenet that Christ never taught is a lawful part of Christianity. And he protested Eck's use of the Apocryphal *2 Maccabees 12:45* as noncanonical and devoid of authority. Luther published his positions in three works: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *Concerning Christian Liberty*. Thus the populace was kept informed.

The final rupture came when on November 20 Luther brought forth his treatise *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*, and on December 10 dramatically burned in public the papal bull as the "Bull of Antichrist" together with a copy of the decretals. The breach was now irreparable. But by this time Luther regarded excommunication as emancipation from the fetters of the Papacy. That bold act launched the Reformation. The pope's first bull had anathematized forty-one of Luther's Theses as heretical, scandalous, or false, and ordered his books burned. Now a second bull, *Damnatio et excommunicatio Martini Lutheri . . .* (January 4, 1521), placed Luther, his works and followers, under the actual ban of excommunication, pronouncing Luther an incorrigible heretic. Nevertheless, enrollment in his classes increased sharply. Luther declared that Christ, not Peter, was the rock upon which the church rests. Meantime, his studies again focused on the prophecies of Daniel, Paul, Peter, and John, leading on to the last things. Luther was now more than ever convinced that the Papacy, with all of its perversions, was the Antichrist of prophecy which had perverted the gospel.

2. TRADITIONISM CROWDED INTO BACKGROUND.—Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms was based on that concept, as he took his stand on the platform of Holy Scripture. His defense before the brilliant assembly of 210 high churchmen, princes, and nobles from every country of Europe was a truly imposing spectacle—one of the heroics of history, as this lone monk, in coarse brown frock, rose to the occasion, answering for his faith first in Latin and then in German, and brought his declarations to a climax with:

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."³

Shortly after the Diet a band of horsemen "captured" Luther (in May, 1521), taking him to the Wartburg Castle, which he regarded as his "Isle of Patmos." This period of retirement resulted in his greatest gift to the Reformation—the translation of the Bible into the German vernacular (for Latin was read only by the educated few)—100,000 copies being distributed within forty years. Everything, he taught, must be built upon the rock of Scripture. Thus the vernacular Bible became a symbol of a return to the primitive gospel. And in proportion to its supremacy, traditionism was crowded into the background. Thus the Reformation period became pre-eminently the Age of the Book.

Luther's teachings spread in ever-widening circles. At the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the Augsburg Confession, written by Melancthon, was adopted. But Luther authored 294 works in German and 71 in Latin, including his *Great Catechism* for adults and his *Little Catechism* for children. And his complete German Bible, in both Testaments, was published in 1534.

V. "Immortal Soul" Concept Derived From "Roman Dunghill of Decretals"

On November 29, 1520, Luther published a defense of the forty-one propositions that had been condemned by the bull *Exsurge Domini*, of June 15. This he titled *Assertion of All the Articles Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull*, thus publicly justifying his Theses. On the twenty-seventh item he states the general principle: "It is certain that it is not in the power of the church or the Pope to establish articles of faith, or laws for morals or good works." And he immediately gives as the reason that all true articles of faith are already established in the Word of God.

1. "IMMORTAL SOUL" INCLUDED AMONG POPE'S "MONSTROUS OPINIONS."—With ironical permission Luther grants to the pope the right and power to make special "articles of faith" for himself and his own followers. He lists five in the series, including the "immortality of the soul" as the fifth, all and each of which Luther expressly rejects. The significance of including "*the soul is immortal [animam esse immortalem]*" in what

he denominates "monstrous opinions" and "Roman corruptions," is, of course, obvious. And he added immediately that these "all" came out of the "Roman dunghill of decretals"⁴—thus harking back to the pope's bull of December 19, 1513, wherein he declared the natural immortality of the soul to be a doctrine of the Catholic Church.⁵ Here are Luther's exact words:

