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After Babylon Falls: Adventist Identity and the Radical Reformation Impulse**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In his treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, the most radical of his three major works published in 1520, Martin Luther called for a dismantling of the sacramental system through which the Roman church controlled and exploited lives from cradle to grave. And it happened. The favorable response to own his courageous protest and unfettered explication of the Word of God, including the support of powerful princes of the Holy Roman Empire, began setting much of European Christendom free from its long captivity to the fusion of faith and empire that twisted the church into a machine for corruption and suppressed the truth with the sword.

**Luther’s Choice**

The hard-won freedom confronted Luther with a hard choice. What comes after Babylon’s power has fallen? “The man who had been convinced, in 1520, that all believers were equally priests now had to decide questions about authority and structure within the Church,” writes biographer Lyndal Roper.[[2]](#footnote-2) What would the post-Babylonian captivity church look like? What would define its character and identity?

In the early phase of his conflict with the papal church, Luther spoke of the true church as a *remnant* of consecrated believers, a minority gathered out from the general populace, most of which was Christian in name only. In the early 1520s, the reformer sought to create an organizational framework for the physical gathering and spiritual nurture of this remnant. As late as 1527 he encouraged formation of cells of genuine believers that would meet together in houses. They would pray and read scripture together, and receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A fellowship of committed disciples, entered by means of a free individual choice to step out from society at large and step into a distinct social organization, defined by faithfulness to the way of Jesus, called church, a believers’ church. This appears to have been, for a time, a live option for Luther. But he ended up not choosing it.

In that same year, 1527, he decided instead to pursue another option based on a proposal set forth in another of his 1520 treatises, *An Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Here he called upon the princes — the ruling authorities in the hundreds of varied political entities that comprised the Holy Roman Empire, to oversee the reform of the church in the temporary role of “emergency bishops.” The “Visitation” was put into place as the mechanism for this re-constituting of the church in Saxony under the supervision of its ruler, Elector John.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This would not be the church as remnant, shaped by adherence to the Word of God in contrast to society at large. Rather, this would be the inclusive “territorial” church. It involved, as Roland Bainton pointed out in his classic biography of Luther, *Here I Stand*, a sacramental choice in favor of infant baptism. Bainton called infant baptism the “sociological sacrament” because it is foundational to the “territorial church” in which persons become citizens by birth and Christians by baptism as infants, simultaneously and without their own volition.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In his reformed theology of the sacraments, Luther taught that a sacrament could only be valid if accompanied by faith on the part of the recipient. But he did not therefore repudiate the practice of infant baptism. In addressing this seeming inconsistency, Luther developed two lines of thought over the years: 1) the faith of the whole church applied to the baptized infant; 2) the requisite faith was incipient in the infant -- though not yet apparent or consciously held, but would later develop to full form.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Serious theological commitments lay behind these rationales, including the value Luther place on baptism as the sign of assurance to which a believer could cling when assailed by guilt or doubt. The fact that one was baptized as a helpless baby underscored, in this thinking, the fact that hope for salvation rested outside the believer in Christ alone, not in any fallible human act, not even the exercise of faith. Thus, according to Adventist scholar William M. Landeen, infant baptism was the *alpha* of Luther’s theology. Without it, “Luther’s whole religious thought would be impossible.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The stakes in Luther’s choice concerning sacraments and the reformed church were momentous. And although it was not an easy choice, he made it decisively and held to it. It had consequences that were uncomfortable to him, but the fact that he nonetheless did not flinch from these authenticates his choice as a true index of his priorities as a reformer.

Along with the shift away from the believers’ church ideal, Luther also, says Roper, “moved away from an early commitment that matters of belief should never be settled by force.” The latter transition is made manifest in his policies toward the Anabaptists, whose attempt at radical and immediate realization of the gathered church he had always rejected as too extreme. Moreover, opponents of infant baptism had been among the leaders of the Peasant Revolt of 1524, and a decade later an attempt to establish an Anabaptist theocracy at the city of Muenster had turned into a squalid and bloody nightmare.

