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On to Conviction

Nestled into the northern shoulders of the Swabian Alps, lies the old German city of Schwäbisch-Gmünd. The Romans knew this place. Its Johanneskirche (St. John's Church) dates from 1230, and its cathedral of the Holy Cross was already old in 1528 when a strange man came to town.

The young man, Martin Zehentmayer, came from Bavaria and was an artist. At least he had been an artist learning to paint in the city of Augsburg in Bavaria. There, they said, he had joined a fanatical sect and had gotten expelled. Now he was in Schwäbisch-Gmünd.

None of the respectable people in town would have anything to do with him. But Martin made his presence known. A poet who wrote songs, he went from house to house calling on people to follow Jesus. The young people fell for him. His sincerity deeply impressed them and what he said cut right through the stuffy formality of Schwäbisch-Gmünd's society to the innermost longing of their hearts: a longing for peace with God in brotherly community. Before the townspeople caught on to what was happening, Martin had baptised over one hundred people and was secretly celebrating the Eucharist in their homes.

They caught him on a winter night in February, 1529, in a secret meeting—right in the act of “deceiving” the young, the simple, and the poor people of town. Along with Martin they grabbed

forty others, including nineteen girls and women. Many of them they soon let go for their “innocence,” but Martin and the most outspoken among them they kept on bread and water in the tower prison on the city wall until the end of the year.

The people in the city who had come to the meetings did all they could to stay in contact with the prisoners. Some women and children climbed the city wall at night to reach the tower and talk to them. They read to the prisoners and sang together. But this stopped when the guards discovered them and prohibited further contact.

They tortured Martin on the rack, accusing him of sexual impropriety. But he had little to confess other than his desire to live like Jesus and his conviction (ridiculous from the authorities’ point of view) to hold with the believers all his possessions in common.

On December 4, 1528, they finally brought the seven “obstinate ones” out of their cells and tried them publicly for the benefit of the town. Among the seven stood a woman and the young son of the miller.

The seven prisoners continued in their “stubbornness,” so the town council convicted them of heresy and sentenced them to death. Then, three days later they led them in chains from the tower prison to a bare frozen field outside the walls of the city. A contingent of the Swabian League (under the provost, Berthold Aichele) surrounded them. Noblemen, lords, and judges followed on horseback, and the townspeople, a great crowd, came along behind. The beating of drums made it hard to speak or to be heard.

On the field, the soldiers formed a large circle, with the convicts, the guards, and two executioners in the centre. Then, what was that! The youngest of the seven, the miller’s son, was shouting something.



The Marienbrunnen (fountain of Mary) in the market place at Schwäbisch-Gmünd, whose miraculous benefits the Anabaptists disowned.

His voice above the sound of the drums was clear, and many could understand what he said: “Stand off from your sins! Turn to God! There is no other way to heaven than through the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to redeem us!”

Some women in the crowd shouted back: “Keep up your courage, young man! Be strong!”

But it was too much for one of the mounted noblemen. He could not bear to see the young man killed. Demanding permission, he rode into the ring to speak with the boy.

“My son,” he said, “stand off yourself from the error you are in, and make things right! Do not lose your young life! What do you think you will have for it? I will take you home and keep you with me. I will give you a permanent inheritance as my own son and see to your needs for life. You will have many good things. Now come! Come with me and be my son!”

But the young man answered him distinctly: “God does not want me to do that. Should I choose a worldly life and forsake God? I would do evil by making such a choice, and I will not do it. Your wealth can help neither you nor me. I choose greater riches by persevering to the end. I will surrender my Spirit to God and commend myself to Jesus so that his bitter suffering on the cross will not have been in vain for me.”

They beheaded the seven on the bare frozen field. It was December 7, 1528, and great fear came upon the people. Someone said he saw lights above the fountain in the town square that night and heard the singing of angels. The city council, just to be sure, kept on round-the-clock duty the soldiers of the Swabian League.

Convicted

Who was convicted at Schwäbisch-Gmünd?

The city court convicted the seven prisoners and sentenced them to die. But did they die for that conviction?

No. They died because their hearts had been touched with an infinitely higher conviction—the conviction that they were doing right by following Jesus no matter what it cost.

Inwardly sure that following Jesus was the right thing to do, nothing could make the Anabaptists feel guilty. They followed Jesus into baptism, into the breaking of bread, into turning the other cheek, into a new and totally different economy, into every area of his life and teachings, even into suffering and death, without it ever occurring to them that they could be wrong. The people who killed them sensed this, and it frightened them. They sensed that against such conviction—conviction that chooses capital punishment over a nobleman’s inheritance—no tradition, nor law, nor family, nor emperor, nor sword, nor pope, nor church could stand, because it produces martyrs.

The First Martyr

For the Anabaptists, the first martyr was not Stephen, but Jesus,¹ and it was easy for them to see their lives as parallels—imperfect human parallels—of his.

