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VADIANUS (1484-1551) THE SCHOLAR-LAYMAN AS CHURCH REFORMER

By David Hilton

There are a number of Swiss Reformers who are unknown to English Christians today, but who were significant figures in their day. One of these was born in St Gall, Joachim von Watt, who gave himself the Latin name, 'Vadianus.' St Gall (modern day St Gallen) was a city of some 4,000 inhabitants, slightly smaller than nearby Zurich, a centre of Protestant Reformation under Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) and then Henry Bullinger (1504-1575).

Joachim came from a wealthy family in St Gall, so he was able to obtain all the books he needed for his studies, without needing to follow a clerical career. In 1501 he went to Vienna University, which had both Scholastic and Humanist influences. To show that he sided with Erasmean Humanism, he called himself 'Vadianus.' He became a professor of the university in 1512, and then rector. The Emperor crowned him Poet Laureate.

Vadianus was a learned scholar in natural science, astronomy, geography, history, Greek and classical studies. At the height of his scholarly career, in 1518, he left the university world behind, and returned to St Gall to become the city physician.

Like many other Humanists who became Evangelical Reformers, Vadianus was influenced by Erasmus's Greek New Testament, and his editions of the Church Fathers, printed in Basle, where Erasmus spent his last days.

Vadianus also read some of Luther's and Melanchthon's earlier writings. He was scandalized by the Roman Catholic Church's negative response to both Erasmus's and Luther's calls for church reform, and by the Papacy's attempts to persecute Luther.

From 1519 onwards Vadianus was in regular contact with Zwingli, who was similarly moving towards a biblical and Evangelical position. He took a close interest in the steps toward reformation in Zurich, which Zwingli encouraged the magistrates to take. But how could Vadianus, a layman, bring about a similar reformation in St Gall?

Reformation in St Gall

In the early 1520s Vadianus wrote a commentary on the Book of Acts, employing his great historical and geographical, as well as biblical scholarship.

In November 1523 a colleague and helper arrived in St Gall. Johannes Kessler (1502-74) was a theological student drop-out after 6 months at Wittenberg University. He shared his notes from the lectures and sermons of Luther, Melanchthon and Karlstadt.

Vadianus and Kessler formed a study group which discussed the New Testament and Lutheran writings. These group discussions were clearly influential since the Catholic cantons took alarm, and asked the St Gall Council to silence the group.

However, the St Gall magistrates witnessed the success of Zwingli, Megander and Jud in the Zurich disputations with Roman Catholic opponents. Also in 1523, a student of Luther's opponent, Johann Eck, arrived in St Gall. This was Balthasar Hubmaier (1480-1525) who had joined the Reformation

cause. Hubmaier's sermons in the open air made a great impression in St Gall, even though he remained there for only a short time. (Hubmaier would later become a South German Anabaptist leader).

In 1523 the St Gall Council accepted the Reformation. They declared that clergy were to preach the Word of God as found in Scripture. They set up a commission, which included Vadianus, to undertake the reform of the church.

They set up a poor relief scheme where goods were to be distributed to the poor. Bullinger and Calvin would set up similar schemes under lay deacons.

In 1525 Vadianus became Burgermaster, and set about bringing similar reforms as those happening in Zurich. Images were removed from the churches, the mass ceased and the first Evangelical Lord's Supper service took place at Easter 1527. A catechism was introduced for the Christian instruction of the youth.

The St Gall magistrates produced a 'morals mandate' to regulate the conduct of the people, including ensuring that all citizens attended church services. It also required school teachers to be responsible for the religious and moral education of boys and girls.

Anabaptists in St Gall

One of Vadianus's students at Vienna University was Conrad Grebel (1498-1526). Back in St Gall, he persuaded his former professor of the values of marriage, and that he would find a suitable wife in his sister, Martha Grebel.

Conrad moved to Zurich, where with others, he eventually separated from Zwingli's Reformation, leaving the Swiss Brethren or 'Anabaptist' movement there, before the magistrates suppressed it. In 1525 Grebel's group baptized one another to form a gathered church.

On Palm Sunday 1525 in St Gall, Grebel and other Anabaptists disrupted an infant baptism service. For some months Vadianus had corresponded with Zwingli on the subject of baptism, resulting in Zwingli's tract, 'concerning Baptism, Rebaptism and Infant Baptism' being read out from the pulpit of St Lawrence church in St Gall.

The St Gall Council disapproved of the Anabaptists' rejection of tithing and of swearing oaths. They forbade Anabaptist baptisms and separate services, fining them for their disobedience, but not expelling them.

Grebel failed to convince Vadianus of his radical views. St Gall, however, became a city of refuge for Anabaptists. There was a possibility that they could dominate the city numerically, but they failed to win over the leading citizens. Eventually, the Anabaptist movement in St Gall petered out, especially after one Anabaptist beheaded his brother, claiming the Spirit's leading.

Vadianus's Later Ministry

After Zurich and St Gall's military defeat by the Catholic cantons, and the death of Zwingli and other chaplains, Vadianus, an advocate of peace, gave wise political leadership to St Gall. He concluded from the military defeat that God was signifying that ministers of the Word should teach peace and not war. He worked well with Henry Bullinger at Zurich, who kept out of politics to concentrate on shepherding the church.

Vadianus as a scholar went on learning throughout his life. He believed in the unity of truth in nature and in biblical revelation. He wrote histories of St Gall, of monasticism, and of the Roman

Emperors from Augustus to Caligula. He encouraged Bullinger to study the history of the church in the patristic and medieval eras. He shared Bullinger's theology, whose 'Decades' would have such an influence on Elizabethan Anglicans.

In the Spring of 1551, Vadianus's health deteriorated. His wide scholarship had been inspired by Erasmus. He had a wide circle of correspondents among the Reformers. He provided good service and wise leadership to his native city of St Gall. His approach to theology was not speculative, but was historically based. For such a well-read scholar, his faith was simple and practical.

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