Yet Luther clearly recognized the distinction between the violence-prone revolutionary Anabaptists and the large majority whose nonviolence and subordination to civil authorities were firmly grounded in their Jesus-based ethic. The reformer Ulrich Zwingli’s swift implementation of the death penalty in 1526 in Zurich against the earliest Anabaptists disturbed Luther. When the issue came up in Saxony in 1527, Luther acceded to the penalty of banishment for the Anabaptists. But he was haunted by the thought of emulating “the papists and the Jews before Christ” in killing “false prophets,” and thus — for the time being — refused to go further. As Roper puts it, Luther “would always remain queasy about punishing heretics.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Yet, in 1531 and in again in 1536, Luther overcame his queasiness and took, with firm resolve, the step from which he had previously drawn back. In both years, Luther and his Wittenberg colleague, Phillip Melanchthon, jointly signed memoranda that declared both the revolutionary and the peaceful Anabaptists deserving of execution.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The incongruity of this action with Luther’s stand for unarmed truth against the arrayed powers of pope and emperor defies easy resolution. Yet, the memoranda shed clarifying light. As the Wittenberg reformers saw it, the survival of Christendom was at stake. According to the 1536 memorandum, the effect of the Anabaptists’ opposition to infant baptism was to “cast children out of Christendom” and the spread of that doctrine threatened, ultimately, to make society “openly heathen.” For “obstinate” advocates of this seditious doctrine, the death penalty, not simply punishment by the sword, was specified.[[10]](#footnote-10) Luther’s commitment to the sacrament of infant baptism and the territorial church that it sacralized was the factor sufficiently potent to overcome his haunting fears about becoming like “the papists and the Jews before Christ.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

“Thus again was demonstrated the evil results, so often witnessed in the history of the church from the days of Constantine to the present, of attempting to build up the church by the aid of the state, of appealing to the secular power in support of the gospel of Him who declared: ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ John 18:36.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Ellen White’s observation about New England Puritanism a century later fits here as well. Luther’s powerful witness to the Word of God had been uniquely instrumental in freeing the church from its Babylonian captivity. Yet, after Babylon’s fall came a Protestant variation on Christendom.[[13]](#footnote-13) Recurring formulations of the Constantinian arrangement continued to her own time, according the Adventist prophet.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**The “Come-Outer” Quest**

In December, 1843, the abolitionist leader and radical social reformer William Lloyd Garrison issued, from this city of Boston, a call for a “Second Reformation” in America that would have a “glory and renown” far beyond that of the first one in the sixteenth century.[[15]](#footnote-15) Earlier that same year, Charles Fitch, himself an abolitionist of some prominence at the time, though now preoccupied with preaching the second Advent, had declared the fall of Babylon in his fiery 1843 sermon, “‘Come Out of Her, My People.’” At a time when anti-Catholic nativism was at a peak, Fitch pointed the prophetic finger at America’s Protestant empire as the “Babylon” of current concern. The nation’s culturally dominant denominations, he said, constituted “Protestant Christendom.” And this Babylon had fallen by rejecting the news of Christ’s imminent return to rule the earth, personally, literally, and directly. If Jesus were to show up and take direct charge like that, those with a stake in Protestant Christendom’s ruling social status, would lose their power and prestige, and with the wealth acquired through greed and made possible by the slave system that they tolerated.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Read in isolation, Fitch’s sweeping vitriol, his fierce and urgent insistence that condemnation awaited *all* who remained in Babylon, offends our twenty-first century sensibilities. It makes a different impression, however, when read alongside another document also produced in the same year. At its convention held in March of 1843, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society passed a resolution declaring that “the sectarian denominations of New-England should, on account of the sanction and support they afford to slavery, be considered and treated, by every friend of humanity, as the ‘Babylon of apocalyptic vision’ ‘the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.’”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In giving expression to the “second angel’s message,” as Adventists would come to understand it, Fitch was adapting the “come-outer” theme pervasive in the radical reform culture that the Millerites inhabited. According to historian Lewis Parry, “come-outerism” centered on conviction about the “millennial duty to secede from sinful institutions.” In other words, the imminent arrival of God’s new world required rejection of corrupt human authority and allegiance to God’s government alone – *now!*[[18]](#footnote-18)