"But I permit the Pope to make articles of faith for himself and his faithful, such as [1] The Bread and wine are transubstantiated in the sacrament. [2] The essence of God neither generates, nor is generated. [3] The soul is the substantial form of the human body. [4] The Pope is the emperor of the world, and the king of heaven, and God upon earth. [5] THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL, with all those monstrous opinions to be found in the Roman dunghill of decretals, that such as his faith is, such may be his gospel, such his disciples, and such his church, that the mouth may have meat suitable for it, and the dish, a cover worthy of it."⁶

The implication is clear: These were distinctive *Catholic* doctrines, expressing the Roman faith, and consequently consistent with Catholic dogmas. But they were at variance with the Protestant scripturalism proclaimed by Luther, for the Biblical concept of the nature and the destiny of man had been woefully warped by the Papacy.

2. BLACKBURNE'S OPINION ON LUTHER'S POSITION.—Archdeacon Blackburne's incisive summation of Luther's position was this:

"Luther espoused the doctrine of the sleep of the soul, upon a scripture foundation, and *then* he made use of it as a confutation of purgatory and saint worship, and continued in that belief to the last moment of his life."⁷

Blackburne then adds that Luther's commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, published in 1532, was "clearly and indisputably on the side of those who maintain the sleep of the soul."⁸ Blackburne, the Anglican scholar, is cited here because, having studied deeply into Luther's position nearly two centuries previously, and having searched out all the pertinent source evidences bearing thereon, he recorded this definite opinion: "Luther mentioned the *immortality of the soul*, as a *portentous opinion*, supported by nothing but the Pope's decrees."⁹

3. KANTONEN CONFIRMS LUTHER'S EMPHASIS ON "SLEEP." —Dr. T. A. Kantonen, contemporary American Lutheran scholar and professor of systematic theology, Hamma Divinity School, likewise confirms the observations here made concerning Luther's position.

"Luther, with a greater emphasis on the resurrection, preferred to concentrate on the scriptural metaphor of sleep. 'For just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpectedly when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to

him, so we shall suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death.' 'We shall sleep, until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be happy with Him forever.' "¹⁰

4. DID LUTHER LATER REVERSE HIS POSITION?—To the question Did Luther "so alter his mind as to recant, and espouse the contrary doctrine?" Blackburne gives an unqualified "No."¹¹ Luther, he asserted, not only held to "the sleep of the soul" in the decade from 1522 to 1532, when he published his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, but his later reflections on the death of John, Elector of Saxony, show that he still believed that the souls of the righteous were "at rest."¹²

Blackburne then alludes to disputes among Luther's followers as to "what becomes of the soul after death" and gives Luther's reply as, "Nothing is revealed to us on that head, and that it is rash to affirm anything about it without the word of God."¹³ Nevertheless Luther, it must be frankly stated, was not always consistent. He himself was in the process of clarification, and was subjected to terrific pressures from associates who did not see the issue as he did.

5. RETAINS "SUSPENDED CONSCIOUSNESS" CONCEPT TILL DAY OF DEATH.—Discussing Luther's final view, expressed on the very day of his death (which is cited from Sleidan xvi, p. 488), Blackburne states that Luther averred that friends will see and know each other hereafter, on the resurrection morn, as Adam saw Eve when she "was first presented to him, namely, just [as Adam] awaked out of a deep sleep." Blackburne then observes: "The *renewal* by Christ cannot possibly mean any thing but the resurrection of the dead." Then follows Blackburne's considered conclusion, after all evidence had been painstakingly surveyed:

"Luther never departed from the sentiments he disclosed to Amsdorf in 1522, but retained to his dying moment, the same uniform idea of a total suspension of thought and consciousness during the interval between death and the resurrection."¹⁴