Jesus Christ refused an easy life, earthly glory, and all the kingdoms of the world. He withstood his family, the religious leaders of his day, and the government of the Roman Empire. He walked without hesitating to a gruesome death (even when twelve legions of angels could have saved him) because he felt in his heart the calm assurance that he was doing what was right.

The first Anabaptists, following him, were touched with that same assurance. And from there it was a small step to calling their own religious leaders the “crowd of Caiaphas” and their own government officials “Pilate’s children.”² And it was also a small step to drawing the final parallel between them and Jesus in a martyr’s death.

The Anabaptists saw Jesus as one who did what was right even when every soul on the earth abandoned him. And in that “loneliness of Christ” where every man must take up his cross to follow him, they found inner communion with him. In it they came to “know Christ and the Gemeinschaft of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” and in it they hoped to attain, with him, “to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10).

Following the martyr Christ, the Anabaptists, at the close of the Dark Ages, chose with him the way of the cross that leads to eternal life and light.

¹ The *Martyrs Mirror*, first published by the Anabaptists of the Netherlands in 1660, begins with the account of “Jesus Christ the Son of God, crucified in Jerusalem”. The third song of the *Ausbund* begins even further back, with the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist.

² The *Aelteste Chronik* especially, uses these terms, but they also appear in the *Ausbund*, the *Martyrs Mirror* and elsewhere.

What Made the Dark Ages Dark?

The early Christians, up to the time of Ulfilas, followed Jesus. But the light went out when they became afraid to do what was right (like Ulfilas among the barbarians) alone.

Afraid to do right if “the whole group” was not behind them, the early Christians stopped being a movement of convicted believers and became an organised religious body. They stopped being “rebels,” “fanatics,” and “those who turn the world upside down” to become a respected element of society. The world stopped fearing them. With that, it stopped hating them, and the age of persecution faded away.

Within the church conviction died as “submission” took its place, and “God-ordained authorities” found it necessary to tell everyone what to do and what to believe. The voice of the church took its place above the voice of a Christ-directed conscience, and “Christian Europe” lay for a thousand years in ignorance, bondage, and fear.

Ideas from the “Infidels”

The church of the Dark Ages tried to control everything the people of Europe did. Even worse, it tried to control what they thought. The church had long convinced the people that it was more important to submit than to think. The people no longer dared to think. In fact, after a thousand years, almost everyone had forgotten how, until strange things began to happen.

The pope, to keep the church of the Dark Ages together, called, in the name of the Lord Jesus, for “Christian crusades.” No longer united by love nor by principle, the church sought unity in common hatred of the Muslims who had taken over the Middle East and northern Africa, and were pushing from all sides into Europe itself. The “infidels” had overrun “Christian”

Spain and now threatened to take even the Spanish town where the apostle James's bones were said to lie.³

In the 1400's the pope and the Roman Catholic rulers of Spain finally drove the Muslims back. But in that conquest, the "Christian" armies of Europe (unwittingly, like the Germans a thousand years earlier) brought back with their plunder their own undoing. This time it was not a Cappadocian boy, but a collection of old Muslim and Jewish books. The books were translations from Greek, and after the invention of printing in the 1450s they released a flood of new ideas upon Europe. These exciting ideas gave birth to a new faith in man and a new hope for his future—the movement called *humanism*.

The humanists, after a thousand years of darkness, once more dared to "think for themselves". They even dared to question the traditions of the church, and in so doing they set parts of Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland on a course to the Protestant Reformation.

This led to greater discoveries . . .

Beyond Humanism

Like the popes and bishops of the Dark Ages, the Protestant Reformers knew nothing but to build churches on the principle of submission to God-given authority. But they did so with a much more impressive authority than the Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholics' only claim to authority was their continuity—their "apostolic succession." The Reformers had something far better. Their claim to authority was sound doctrine (*sola fide*) and the Bible itself (*sola scriptura*). Against such a church, a "Biblical church," who would dare to rebel?

Johannes Denck dared.

³ Compostela, in the northwestern corner of Spain (Galicia), a major pilgrimage site in mediaeval Europe.

A university student at Ingolstadt in Bavaria, Johannes Denck did not look like a rebel. He was “tall, very friendly, and of modest conduct.”⁴ He was also intelligent. One professor described him as “surpassing his age and seeming older than what he was.”⁵ Enrolling in the university when he was seventeen years old he graduated two years later with a bachelor’s degree, fluent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. In his first job, he undertook the editing of a three-volume Greek dictionary.

At 23 years of age, Johannes Denck (*Hans* as everyone called him) accepted an appointment to the position of rector at the Sankt Sebald school of Nürnberg in Bavaria. He married a young woman of the city and they had a baby.

But all was not well.

Deep down in his heart, Hans (who had learned to “think for himself” in the university) knew his thinking was getting him nowhere. Like his “enlightened” Protestants friends, he had no victory over sin in his private life. He felt guilty and disappointed. “Surely there must be more to life than this!” he told himself. “But what?”