William Lloyd Garrison connected his 1843 call for a “second Reformation” with the “come-outer” message. His was a call was for “No union with slaveholders,” but it applied to the established churches that colluded with oppression as well as government. Though “come-outer” had been used by opponents as a term of “contempt and reproach,” Garrison urged that “no seeker after truth be ashamed it.” And even for the apostle of non-violence, the message came with a warning: those “unwilling to bear it” should take care that they do not “perish with the scoffers.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

“Come-outerism” gave voice to the radical Protestant impulse to continue and extend the Reformation and to critique all organized forms of Protestantism in the light of advancing truth constantly unfolding from God’s Word. And it was this radical Protestant impulse that gave rise to Seventh-day Adventism. The movement labeled nineteenth-century Protestant Christendom as “Babylon” because it re-forged the Constantinian link between the church and coercive power, thus betraying a defining principle of the Protestant Reformation, one that Luther himself had expressed with characteristic power before subordinating it other commitments.

Once again, Babylon’s fall brought freedom. “We heard it with our ears, our voices proclaimed it, and our whole being felt its power, and with our eyes we saw its effect, as the oppressed people of God burst the bands that bound them to the various sects, and made their escape from Babylon,” wrote James White in describing the experience of the second angel’s message in 1843-1844. To stay in the “fallen churches” would have been to remain “bound down by ministers and creeds,” but coming out brought them to a new place “where we are free to think and act for ourselves in the fear of God.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Adventism called out a people freed from every institution and power that oppresses humanity, a people of unwavering allegiance to the rule of Christ.

But soon the Sabbatarian Adventist movement in the 1850s, like Luther in the 1520s, faced the question, What comes after Babylon falls? The dawning realization of a comprehensive mission preceding the fullness of Christ’s reign mandated “gospel order” — organizational structure that would support both “the oneness and freedom of the gospel,” as James White put it in 1853.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Our Choice**

The oneness *and* the freedom of the gospel, how to have both at the same time and how to define and defend both — this conflict-laden quest runs through the entire Adventist story down to the particularly pressing, critical form it in which we now face it. I do not have a formula or program to propose. But the 500th anniversary of the launch of Luther’s reformation, invites reflection on the identity and vocation of the reformed church, the question of what comes after Babylon falls. Such a conversation might, in turn, cast fresh light on our current concerns.

Probably no one would defend Luther’s territorial, state-backed church as a model for Adventism. But it does provide a useful foil for the discussion about what a post-Babylonian church *should* look like. The Adventist movement arose at the radical Protestant impulse that was calling into question all churchly institutions that gave comfort to unconstrained accumulation of wealth through an economic system built upon and sustained by oppression and violence. Seventh-day Adventists would go on to formulate a theology of history that centered on the trajectory of that radical reformation impulse and fostered identity as a people faithful to God’s government over against the compromises with coercion that the church began making under the emperor Constantine.

That identity-forming narrative, given classic expression by Ellen White in *The Great Controversy*, owes a largely unacknowledged debt, and the Luther retrospective is an opportune moment to talk about it. For that debt is to the Anabaptist movement that pioneered the radical alternative that Luther finally rejected and then persecuted. A century before Roger Williams, whom Adventist narratives typically present as completing the arc toward religious freedom launched by the Reformation,[[22]](#footnote-22) the Anabaptists initiated and embodied, at enormous cost, the core values that animate the “great controversy” narrative, such as: a clean break with Constantinianism; following the light of scriptural discovery wherever it leads; a way of life made distinctive by its congruence with those discoveries; acceptance of persecution as the price of that nonconformity as well as redemptive witness; and, a world mission.