6. LUTHER'S FOLLOWERS SOUGHT TO CONCEAL SENTIMENTS. —Then Blackburne adds: "The misfortune was that his more immediate disciples were in another persuasion, and therefore, instead of defending their master's doctrine, set themselves to prove he never held it," wishing "to conceal Luther's sentiments on the intermediate state through a foolish, apprehension of their being heretical."¹⁵ In thus "leaving the main root of *Popery*, in the ground," Blackburne observes, "it is no wonder they should have been unsuccessful in pruning away the corrupt fruits [the "*intercession* of saints which led directly to the practice of *invocation*"] which always have, and always will spring from it."¹⁶

VI. Counters Purgatory With Unconscious Sleep of Soul

The oppressive papal dogma of Purgatory, with its inseparable corollary of the conscious torment of anguished souls therein, was the immediate cause of Luther's counterposition on the sleep of the soul. As we will now see by direct quotations, he repeatedly contended that during death the soul is at rest, devoid of consciousness or pain. He stated many times that the Christian dead are unaware of anything, for they see not, feel not, understand not. They are asleep, oblivious of all passing events.¹⁷ More than one hundred times, scattered over the years Luther declared death to be a sleep.¹⁸ and repeatedly asserted that in death there is total unconsciousness and consequent unawareness of the passage of time.¹⁹ He presses the point that death is a sound, sweet sleep.²⁰ And furthermore, the dead will remain asleep until the day of resurrection,²¹ which resurrection embraces both body and soul, when both will be brought together again.²² Here are sample statements:

1. DEAD ARE UNCONSCIOUS OF PASSING TIME.—First, there is Luther's clear comment based on *Ecclesiastes* 9:10:

"Another proof that the dead are insensible. Solomon thinks, therefore, that the dead are altogether asleep, and think of nothing. They lie, not reckoning days or years, but, when awakened, will seem to themselves to have slept scarcely a moment."²³

2. DEATH A "DEEP, STRONG, SWEET SLEEP."—The same thought was interwoven by Luther into the prescribed funeral service for the Christian:

"But we Christians, who have been redeemed from all this through the precious blood of God's Son, should train and accustom ourselves in faith to despise death and regard it as a deep, strong, sweet sleep; to consider the coffin as nothing other than our Lord Jesus' bosom or Paradise, the grave as nothing other than a soft couch of ease or rest. As verily, before God, it truly is just this; for he testifies, *John* 11:21: Lazarus, our friend sleeps; *Matthew* 9:24: The maiden is not dead, she sleeps.

"Thus, too, St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, removes from sight all hateful aspects of death as related to our mortal body and brings forward nothing but charming and joyful aspects of the promised life. He says there (vv. 42 ff.): It is sown in corruption and will rise in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor (that is, a hateful, shameful form) and will rise in glory; it is sown in weakness and will rise in strength; it is sown in natural body and will rise a spiritual body."²⁴

3. SLEEPS IN UNCONSCIOUS REST AND PEACE.—Luther explains that, unconscious of passing time or surrounding events, the sleeping soul will awake at the call of the Life-giver:

"Thus after death the soul goes to its bedchamber and to its peace, and while it is sleeping it does not realize its sleep, and God preserves indeed the awakening soul. God is able to awake Elijah, Moses, and others, and so control them, so that they will live. But how can that be? That we do not know; we satisfy ourselves with the example of bodily sleep, and with what God says: it is a sleep, a rest, and a peace. He who sleeps naturally knows nothing of that which happens in his neighbor's house; and nevertheless, he still is living, even though, contrary to the nature of life, he is unconscious in his sleep. Exactly the same will happen also in that life, but in another and better way."²⁵

4. RESTS SECURELY TILL AWAKENER CALLS.—Death, Luther repeatedly asserts, means lying down in rest, with surcease from life's cares, until the one great awakening call of all the saints at the resurrection, when they all come from the grave together. Thus:

"We should learn to view our death in the right light, so that we need not become alarmed on account of it, as unbelief does; because in Christ it is indeed not death, but a fine, sweet and brief sleep, which brings us release from this vale of tears, from sin and from the fear and extremity of real death and from all the misfortunes of this life, and we shall be secure and without care, rest sweetly and gently for a brief moment, as on a sofa, until the time when he shall call and awaken us together with all his dear children to his eternal glory and joy.