Hans was not the only one to ask this question. All around him people were grumbling about the “Reformation farce.” Some were actually going back to the Roman Catholics. Then Hans found the answer in the call of Jesus: “Follow me!”

It changed his life.

Hans took as his motto, “No one truly knows Christ unless he follows him daily in life,” and began at once to follow him to the best of his ability. That made trouble. The faculty and board of Sankt Sebald’s school roused themselves. His parents-in-law

⁴ From Johannes Kessler’s *Sabbata* a cultural and church history written at Sankt Gallen, in Switzerland, in the mid-1500’s.

⁵ Joachim von Watt (Vadian), the reformed scholar of Sankt Gallen.

told him to be careful. But Hans did what he believed was right—even when they summoned him to court.

The city court of Nürnberg demanded an explanation for his “odd behaviour.” Hans replied in writing:

I confess that I am a poor soul, subject to every weakness of body and spirit. For some time I thought I had faith, but I have come to see that it was a false faith. It was a faith that could not overcome my spiritual poverty, my inclinations to sin, my weaknesses and my sickness. Instead of that, the more I polished and adorned myself on the outside (with my supposed faith) the worse became my spiritual sickness on the inside. . . . Now I see clearly that I cannot keep on in this unbelief before God, so I say: Yes Lord! In the name of the Almighty God whom I fear from the bottom of my heart, I want to believe. Help me to believe.⁶

The court decided, in spite of his humble testimony, that Hans could not stay in Nürnberg. On January 21, 1525, in the dead of winter, they expelled him from the city with orders not to come closer than ten miles to it, on pain of death, for the rest of his life. They confiscated his property to support his wife and child who had to stay behind, and he found himself on the road, among the mountains and snow-laden forests of southern Germany, with nothing but the clothes on his back—and the inner conviction that he was doing what was right.

Joy in Surrender

By the time he left Nürnberg, Hans Denck had rejected his humanistic education that had taught him to “think for himself.” Inner peace, he now knew, is not discovered in thinking for oneself, but in thinking like Jesus and in following him, no matter if one has to do it alone.

Once he comprehended this, Hans entered, with the Anabaptist movement, into actual *Gemeinschaft* with the martyr Christ.

⁶ From Hans Denck’s confession of faith, written on January 14, 1525.

And in this he discovered, with them, the joy of submitting to Christ within us, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

In prison, before they beheaded him at Rattenberg on the Inn, Leonhard Schiemer wrote in 1527:

There are three gifts of God. The first gift is the Word given to us by the Father. It is the law, the light of God within us. This light of God within us shows us what sin is, and what it is not. All men have this light, but not all of them make use of it.

The second gift is Christ, the righteousness of God. The first light (the light within us) is our guide to this second light which is Christ. But there is only one way to get to the second light. It is through the melt-oven of true surrender (*Gelassenheit*). . . .

The third gift is the gift of joy. It is the promise of the Holy Spirit and of the glory of God. The life of the world begins in happiness but ends in sadness. The life of the one who fears God has a sorrowful beginning; then the Holy Spirit comes to anoint him with unspeakable joy.⁷

With Hans Denck and Leonhard Schiemer the first Anabaptists found Christ, the “true light which lights every man that comes into the world” (John 1:9), and the great joy that comes in total surrender to him.

Like a Willing Bride

God, the Anabaptists taught, gives to all of us the freedom to think and to believe what we want. But God, they also taught, convicts all of us when we sin and gives us a longing to do what is right. This gift from God, this knowledge of the truth—our *Gemüth* (intuition)—is a light within us to guide us in the choices we make. We all have the freedom to choose to follow it and to find joy in *Gemeinschaft* with Jesus, but many of us do not “make use of it.”

⁷From the article *Was die Gnad sey* . . . 1527

The Anabaptists respected the conscience (*Gewissen*) highly. Menno Simons spoke of guarding what we learn “in the little chest of the conscience.” But they saw the *Gemüth*, our inborn knowledge of the truth, as a yet higher authority than the conscience.

The conscience can be wrong. The Anabaptists, when they left Catholicism, struggled with their consciences about leaving the “holy, mother church.” But another voice within them, the voice of truth working through their *Gemüth*, compelled them to override their consciences and do what was right no matter what they felt like doing. It was this obedience to the truth that disentangled the Anabaptists from the Dark Ages and set them free—free to think, free to believe, and free to stand for what was right.

The first Anabaptists used their freedom to think, but not to “think for themselves.” They thought like Jesus.

The first Anabaptists used their freedom to believe, but not to promote their own beliefs. They believed like Jesus.

The first Anabaptists used their freedom to stand, but not to stand for “personal convictions.” They stood for Jesus, and Jesus within them became the conviction that carried them through prison, through torture, through violence and death—to eternal life.