Recovery of the Anabaptist heritage to its rightful place in the story of the “great controversy,” while in continuity with the existing narrative, also goes beyond it in crucial ways. Consider the concise description of the Anabaptist way given by Mennonite historian Harold Bender in 1943:

1. A new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship: all of life was to be fashioned after the teaching and example of Jesus.

2. A new conception of the church as a brotherhood: a community of voluntary commitment to the way of Christ, suffering, sharing of possessions, which is separate from and a challenge to worldly society.

3. A new ethic of love and nonresistance: rejection of warfare and violence in human relationships.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Beyond the individual freedom that Adventist literature has tended emphasize, the Anabaptist reformation highlights what it means to be a people whose common life is ordered as a witness against coercive power. Drawing on this aspect of the Anabaptist legacy would, arguably, involve a course correction for twenty-first century Adventism. Yet it would by no means be alien or incongruous diversion. That was the point of highlighting earlier that Adventism and immediate abolitionism were of the same radical Protestant parentage. The Anabaptist heritage can thus be a resource for recovery of a much-neglected aspect of the Adventist heritage.

What comes after Babylon falls? Ellen White wrote of a light being kindled at Wittenberg five hundred years ago “whose rays should extend to the uttermost pars of the earth, and which was to increase in brightness to the close of time.”[[24]](#footnote-24) To dismiss or marginalize the Anabaptist witness would be to truncate our endeavors to fulfill the vocation of moving the Reformation forward as “light bearers.” The openness to “present truth” that is to be a hallmark of our movement calls us to critical yet teachable appropriation of the Anabaptist reformation into our story.[[25]](#footnote-25) We need it:

* for guidance in living out the meaning of the baptismal identity that makes us nonconformists in the present age;[[26]](#footnote-26)
* to sharpen our prophetic resistance to the contemporary reformulations of Constantinianism that have hijacked Christianity in America, whether as sacred legitimation for ethno-nationalist militarism or for liberal internationalism;[[27]](#footnote-27)
* to help us “recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism;”[[28]](#footnote-28)
* in sum, to represent Jesus more fully and authentically to a perishing world, as a community of hope that not only announces but moves toward the promise of “new heavens and a new earth, in which justice will be at home” (2 Peter 3:13, *New Testament for Everyone*).