"For since we call it a sleep, we know that we shall not remain in it, but be again awakened and live, and that the time during which we sleep, shall seem no longer than if we had just fallen asleep. Hence, we shall censure ourselves that we were surprised or alarmed at such a sleep in the hour of death, and suddenly come alive out of the grave and from decomposition, and entirely well, fresh, with a pure, clear, glorified life, meet our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the clouds. . . .

"Scripture everywhere affords such consolation, which speaks of the death of the saints, as if they fell asleep and were gathered to their fathers, that is, had overcome death through this faith and comfort in Christ, and awaited the resurrection, together with the saints who preceded them in death,"²⁶

5. QUESTION OF ETERNAL TORMENT LEFT UNTOUCHED.—Luther rarely alluded to the question of Eternal Torment. In the immensity of the reformatory task, and separation from Catholic dogma in so many other matters, the early theologians of the Reformation Era did not at first examine the foundations of this Augustinian theory. It was enough for Luther that he stated his convictions on the paramount point of the sleep of the soul. No one in that transition hour had as yet grappled with the problem of the traditional Hell concept.²⁷ In taking his bold stand on the sleep of the soul, Luther was fully aware that he was placing himself on the side of a despised minority. An imposing succession of

learned men—the preponderant voice of past centuries, as well as the majority view of contemporary theologians, bishops, universities, the pope, and even many associates—was ranged against him. But neither numbers nor the genius, dignity, and stature of opponents moved the intrepid Luther. Truth, as he conceived it, compelled him to declare his convictions to the world, there to stand on record as his witness.

Luther's stand drew hot fire, and exposed him and those who stood with him to severest reproaches in an age conspicuous for controversial abuse. They were the object of derisive epithets. They were dubbed modern Sadducees, and soon were classed with the, despised Anabaptists, and thus destined to draw the blistering fire of Calvin in his forthcoming *Psychopannychia*²⁸

But first we must note the Anabaptists and the Socinians, some of whom suffered persecution for holding to the sleep of the soul in death. We must note them, for they become definite factors in the chapters to follow.

VII. Anabaptists Often Involved in Conflict Over "Soul" in Death

The conflicts of the sixteenth century over the state of the soul in death, together with the correlated fate of the wicked, frequently involved the Anabaptists.²⁹ It is therefore essential to understand the origin, spread, and teaching of this widely scattered and often misunderstood and maligned group, in order to grasp the reason for much of the misunderstanding wherein it touches the field of our quest. One handicap to be noted at the outset is the fact that much of their contemporary history was written by avowed enemies, not by impartial historians. The facts can only be gathered from their own meager writings and from unbiased sources.³⁰

1. REGENERATION PREREQUISITE TO VALID BAPTISM.—The term "Anabaptist" was applied to those who were rebaptized —Christians who regarded their sprinkling baptism in infancy as unscriptural and invalid, and desired to be rightly baptized according to Scripture. It will be remembered that the early Donatists and Novations rebaptized on occasion. And the later Petrobrusians, Paulicians, Henricians, and Waldenses insisted on regeneration on the part of those baptized. Such groups were thus, in a sense, the spiritual forerunners of the sixteenth century Anabaptists³¹ on this point.

The Anabaptist movement in Switzerland and Germany was actually a logical development of the Protestant principles laid down by Zwingli and Luther, who took the Bible as their only standard of faith and practice and held to justification by faith as the basic principle of the gospel. But it was observed by some that in such communions, church membership, as well as the celebration of the Lord's Supper, continued to be participated in by both the "godly" and "ungodly"—that is, the truly regenerate and the unregenerate. Separation of genuine Christians from the unregenerate, who had merely been sprinkled in infancy,

therefore became a requirement among the Anabaptists. Faith, they held, was a prerequisite to true baptism.