Free to choose, free to live like they pleased, the first Anabaptists knew that they were totally free. But they chose to give their freedom to Jesus and follow him. Hans Denck taught that the highest thing we can choose with our freedom of choice is to choose to give our freedom of choice back to God, and that there is “no other way to blessedness than to lose one’s self-will completely.” This, for the Anabaptists was the way to *wahre Gelassenheit* (a true “letting loose” or surrender), and it led them to community with Jesus and his body, even in material things.

Hans Denck wrote that “the church surrenders her freedom of choice to Christ like a willing bride surrenders herself to the groom.”⁸

Menno Simons wrote:

We have but one Lord and master of our conscience, Jesus Christ, whose word, will, commandment and ordinance we obey, as willing disciples, even as the bride is ready to obey her bridegroom’s voice.⁹

Michael Sattler wrote:

They threatened us with bonds, then with fire and the sword. But in all this I surrendered myself completely into the will of the Lord, together with all my brothers and with my wife, and prepared myself to die for his testimony.¹⁰

Shortly after Michael Sattler and his companions died in public executions, Heinrich Hug, the Roman Catholic chronicler of Villingen wrote, “It was a miserable affair. They died for their conviction.”

A young Anabaptist, Hans van Overdam, wrote before they burned him at Gent in Belgium, on July 9, 1551:

We would rather suffer our bodies to be burned, drowned, racked or tortured, whatever you may wish to do with them, and we would rather be whipped, banished, or driven away, or robbed of our goods, than show any obedience contrary to the Word of God.¹¹

This true surrender (a true “letting loose”) became within the Anabaptists the conviction to follow Jesus no matter what it cost—and it led them to decisions like that of the miller’s son.

⁸ *Was geredt sey . . .* 1526

⁹ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers . . .* 1539

¹⁰ *Ein Sendbrief an die Gemeine Gottes in Horb, 1527*

¹¹ *Ein Brief von Hans von Oberdam, der er an die Herren des Gerichts zu Gent und an die Ratsherren den Tag vor seiner Gefangenschaft gesandt hat, 1551*

What happened at Augsburg

After eight months of wandering through the mountains of Switzerland and southern Germany, Hans Denck reached the old city of Augsburg in Bavaria, by September, 1525. He was tired and ready to stay at one place for the winter, but he found the city sharply divided and in a turmoil. Some followed Luther. Some followed Zwingli. Some had remained Roman Catholic, but very few, only two or three people in the city, seemed to show interest at all in following Jesus.

Everyone fought about doctrine—“correct”, “Biblical” doctrine. Everyone fought to have the most members and for the control of the city. But the “light of God” within them, Hans observed, they totally ignored. “What would it help you if you should reject all ceremonies?” he wrote in frustration to one Protestant leader. “Or what would it help you if you should keep all of them? What you need is to teach one another to know God. . . . I see not only the people of this city, but also the pastors going astray.”¹²

Hans felt great disappointment in the “Christians” of Augsburg, but he knew that no matter what they did, he needed to follow Jesus. He found a job teaching Latin and Greek to a nobleman’s children and met from time to time with a few seekers who wondered where they should go.

Joining the Roman Catholics was not an option for any of them. The Lutherans had some impressive arguments. The Zwinglians seemed more sincere. But finally, with Hans’ encouragement, they decided to take as their criteria nothing but the life and teachings of Jesus. They decided to ask this question about everything: “Is it like Jesus?” Then, whatever doctrine, whatever practice, whatever church, whatever tradition,

¹² *Wer die Wahrheit wahrlich lieb hat . . . 1526*

whatever law, whatever decision was not like Jesus, they would simply ignore . . . to follow him.

This led them to meet on Easter Sunday, 1527, in a house near the gate of the Holy Cross at Augsburg where Balthasar Hubmaier baptised five people on confession of faith. Hans Denck was one of them. A year and a half later the congregation numbered over a thousand souls.

Go Ahead!

Suddenly, not just in Augsburg, but in Nikolsburg, Strasbourg, Wassenberg, Amsterdam, Antwerp . . . everywhere throughout the German lands of Europe, seekers felt that *now* was the time. The time to get up and follow Jesus was *now*—no matter who was with it or who was not, who gave permission or who did not.

In Zürich it had already happened two years before on the evening of January 21, 1525. Conrad Grebel, Georg Blaurock (an ex-priest from Chur) and a number of others had found their way through the back streets to the house where Felix Manz lived. Then, according to the *Aelteste Chronik* this took place:

And it came to pass that they were together until fear rose up within them and came upon the gathering. They were constrained in their hearts. Then they got down on their knees before the highest God in heaven. They cried to him because he knew their hearts. They prayed that he would help them to do his will and show his mercy to them, because flesh and blood or human instigation had not brought them to this place. They well knew that their patience would be tried and that they would have to suffer for this.