1. Portions of this essay have been adapted from the following by the author: “Toward Oneness and Freedom: The Road From Babylon to General Conference Organization,” *Spectrum* 41:2 (Spring 2013), 18-26; and “Luther, Adventists, Anabaptists, and Liberty,” in Michael W. Campbell and Nikolaus Satelmajer, eds., *Here We Stand: Luther, the Reformation and Seventh-day Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 233-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2016), 333-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Roland H. Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 117-119; Roper, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 109-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heiko O. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 230; William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1971), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roper, 334; Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation*, 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Luther opposed the use of force against *heresy*, defined as privately held, unorthodox belief, and *blasphemy* — public opposition a doctrine central to the Christian faith, on the level of those affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed. The latter would be an action that “upset society” and thus rightly subjected to civil penalties, even the death penalty. The 1531 memorandum distinguished between Anabaptists guilty of sedition and those guilty only of blasphemy, but supported the death penalty for both. In an addendum adding his personal assent to the 1531 memorandum, Luther acknowledged the appearance of cruelty, but contended that all who rejected the “ministerial office” were guilty of blasphemy, a crime of greater cruelty than the seeming cruelty of punishing them with the sword. See Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation*, 41-42, and *Here I Stand*, Chapter 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The 1536 memorandum made no distinction between the peaceful and revolutionary Anabaptists. In addition to opposing infant baptism, teachings that Christians should not use the sword, serve as a magistrate, take oaths, or hold property were all grounds for charges of sedition. See Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation*, 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Evidence that the prospect of executing peaceful dissidents continued to cause Luther inner dissonance include the fact that his addendum to the 1536 memorandum urged that, in the words of Bainton, “severity be tempered by mercy” and that in his “table talks,” Luther is reported to have returned, in 1540, to the position that only the seditious or revolutionary Anabaptists should be executed, with banishment be the most severe penalty for the others. See Bainton, *Here I Stand*, Chapter 22. My contention is that the likelihood that such use of coercion in matters of faith always went against Luther’s heart, and his best insights, only underscores the strength of his commitment to infant baptism and its concomitant, the territorial church, which necessitated the measures for repressing the Anabaptists. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1911), 297, Ellen G. White Writings, <https://egwwritings.org> . [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Christendom” used here to denote political territory officially identified as Christian and ruled by Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Though Ellen White avoided direct criticism of Luther, she decried the Protestant “state churches” such as established under Luther for “following Rome’s example of iniquitous connection with ‘the kings of the earth.’” *Great Controversy*, 383. This, presumably, was prominent among the reasons for pointing out that Luther did not complete the Reformation; rather, it was “to be continued to the close of this world’s history….From that time to this, new light has been continually shining upon the Scriptures, and new truths have been constantly unfolding” (148). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “The Second Reformation,” *Liberator* (22 Dec. 1843), 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. C. Fitch, *“Come Out of Her, My People,” A Sermon* (Rochester: J.V. Himes, 1843), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CharlesFitchComeOutOfHerMyPeople1843>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Convention at Haverhill,” *Liberator* (7 Apr. 1843), 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lewis Parry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Garrison, “Second Reformation”; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 300-304, 313, 368-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. James White, “The Third Angel’s Message*,” Present Truth*, April 1850, 65-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Gospel Order,” *Review*, Dec. 6, 1853, 173, emphasis supplied. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Williams completed what Luther began,” wrote Alonzo T. Jones in summarizing a lengthy section of his tome *The Two Republics; or Rome and the United States of America* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Co., 1891), 662. Ellen White followed a similar line in *The Great Controversy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 42-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *The Great Controversy*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Adventist scholars have made important strides in bringing to light the significance of the Anabaptist legacy for Adventism. In *The Reformation and the Advent Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Review Herald, 1983), W.L. Emmerson showed how it was in fact the Anabaptist strand of Reformation history that figures most directly in the Adventist heritage. George R. Knight similarly asserts that “Adventism is the heir of the Anabaptist/Restorationist wing of the Reformation rather than the Lutheran or Calvinistic” in his influential synthesis of the historical development of Adventist theology, *A Search for Identity* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 177. In *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) Adventist historian Nicholas P. Miller gives prominent place to the contribution of the Anabaptists in the development of the “dissenting Protestantism” that, he argues, was of foremost importance in shaping religious liberty in America. In addition to this book, which has received much favorable recognition in the wider intellectual community, Miller has recently made his analysis more readily accessible to Adventist readers in *500 Years of Protest and Liberty: From Martin Luther to Modern Civil Rights* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), see especially Chapter 2. Charles Scriven has upheld the importance of the Anabaptist heritage for renewal of Adventist faith and practice in numerous works, notably “Radical Discipleship and the Renewal of Adventist Mission,” *Spectrum* 14:3 (December 1983), 11-20; and “The Peacemaking Remnant: Dreaming a Grander Dream,” *Spectrum* 27:3 (Summer 1999), 67-73. The Anabaptist witness has also figured prominently in the work of Adventist political theorist Ronald E. Osborn, for example, *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence and Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Believers’ baptism “was the sociological prerequisite for forming in the midst of the world a community of non-conformists . . . . That community is different from the surrounding community not because, like so many of the groups in the American melting pot, they came from a different part of the old country, but because of the allegiance they confess to Jesus as Lord, over against other lords,” wrote John H. Yoder in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics and Gospel* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The latter’s projects are usually more humane but at times untethered from God’s saving story and nonetheless backed by drones, cluster bombs, and a nuclear arsenal. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” 4 Apr. 1967, transcript, King Institute Encyclopedia, <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)