2. DISTINGUISH SOUND ADHERENTS FROM FANATICS.—Another vital factor in the over-all picture is recognition of the fact that of the thousands of Anabaptists—scattered over Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Poland, Northern Italy, Moravia, and other lands—a majority had sound and wholesome Biblical backgrounds, *as*, for example the Waldensian and Bohemian Brethren bodies. Such were now intent on forming churches that would embody the Anabaptist understanding of Bible truth and would perpetuate their conscientious beliefs and practices.

However, the name Anabaptist was an elastic term, covering both true and false, as there were not only sound *Baptist* Anabaptists but fanatical Anabaptists and mystical Anabaptists as well. And it is to be particularly noted that it was the presence and proclivities of certain extreme groups—but all classed together as "Anabaptists"—that brought the entire movement into disrepute despite its fundamentally sound majority. It was this situation that brought on bitter opposition and persecution of Anabaptists by other religious bodies.

3. FIVE CATEGORIES OF ANABAPTISTS.—For convenience, the Anabaptists may be classified as (1) the soundly Biblical majority, embodying and perpetuating the best medieval evangelical thought, such as that of the Waldenses and the Hussites; (2) the Chiliastic Anabaptists, such as the fanatical Munster group and the Zwickau prophets, who were never really Anabaptist; (3) the mystical or speculative Anabaptists who, while allied to the Anabaptists, outlawed all ordinances as incompatible to inner spiritual life; (4) a few from the Beghards and Brethren of the Free Spirit who were tintured with pantheistic concepts; and (5) the Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptists, of the sounder group, but holding divergent views on the person of Christ.³² These opposed the Greek and Roman Catholic position and frequently denied the eternal torment of the wicked in hell. Michael Servetus (d. 1553) was in this category.

The impetuous, who had come out of medieval enthusiasms, had bold reformatory schemes and chiliastic hopes, even believing that the Reformation itself was but a halfway measure. The Munster extravagances did more than anything else to discredit the Anabaptists as a whole, despite the limited group involved. In the folly at Munster there was first excitement, then frenzy, then madness. The whole Anabaptist movement was blamed for the misdeeds of a few in Germany, for which the rest were not responsible. Such had been bewildered by the sudden transition from darkness to day. But such fringe segments, we repeat, were never really Anabaptist. Nevertheless, they were so considered, and this brought odium on all the rest.

4. PRINCIPLES HELD BY SOUND ANABAPTISTS.—Another divergence was this: To the established churches the support of the civil powers seemed imperative. But the Anabaptists held that the established Protestant churches had sacrificed truth to gain or

retain the favor of their civil rulers. And they denied the right of Christians to use the sword to protect the gospel or to resist abuses. They also held that all false doctrine should be rejected, and taught separation of the pure churches from the world in worship, marriage, teachings, et cetera. And, significantly enough, some taught the sleep of the soul in death and eternal life only in Christ received at the resurrection. This inevitably developed into tension with the established churches, which in turn resulted in prohibition of the Anabaptist assemblies. However, the more they were repressed, the more they multiplied. They were thus a disturbing, divisive factor.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF GEOGRAPHICAL GROUPS.—Of the several component groups, the (1) *Swiss* group³³ was quite evangelical. In fact, the earliest Anabaptists arose in Switzerland and were at first followers of Zwingli, accepting his earlier view that infant baptism has no scriptural authorization. But when he became reluctant to continue his Anabaptist teaching— for it would disfranchise many and disrupt the state church—they broke with him, about 1525. Pressure and persecution followed. They then challenged the arguments advanced in support of his position—that the tares and the wheat are to grow together in the church until the harvest, and that "he that is not against me is for me." The Swiss group set forth their views in their Confession of 1527, which was the basis of Zwingli's "Refutation." Their position on separation of "pure" churches from the world resulted in endless conflict. They condemned the support of pastors by taxation and refused obedience to the magistrates whenever such mandates were contrary to their own religious convictions. To them it was a struggle between despotism and soul freedom. They were threatened with banishment, many were imprisoned, and some were martyred by drowning. Thus by 1535 they were suppressed in Zurich.³⁴