After the prayer, Georg of the house of Jakob got up. He had asked God to show him his will. Now he asked Conrad Grebel to baptise him with the correct Christian baptism upon his faith and testimony. When he knelt down with this desire, Conrad baptised him because at that time no servant had been ordained to handle

such a work. After this the others asked Georg to baptise them, which he did upon their request. In this way they gave themselves together to the name of the Lord in high fear of God. They commended one another to the service of the Gospel. They began to teach and hold the faith, to separate themselves from the world, and break themselves off from evil works.¹³

Only a few months earlier, Conrad Grebel had written to Thomas Müntzer, urging him to go ahead and do what was right:

Go ahead with the Word and establish a church community with the help of Christ and his teachings, as we find in Matthew 18 and lived out in the epistles. Use determination and common prayer, and make decisions about faith and life without commanding or forcing the people into anything; then God will help you and your little flock to real sincerity.¹⁴

Then, in 1525, Conrad encouraged the Reformed pastor of Hinwil in Switzerland:

Do not have respect of persons! Do not worry about the authorities. Just do what God has told you to do.¹⁵

When Melchior Hofman presented his beliefs to Christian, Duke of Denmark and four hundred representatives of the nobility and clergy in the chapel of the Barefoot Friars at Flensburg in Holstein, they threatened to punish him severely. But he said: “All the scholars in Christendom cannot hurt me. Even if God would permit that you should treat me violently, you cannot take from me more than this robe of flesh which Christ will replace with a new one on the day of judgement.”

¹³ From the entry for 1525 under the heading: *Geörg vom Hauß Jacob oder Blabrock sampt etlichen gleerten ersprachten sich aus Gottes wort vom rechten Tauff unnd begert e einer vom andern getaufft zu werden weil sie kein verordneten Diener dises wercks darzu nit heten.*

¹⁴ *Ein Brief an Thomas Müntzer*, September 5, 1524.

¹⁵ From a statement made to Hans Brennwald, August 9, 1525.

The Duke was surprised. “Is this the way you talk to me?” he asked.

Melchior replied: “If all the emperors, kings, princes, popes, bishops, and cardinals should be together in one place, nevertheless the truth shall and must be known to the glory of God.”

“Who stands with you?” asked the Duke of Denmark.

“No one that I know of,” answered Melchior Hofman. “I stand alone on the Word of God, and let all men do likewise!”

Once the conviction to follow Jesus had taken control of their hearts, there was nothing the Anabaptists could do but *go ahead* at the price of their lives.

Disobey the Church?

To oppose the world to follow Jesus was one thing. But to oppose the church was another—and the Anabaptists, after a thousand years of authoritarian teaching, had to overcome a deeply rooted feeling of guilt before they could do so.

The first Anabaptists were not leaving the old corrupt church of the Dark Ages. They were leaving the new “Biblical” and “evangelical” church of Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland. But in following Jesus, they got to where it made no difference. They could walk only with a church that followed Jesus, and wherever it did not, they felt “constrained in their hearts” to disobey it. For Menno Simons, the courage to do so became the turning point of his life.

For two years Menno Simons had lived with a problem. He was a Catholic priest, but he doubted whether the wafer and the wine in his hands really turned into Jesus’ body and blood. “Such doubts,” he told himself, “must come from the devil.” But he could not get rid of them. They did not go away, until in desperation he turned to the New Testament.

Menno Simons did not question the authority of the church. He hoped the New Testament would confirm it and help him to be a better Catholic. But to his dismay it did the opposite. The more he read, the hungrier he got for the truth, and the more he realised how far from Jesus his church's teaching was. Eventually his inner conflict reached a climax. He had to decide which authority was to rule his life: the church or the Word of Christ.

Really, Menno would have liked to obey them both. He had always "known" that disbelief in church doctrine meant eternal death. Then he found a book Martin Luther had written as a young man. In it Luther taught that one is not damned if he disobeys the church to obey the Bible. Slowly that truth soaked in. And slowly it led to a yet greater truth—that one is not damned even if he disobeys a "Biblical" church to follow the example of Jesus. Once he placed the Word and example of Jesus above all human authority, Menno felt free to leave both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants behind, to be baptised, like Jesus, on confession of faith. "Then I surrendered myself, body and soul to God," he wrote. "I committed myself to his grace and began to teach and baptise according to the contents of his holy Word. I began to till the vineyard of the Lord with my little talent. I began to build up his holy city and temple and to repair the tumble-down walls."¹⁶

Disobey the Government?

Huldrych Zwingli said, in a public debate at Zürich, Switzerland, in 1523: "The authorities dare not call for anything but that which the holy and unchangeable writings teach. If they fail to do so and adopt some other course, which I do not expect, I would preach against them, severely, with the Word of God."

¹⁶ *Een Klare beantwoordinge, over een Schrift Gellii Fabri . . . 1554*

But Zwingli, when he came to the test, did not keep his word. His government, in cool defiance of his words went ahead and called for exactly that—infant baptism and the continuing of the mass—and Zwingli backed down. He did not want to make trouble (or lose his position) by being more “Biblical” than what his government would allow. Two months after he made the above statement there was another debate in Zürich. Zwingli proposed to leave the matter of whether to celebrate mass in the hands of the city council. Then Simon Stumpf, a supporter of Conrad Grebel, got up and said: “Master Huldrych, you do not have the right to place the decision on this matter into the hands of the government, for the decision has already been made. The Spirit of God has already decided. . . . If the government adopts a course that would be against the decision of God, I will ask for his Spirit and I will preach and act against it.”

