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## Literarily . . . An Explosion!

Conrad Grebel, a young Anabaptist, wrote on September 3, 1524:

I am full of words and the spirit of my belly constrains me. Behold my belly is as new wine without a vent, which bursts the wineskins. I shall speak and I shall breathe a little more freely: I shall open my lips and make answer.<sup>1</sup>

Hans Denck, a widely-travelled Anabaptist messenger from southern Germany, wrote:

I open my mouth against my will. I speak reluctantly about God, but he compels me to speak so I cannot be silent.... Some brothers think they have utterly explored the gospel, and whoever does not agree with everything they say must be a heretic. Should one wish to give an account of one's faith to those who desire it, then they say that one causes discord and tumult among the people. If one ignores the wrong things they say, they insist that one shrinks from the light. Very well, let God draw me out of my corner then, and I will say what is on my mind. Whether it will do any good, only God knows. For there are many who ask for the truth, but few who like to hear it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Job 32:18-20, quoted in a letter of September 3, 1524, to Joachim von Watt (Vadian).

<sup>2</sup> From *Was geredt sey . . .* published at Augsburg in 1526.

Fortunately, Conrad Grebel, Hans Denck, and other Anabaptists, did not stay silent. And they did more than just speak. They wrote. From the beginning of the movement their writings shook the populace. Roman Catholics burned them. Luther cursed them. Zwingli and Bullinger wrote scathing replies. Practically all European governments made the publication, the distribution and the ownership of Anabaptist writings a capital offence. But they survive to speak today.

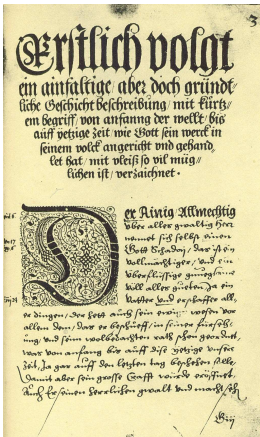
### **The Anabaptist Writings**

Unlike the writings of the first Christians, which survive only in rare manuscripts and in limited quantity, the writings of the Anabaptists survive in amazing abundance, and more are coming to light all the time. When Roman Catholic authorities ransacked the Anabaptist communities of Moravia and drove the brothers away, they hauled off wagonloads of handwritten books. Many of them survive, even after World War II, and are being discovered in the libraries and church archives of Europe.

The difficulty in preparing this book was not in finding material to use, but in deciding what *not* to use. Without constant effort and many deletions, this book could have grown to the size of the *Martyrs Mirror* and the *Aelteste Chronik* combined! But it was deliberately kept brief. This regrettably required the use of fragments and abbreviated passages. Those who can do so are urged to read these writings in their original languages and in their context if possible.

### **Spontaneous Literature**

“How did they do it?” I have asked myself time after time. Out of money, driven from their homes, when paper was scarce, ink expensive, and the publishing of their books was a mortal risk, the Anabaptists produced thousands upon thousands of books for free distribution!



**Anabaptist writers and publishers** used printing presses where possible. But printing, in the sixteenth century, continued to be a costly, time-consuming affair. Copying writings by hand was much simpler, even though it did not allow for as wide a distribution of the finished product.

This page from the Hutterite *Gross-Geschichtsbuch*, first written on vellum during the 1500s and recopied many times, is an example of what came from the *Schreibstuben* (scriptoriums, writing rooms) of the believers in Moravia. Young men and women, working under gifted teachers like Hauprecht Zapf, reproduced thousands of writings, some of them surviving in European libraries and in Anabaptist communities today.

The only thing I can see is that God helped them.

The first Anabaptists had no central organization. For the most part (outside of Moravia) They had no publishing houses nor editorial committees. Their earliest writings were nothing but the spontaneous efforts of individuals here and there, many of them in jail. Their originality shows in poetry that doesn't quite rhyme, Scriptures quoted by memory, words and names written in a vast variety of German dialectic spellings and misspellings, a lack of punctuation, and in many cases a lack of style or form. But God spoke through their literature and it moved Europe.

In this book you will often read what “the Anabaptists said” or “the Anabaptists believed.” Such statements, in light of the spontaneity of my sources cannot be taken as all-inclusive absolutes. The Anabaptists shared the secret of the strength of their movement, but many of them did not share the beliefs of the majority in every area.