(2) The *Dutch* Anabaptists repudiated the lawless acts of the Munster men, maintaining moderation in times of extravagance. Many had come as refugees from Switzerland, and enjoyed a degree of toleration. They had suffered much under the brutalities of the Inquisition, thousands dying at the stake and by the sword before toleration was secured. The early Dutch group, tied in closely with the Mennonites, constituted an important group in the Low Countries. Menno Simons, a converted Catholic priest, was their most prominent leader. With views akin to some of the earlier Anabaptists, he stressed many sound evangelical principles. He, however, denied the true humanity of Christ.

(3) The *German* Anabaptists embraced certain fanatical radicals. Their attempt at "bringing in the kingdom" by force was repugnant to other groups. But the Munster episode was met with extreme brutality. Hubmaier, though no radical, was burned at the stake. And fines, imprisonment, banishment, and death were widespread. The suppression of the Munster rebellion seemed to be the signal for all Europe to join in persecuting the Anabaptists on the ground that all were a potential menace to law and order.³⁵ It was a time of great tension.

(4) In *England*, Anabaptist teaching appeared early in the sixteenth century. Large numbers came in 1528, and by 1573 there were said to be some fifty thousand adherents in Britain. In 1530 their book *The Sum of Scripture* was condemned by an assembly of bishops and theologians, convened by the archbishop at the command of Henry VIII. Edicts were soon issued against them. Such was the situation when Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558. They were often identified and confused with other independents, and were harassed and persecuted out of England under the Tudor monarchs. When the Stuarts in the seventeenth century pursued the same policy, many Anabaptists fled to the Netherlands.³⁶

(5) In northern *Italy* and *Austria* there were numerous Anabaptist churches, and some martyrdoms.

(6) In *Poland* the Hussite influences were quite strong. Also in that country Faustus Socinus became leader of a group that agreed with the Anabaptist position on baptism. Thus Socinianism was likewise involved.

It may therefore be said that the term "Anabaptist," often used as an epithet of reproach, was applied to those Christians in the time of the Reformation who, adhering rigidly to the Scriptures as the infallible rule of faith and practice, stressed the obvious incompatibility of infant baptism with regenerate church membership. And they not only rejected infant baptism but began to establish churches of their own on the basis of believers' baptism. Reproached for rebaptizing those already "baptized" in the established churches, they brought on antagonisms by maintaining that baptism of adult believers by immersion, as administered by themselves, was the only valid Christian baptism—the so-called baptism of infants being unworthy of the name. Particular groups held to particular doctrinal views. And Conditionalism was one of the points of contention and condemnation.

VIII. Polish Anabaptists—Eternal Life After Resurrection

The Reformation in Poland, as in Bohemia, was thwarted by the Counter Reformation. Poland had not shown special devotion to the Roman See, and during the Council of Constance had evidenced sympathy with the reforms of Huss. Waldensians, Bohemians, Socinians, and Anabaptists had thus found shelter within her borders. Polish students from Wittenberg introduced Reformation principles, and at the University of Cracow the Reformation made definite progress. But papal reaction and triumph followed. The Consensus of Sendomir in 1570 was based on the Reformation formulas. It was confirmed at Cracow in 1573 and at several other centers.³⁷ A Confession of Faith, printed at Cracow in 1574 by certain Anabaptists and others driven thence by both papal and Protestant persecution, contained the following significant statement:

"So that being engrafted [by baptism] into the body of Christ he may mortify the old Adam and be transformed into the celestial Adam, in the firm assurance of eternaMife after the resurrection."³⁸

That is explicit.