The first Anabaptists felt free to disobey the government whenever they needed to do so to follow Jesus. And patriotism, for them, was a thing of the world.

Eccentrics and Individualists?

Some time ago, after I spoke about the Anabaptists following the voice of inner conviction, a Christian woman asked me: “But how would that work? How could we maintain our unity if we just let everyone go out and follow their convictions?”

Another question that must be asked is, “How does it work if we don’t?”

The first Anabaptists believed that unity is not the result of group consensus. It is the result of many individual commitments to Jesus. It is not the work of men, but a gift from God. They believed that true unity can be nothing but “the unity of the Spirit” that comes from Gemeinschaft with Jesus (Eph. 4:3). Such unity, they believed, cannot be forced nor regulated, for the Spirit of God is like the wind that “blows wherever it

pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:7-8).

By 1527, the Anabaptists had already published two books about man’s freedom of choice and his duty to obey the voice of Jesus within him. In Augsburg, Hans Denck wrote:

Everyone should know that in matters of faith we should all proceed in a free, voluntary and uncompelled way.¹⁷

Kilian Auerbacher, from Moravia, wrote:

Christ’s people are a free, unforced and uncompelled people, who receive Christ with desire and a willing heart. . . . What people believe is not to be forced, but is to be accepted as a gift of God.¹⁸

Menno Simons wrote:

Christ alone is the ruler of the conscience, and besides him there is no other. Let him be your emperor, and his holy Word your law. You must obey God before the emperor and hold what God says above what the emperor says.¹⁹

That this teaching rocked the foundations of every establishment in Europe—church, state, and family—can well be understood. If what people believed was not the “God-ordained authorities” business to decide, whatever would become of society? If people were free to believe what they wanted to believe, free to obey what they felt led to obey, and free to follow the voice of conviction within them whenever and however they wanted to follow it . . . what would become of public order? Of the church? And of the laws of the land?

The Protestant Reformers woke up with their eyes round. They roused themselves with a roar. Joining forces with the Catholics and the church of the Dark Ages, they responded to this “heresy” with a tidal wave of persecution, hatred, and “holy” rage, the likes of which has not been seen before nor since.

¹⁷ *Was geredt sey*. . . 1526

¹⁸ *Ein Brief an Martin Butzer*, 1534

¹⁹ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

This was sedition! This was high treason! “Unauthorised men preaching on the street corners” wrote Martin Luther “are a sure sign of the devil.”²⁰

John, duke of Saxony, made a law at once to stop secret baptisms and communions. Imagine! Baptising or celebrating communion without the church’s consent! Without properly authorised men in charge! In secret! Not in church buildings but in private homes! This, wrote Luther, is blasphemy, blasphemy, blasphemy . . . and after his book *Of the Sneaky Ones and the Corner Preachers* came book after book and sermon after sermon loaded with his bitterest invectives against the Anabaptists who “dared to take the Scriptures into their own hands and overthrow the authority of the church.”

The “Sitzrecht”

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers did not have a problem with the Anabaptists because they called for changes in the church. Everyone was calling for changes. Luther himself was a leader in making them, and he, with the other Reformers, was only too willing to sit down (at the beginning) and “lay everything out on the table” to discuss it. But when Luther and the Reformers discovered that the Anabaptists were committed to making changes with or without the church’s consent, their “friendliness” turned to alarm.

There is only one way to make changes in church practice, the Reformers believed. That is by presenting “new ideas” to the God-ordained leaders of the church. Working with the church and its leaders, changes could be made “in a God-fearing, honest, and orderly way.”²¹

²⁰ From *Von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern*, 1532

²¹ An idea expressed, for example, in Justus Menius, *Der Wiedertäufer Lehre und Geheimnis*, of 1530, Urbanus Rhegius’ *Widerlegung des Bekenntnisses der Münstertischen neuen Valentinianer und Donatisten und zur Neuen*

The Reformers did not require (like the church of the Dark Ages) total agreement with its practices. They were actually quite lenient in offering the Anabaptists the freedom to believe what they wanted, as long as they obeyed the church and practiced what its leaders saw fit to allow.

The Reformers appreciated the way the Anabaptists lived, and frequently said so. They asked the Anabaptists to help them toward greater holiness and fear of God in the state churches. Luther, on several occasions acknowledged the Anabaptists' steadfastness, and the other Reformers wrote about their holiness, sobriety, and excellent reputation among the people.

But what the Reformers could not tolerate—what made them fearful, and eventually furious, with the Anabaptists—was the Anabaptists' high regard for inner conviction and low regard for the voice of the church. "This heretical persistence in following an inner word," thundered Martin Luther, "brings to nothing the written Word of God!"