## **A Word of Caution**

You will, in fact, almost certainly disagree with some things the Anabaptists said and believed. If you are a descendant of the Anabaptists themselves, you may feel disappointed and unsettled (I did). You may be sorely tempted to doubt my

sources, to write off the men I quote as “unsound” or “marginal” characters, or simply to dismiss this book by saying: “Well, the Anabaptists were off on some things too.”

They probably were. But I encourage you not to react like my friend from Pennsylvania did. Several years ago I wrote a paper on threefold baptism as taught by the Anabaptists. The night after I gave him the paper I was startled to suddenly have him knocking on my door. Because he lived a good distance away, my first thought was that something terrible must have happened. He looked dishevelled and excited. “Peter!” he exclaimed as he burst through the door. “I read your paper and just had to come to talk things over. What is going on?”

“Did you read the whole paper?” I asked him.

“No,” he confessed. “I didn’t get past the first paragraph where you spoke of being buried in baptism. I thought it sounded like you were going off track and teaching immersion. . . .”

I understood my friend’s concern. I grew up like he did. But our Anabaptist forefathers could not have understood it at all, and this book, which consists largely of what they wrote, reflects their insensitivity to our doctrinal touchiness.

My prayer is that such “details” in this book will not divert your attention from its theme. My prayer is that you will find your way through the superficial, the transient, and that which you did not expect, to get your hands on the truth behind the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century. If that can happen, and if a light comes on in your heart as a result, I shall feel amply rewarded for having prepared this book in the English language.

## **A Word on Anabaptist Research**

Knowing what the Anabaptists taught is not enough. Thousands, now-a-days, both know what they taught and are able to expound on it at length, but their lifestyle remains unchanged.

This book is written with a general distrust of Anabaptist scholars who do not live in an “Anabaptist” (radically nonconformed) way. It is written with little sympathy or appreciation for the conclusions of most modern-day Anabaptists. What can those who have gone the way of the world in education, in economics, in dress, and in entertainment contribute to the understanding of what was believed by their forefathers in the sixteenth century?

Can a man describe the inner feelings of a woman?

How can those who have isolated themselves in culturally elite, rural communities in North America, or those who have become wealthy property owners and businessmen, identify with the Anabaptists who were often at the bottom of the working class, landless, and city dwellers?

This book is written with the premise that only those who choose the life which the Anabaptists chose will in the end discover what they thought and believed.

## **Anabaptist Quotations in This Book**

Most twentieth-century Christians do not know Anabaptist writings because they cannot read them. The Anabaptists wrote in a variety of German dialects. (“Standard High German” had not yet become a standard in their day.) Some of their important writings have never been translated into English. Those that have been translated are in some cases hard to read because of the cumbersome English used to portray German thoughts. (How, for instance, do you best translate such graphic terms as *untergeworfen*, *angestrengt*, or *einverleibt*?)

In this book I have tried to make the Anabaptists as readable as possible without altering the sense of their statements. I have used some English translations (such as Leonard Verduin’s excellent one of Menno Simons’ writings), but even in them I have changed some terms back to correspond more exactly with

their German originals (such as “teachings” instead of “doctrine” for the German word *Lehre*, and “nighttime meal” instead of “communion” for *Nachtmal*). I have tried to express original German ideas as accurately as possible. Because of this I favoured the use of standard German above English translations, the gap between standard and dialectic German (or Dutch) being much smaller than the gap between those dialects and English.

Those acquainted with Anabaptist writings will notice that I have in some cases broken up or abbreviated quotations for the sake of readability and brevity. In all such cases I refer readers to the original works or their competent translations for the full text.

References are given to original Anabaptist works, which were my sources, whenever possible, for the quotations used in this book. Of these you may find many translations, both fragmentary and complete, in standard High German and English. A good way to locate them is by searching in scholarly Anabaptist bibliographies in Mennonite college libraries.

This book itself is not a scholarly work. It is not a reference book. Its translations are rough and fragmentary. Its references are incomplete. But I pray that the Spirit who moved the Anabaptist writers will move those who read this book and lead them . . .