A Latin copy of the Racovian Catechism (published in Polish in 1605), sent to England with a declaration to James I, was publicly burned in 1614. An English version, by J. Biddle, published at Amsterdam in 1652 was likewise formally burned in 1654 by order of Oliver Cromwell.³⁹ "Every copy of the Racovian Catechism (an exposition of the Socinian doctrine) that could be found was burned in the streets and the *Index Expurgatorius* for Catholic countries was freshly filled each year."⁴⁰

IX. Many Socinians Likewise Hold Conditionalist Positions

Many of the Socinians denied the immortality of the soul, and held to the sleep of the dead and the ultimate annihilation of the wicked after due and just punishment. In common with others they believed in the second coming of Christ, the physical resurrection of the dead, and the day of judgment.⁴¹ The old *Religious Encyclopedia* makes a succinct statement of their belief in this area. It is adduced here chiefly because current authorities are seemingly not interested in bringing out this aspect of their belief at that time and do not commonly discuss this angle—evidently not considering it of particular concern or importance. But here it is:

"Many of them [the Socinians] also reject the spirituality and separate existence of the soul, believing that man is wholly material, and that our only prospect, of immortality is from the Christian doctrine of a resurrection. Of course, the notion of an intermediate state of consciousness between death and the resurrection is rejected; for, as the whole man dies. To the whole man is to be called again to life at the appointed period of the resurrection, with the same association that he had while alive; the intermediate, portion of time having been passed by him in a state of utter insensibility."⁴²

From about the middle of the sixteenth century, Socinianism spread rapidly in Poland, as elsewhere in Europe. Following the lead of their founder, FAUSTUS SOCINUS (d. 1604),⁴³ the Socinians revolted against the high Trinitarianism of the time, taking the opposite position and denying the eternal deity of Christ. But, significantly enough as noted, many of them also rejected the Innate Immortality of all souls and repudiated the dogma of the Endless Torment of the impenitently wicked.

Thus it was that Conditionalism in time came to penetrate all groups, as we shall see—Trinitarians and Anti-Trinitarian Socinians, Lutherans and Anglicans, Arminians and Calvinists, Anabaptists and Baptists, Presbyterians and skeptics. No lines were drawn concerning Conditionalism, and it appeared in many lands and languages as the Reformation spread. We now turn to England and William Tyndale.

Footnotes

1. Dokumente zum Ablassstreit von 1517, no. 32, p. 132, quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 78.

2. Walter Koehler, *Luther's 95 Theses*, quoted in Bainton, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-83.

3. *Deutsche Reichstagsakten, jüngere Reihe*, vol. 2 (Wrede, ed.), p. 555, quoted in Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 185. "The earliest printed version added the words, 'Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.'"

4. Forthright coarse-sounding language was used frequently by these robust Reformers. To ears accustomed to the suavities and euphemisms of the twentieth century, they sound rough and uncouth. But such phraseology was part of the common parlance of the time, employed by outstanding men of the day who were desperately in earnest. They were fighting a relentless foe at close quarters and against terrific odds, and in so doing they used blunt phrasings.

5. See pages 20, 61, 485. Petavel observes, "Native [or innate] immortality there finds itself in very bad company" (*The Problem of Immortality*, p. 256).

6. 'Quoted in Blackburne, *A Short Historical View*, pp. 12, 13 (bracketed figures inserted); see also C. F. Hudson, *Debt and Grace*, p. 346.

7. Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

10. Quoted in T. A. Kantonen, *The Christian Hope* (1954), p. 37.

11. Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

12. According to Peter Bayle (Critical Historical Dictionary, art. "Luther"), Luther wrote a letter to Amsdorf in 1522, stating that he was inclined to believe that "the souls of the just sleep to the day of judgment." They "lay in a profound rest and sleep," in which opinion he followed many fathers of the ancient church. We have not been able to locate this in Luther's published writings, but it adds nothing to his accessible statements. It is interesting only for the early timing, for that was ten years before his well-known statement on [Ecclesiastes 9:10](#), in 1532.