In a sense he was right.

The first Anabaptists did not follow the Scriptures (and their "correct interpretation") like Martin Luther wanted them to be followed. They followed a man. And in following him (instead of Luther's church, or Luther's Bible) they got their hands onto the thread that pulls the fabric of civilization apart. This, the Reformers correctly discerned, and it made them desperate enough to pass the death penalty upon them.

Huldrych Zwingli began and Martin Luther kept on violently denouncing the "stirring-up spirit" (*auführerischer Geist*) of the Anabaptist movement, which they found, above all, in their "silly teaching" of the *Sitzrecht* (the "sitter's right").

Zeitung von den Wiedertäufern zu Münster, of 1535, in Luther's instructions to the pastors of Saxony, and in his other writings and published sermons against the Anabaptists.

The first Anabaptists took literally the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: 30-31: “And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.” They called this the “sitter’s right” and calmly implied that they, when moved by inner conviction, had as great a right to speak and to act as any pastor, any priest, any Reformer or bishop or pope. This audacity, this “Sitzrecht from the pit of hell,” Martin Luther and his friends believed, could be dealt with only by fire, water, and the sword.

“Even though it is terrible to view,” Martin Luther admitted, he gave his blessing to the death sentence upon the Anabaptists, issued by the elector, princes, and landgraves of Protestant Germany on March 31, 1527. The sentence was based on the following four points:

1. The Anabaptists bring to nothing the office of preaching the Word.
2. The Anabaptists have no definite doctrine.
3. The Anabaptists bring to nothing and suppress true doctrine.
4. The Anabaptists want to destroy the kingdom of this world.

“For the preservation of public order” both Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli promoted the total elimination of the Anabaptists (through capital punishment) as a matter of utmost urgency. They accused the Anabaptists of a crime against the public, “not because they taught a different faith, but for disturbing public order by undermining respect for authority.”

Philipp Melanchthon, Luther’s close friend and adviser wrote: “The Anabaptists’ disregard for the outer Word and the Scriptures is blasphemy. Therefore, the temporal arm of government shall watch here too and not tolerate this blasphemy, but earnestly resist and punish it.”

Urbanus Rhegius, the Reformer of Augsburg, wrote: “The Anabaptists cannot and will not endure Scripture.” And within twenty years, no less than 116 laws were passed in the German lands of Europe, which made the “Anabaptist heresy” a capital offence.

On to Strasbourg and Worms

Called to court by Urbanus Rhegius, in the fall of 1526, Hans Denck decided to flee. He found his way through the Swabian Alps and up the Rhein to Strasbourg. Here where the Protestant rulers of the city had a reputation for tolerance, he hoped to find a place to stay. But they gave him none.

Instead, they called him to court. Alarmed by his insistence on following Jesus, they told him to leave, once more in the dead of winter. It was December, 1526. The day after his departure, Wolfgang Capito, the Reformer of Strasbourg wrote to Huldrych Zwingli:

Hans Denck has disturbed our church very much. His apparent sacrificial life, his brilliance, and his decent habits have wonderfully captivated the people. . . . He left yesterday. His going left some disturbance behind, but the remaining problems can easily be settled with diligence and caution.

From Strasbourg, Hans Denck travelled through Bergzabern (where he visited the Ghetto and publicly invited the Jews to follow Jesus), and from there to Landau and Worms.

The venerable city of Worms, seat of Catholic bishops on the Rhine River since 600. A.D., had turned Protestant just the year before. One of its new Protestant pastors was a young man, Hans Denck’s age, by the name of Jakob Kautz.

Hans and Jakob soon became friends, even though their activities were not the same. Hans stayed in seclusion in an old house of the city, translating the Hebrew prophets into German. Jakob preached every Sunday to great throngs of people in the

Protestant churches of the city, until the call of Jesus—“Follow me!”—made it impossible for him to continue his career.

They called Jakob to court in March, 1527, to warn him. But he could not change his preaching. He followed Jesus, and the situation with the church grew steadily worse. By June 1527, Jakob was ready to let everyone know where he stood. He tacked a sheet of paper with seven statements to the door of the cathedral and invited all who cared to discuss them with him in a public meeting:

1. The word which we speak with our mouths, hear with our ears, write with our hands and print onto paper is not the living, true, eternal Word of God. It is only a witness, pointing to the inner Word.
2. Nothing external, neither Word, sign, sacrament or promise, has the power to assure the inner man, comfort him, or make him sure that he is doing what is right.
3. The baptism of infants is not of God. It is against God and his teaching given to us through Christ Jesus, his beloved Son.
4. In the sacrament of the Lord’s nighttime meal the literal body and blood of Christ are not present. Our tradition here in Worms is wrong. We have not been celebrating the sacrament in a proper way.
5. Everything that died with the first Adam, comes back to life in a better way with the second Adam, that is with Christ who walks on ahead of us. Everything unfolds and opens up in Christ. Everything becomes alive in Christ.
6. Jesus from Nazareth did not suffer for us in any way, he did nothing to satisfy God for us, as long as we do not follow him in the way he went before us—unless we follow the commands of the father, like Christ follows them—every man according to his ability.
7. Like Adam’s outward biting into the forbidden fruit would not have hurt him nor his descendants if his inner being would not have been involved in the disobedience, so the outer suffering of Christ is no redemption nor work of grace for us

if there is no inner obedience and desire within us to obey the will of God.²²

On the day appointed, June 13, 1527, Jakob Kautz appeared with Hans Denck and Ludwig Haetzer at six o'clock in the morning on the town square to tell everyone what he believed. It was market day, and a great crowd gathered to hear him.

Jakob explained to the people what he had written in the seven statements. He told them that their struggling to find the “right church” and to be good Christians was in vain, as long as they were not moved by the Spirit of God within them. Many turned to Jesus and sealed their covenant with him in baptism at Worms. But it made trouble. . . .

Two Protestant pastors of the city tacked seven other statements to the door of the church. They contradicted Jakob Kautz and Hans Denck, calling the people back from “following their own ideas” to following the voice of God-ordained church authority. Two weeks later, on July 1, 1527, they expelled the “troublemakers” (including Jakob Kautz and Hans Denck) from the city, and a day later a book appeared: *A Faithful Warning from the Preachers of the Gospel at Strasbourg, against the Statements of Jakob Kautz*. Even Huldrych Zwingli took the time to refute the “troublemakers” in writing, and of the believers at Worms who followed Jesus into baptism, more than one hundred were soon put to death.

Jakob Kautz baptized twenty believers in the nearby town of Alzey. From here others went out to teach and baptize. The Kurfürst Ludwig V set a bounty on their heads. His men caught fourteen Anabaptists, beheading the men at Alzey and drowning the women. When a kindhearted bystander tried to comfort the victims in their distress, Ludwig’s men caught her too and burned her alive. Three hundred and fifty believers died in a

²² *Sieben Artikel zu Worms von Jakob Kautzen angeschlagen und gepredigt. Verworfen und widerlegt mit Schriften und Ursachen auf zwen weg, Anno MDXXVII.*

short time but more than one thousand two hundred escaped to find refuge in Moravia. A great number of them joined the community at Auspitz led by Philip Plener.

Only a Movement

Neither the Roman Catholics nor the Protestant Reformers could see a *church* in the Anabaptist movement. All they saw was an assortment of “perverted sects” whose leaders were eccentric individuals, “unbelievably stubborn” and “wildly obstinate” heretics “who have forsaken much, but can never forsake themselves.”²³

About Menno Simons, John Calvin said: “Nothing could be prouder, nothing more impudent than this donkey.” Perhaps, if we would have been in his shoes we would have seen it that way too.

The Reformers came from a comfortable background of “group conviction”, where everyone submitted to the leaders and believed like everyone else in the group. The first Anabaptists rejected “group conviction.” They believed that just as everyone needed to repent and believe on his own, so the “light of God” (inner conviction) was a personal matter.

The Reformers believed that faith got handed down, like tradition, from generation to generation, and that it was imparted from parents to children in baptism. The first Anabaptists rejected this “historic” and “handed-down” faith. They believed that faith was of the Spirit, and that the Spirit’s movings could no more be preserved nor handed down than the wind can be preserved in a box, or the current of a river in a jar.

The Reformers, influenced by humanism, believed that along with “group convictions” it was alright to have some “personal convictions,” providing one did not make an issue out of them

²³ The Reformer, Martin Bucer’s description of Pilgram Marpeck.

and kept on cooperating with the church. But the first Anabaptists rejected “personal convictions” when they “let loose” and truly surrendered their personal ideas, personal views, and personal rights to Jesus.

All they had left was the inner conviction that it was right to follow Jesus. This conviction alone gave them direction on what to obey and what not to obey, what to believe and what not to believe, what to do and what not to do, and how to understand the Scriptures. This conviction alone led them to submit themselves one to another in the freedom of allowing all men to follow Jesus “in an uncompelled way.”

How could they build church like that?

They couldn't. Nobody can . . . except God. And God does not “build churches” the way people do. He moves. He is a Spirit. God is the Spirit that moves in Jesus and in those that live in Gemeinschaft with him. The church is a movement, moving from age to age, from place to place, and from people to people, wherever God finds broken hearts, truly surrendered, in which to dwell.

The Jews looked for an earthly kingdom with an earthly Messiah. The Christians, after a few centuries went the way of the Jews. “But the kingdom of God,” Jesus said, “does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is’, or ‘There it is’, because the kingdom of God is within you!” (Luke 17:20-21).

For some time, right after the Dark Ages, this “inner kingdom,” the Kingdom of Heaven, came down to touch the Anabaptist movement. It touched it with the clear light of conviction that shone from the face of the miller's son, sixteen years old, who could say at the price of his life: “God does not want me to do that.” And it led the first Anabaptists . . .