13. Blackburne, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 124, 125.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Blackburne, in 1755, epitomized Luther's position in two sentences: The soul "*sleeps in peace, without being tormented,*" and "Luther's sleeping man was *conscious of nothing.*" (*A Short Historical View*, pp. 119, 120.)
18. T. N. Ketola, "A Study of Martin Luther's Teaching Concerning the State of the Dead" (Master of Arts Thesis, 1946), tabulating Luther's references to death as sleep—as found in *Martin Luther's Sammiliche Schriften*, ed. by Joh[ann] George Walch, 1904, lists 125 specific Luther references to death as sleep. Ketola also cites a smaller group of references showing that Luther believed in the periodic consciousness of some. But the main point stressed by Luther is that, while the dead will live again, they are unconscious during this period of sleep, which contention is stated again and again.
19. See *Auslegung des Ersten Buches Mose* (written before 1544), in *Schriften*, Vol. 1, col. 1758; *Kirken-Postille (1528)*, in *Schriften*, vol. 11, col. 1143; *Schriften*, vol. 11, col. 1069; *Deutsche Schriften* (erlanger ed.), vol. 11, p. 142 f.; vol. 41 (1525), p. 373.
20. *Catechitische Schriften* (1542), in *Schriften*, vol. 10, pp. 1425, 1426.
21. *Auslegungen uber die Psalmen* [3] (1533), in *Schriften*, vol. 4, pp. 326, 327.
22. "Am Zweiten Sontage nach Trinitatis," *Haus-Postille* (1534), in *Schriften*, vol. 13, col. 2153; "Predigt uber 1 Cor. 15: (54-57)," (1533), *Auslegung des neuen Testament*, in *Schriften*, vol. 8, col. 1340.
23. Quoted in Hudson, *of. cit.*, p. 258.
24. "Christian Songs Latin and German, for Use at Funerals," in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 6, pp. 287, 288.
25. *Ersten Buches Mose*, in *Schriften*, vol. 1 col. 1759, 1760.
26. *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, p. 242.
27. Cf. Hudson, *op cit.*, pp. 346, 347.
28. See pages 119-124.

29. While not all Anabaptists held the doctrine of "soul sleep" in death, it is nevertheless historically true that such a view was held by many among them—by perhaps more than with any other single *group* of the time.

30. Much helpful data may be found in Cathcart, Cramp, Croaby, Neal, Mills, Mosheim, Newman, Torbet, and similar historians.

31. Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, p. 35.

32. While the Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptists emphasized the propitiatory character of Christ's death, they rejected His absolute equality with the Father. Nevertheless, many of these were called Anabaptists, sometimes being confused with the Socinians.

33. Torbet, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-39.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-48.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-55

37. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1, pp. 581-588.

38. H. A. Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Refarmatis publicaturum*, pp. 565-591. A. Turobini, *Catechism and Confession*, quoted in A. J. Mills, *Earlier Life—Truth Exponents*, p. 13.

39. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 1135, 1136.

40. Alger, *The Destiny of the Soul*, p. 445.

41. Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History* {Murdock tr.}, vol. 3, pt. 4, ch. III, p. 428; see also Alger, *op. cit.*, p. 429,

42. *The Religious Encyclopedia*, art. "Socinianism."

43. Though born in Italy, FAUSTUS SOCINUS (1539-1604) lived the greater part of his life at Cracow, Poland. The early Socinians erected a college at Racovia, which attained such high repute as to attract students from both Protestant and Romanist ranks. But it was suppressed by the government in 1658, and the followers of Socinus, after protracted persecution, were likewise expelled from Poland. Socinus came to be opposed by Catholics and Protestants alike because of his attacks on orthodox teachings. He maintained that DO doctrine, even though founded on the Bible, was forced to withdraw from Cracow, where He had strongly influenced the theology of the developing Polish Unitarian Church,

unifying and organizing the budding movement. In 1562 he wrote a treatise on John's Gospel, denying the essential deity of Christ. And in 1563 he denied the natural immortality of the soul.