

8

On to the Teachings of Christ

In the Gospels the Anabaptists found the teachings of Christ, to which the following passages are the open door:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him (Matthew 4: 18-22).

Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

But Jesus told him, “Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8: 21-22).

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him (Matthew 9: 9).

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For

whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16: 24-25).

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14: 25-27).

“In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14: 33).

Teachings of Salvation

Jesus’ words as recorded in the Gospels, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, were for the first Anabaptists the *seligmachende Lehre* (teachings of salvation) to which the Old Testament was an introduction, and to which the New Testament epistles gave testimony. The first Anabaptists did not regard any of the Scriptures lightly (they used and quoted from apocryphal books without apology), but the Gospels were for them the doorway to them all. Every understanding of the Scriptures was a mistaken understanding, they believed, if it did not match Jesus’ example and his teaching in the Gospels.

With the Christ of the Gospels as their guide, no doctrine, to the first Anabaptists, looked complicated or “profound.” They may have known the German word for doctrine (*Doktrin*), but both the term and its connotation were foreign to Anabaptist thought, and they did not ordinarily use it. They simply spoke (English translations notwithstanding) of the *Lehren* (teachings) of Jesus.

Menno Simons, in his book, *A Foundation and Clear Direction to the Teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ Which Are Able to Save You* wrote:

We do not have a new teaching, as people would like to make you believe. We teach what was taught and practiced in the church 1,500 years ago. It is the teaching which brought the church into being, through which the church is, and through which it will be to the end of time.¹

In another tract Menno wrote:

I speak with sure conviction. I speak not because I had a vision or some special revelation from heaven, but I speak by the sure Word of our Lord. From my innermost being I am convinced that this teaching is not our teaching. It is the teaching of the one who sent us: Jesus Christ. . . . Those who love darkness rather than light curse the truth we find in the Gospels. They call it heresy and handle it like treason. But the Word of God shall remain unbroken to the last day.²

Steps to Understanding the Teachings

After a thousand years of darkness, the first Anabaptists rediscovered the first step to understanding Jesus' teachings. That step is to get up and follow him. We need to submit to him (*throw ourselves under him* as the Anabaptists wrote) in true detachment from this world's things. As long as we have not done this the study of the Scriptures is useless—or even harmful. Leonhard Schiemer wrote before they beheaded him in 1528:

He who has not learned what he knows from God, but from men, has a faith that cannot stand. . . . If I should try to teach someone who has not thrown himself under Christ, I would be running ahead of Christ, and I would be a thief and a murderer. For such a man's heart and mind are in the dark. Paul says that man is a

¹ *Een Fondament ende clare aenwijsinghe van de salichmakende Leere Jesu Christi* . . . 1558

² From *Die oorsake waerom dat ick M. S. niet of en late de leeren, ende te schrijuen* . . . first published at Antwerp ca. 1542.



Strasbourg, at the convergence of the Ill River with the Rhein, where Germany meets France, has been a gathering place for centuries. Open to nonconformist ideas, the city sheltered many Anabaptists, including Pilgram Marpeck, who assisted in the engineering of its drainage canals.

stranger to the life that is from God. Trying to teach such a person about spiritual things is like lighting candles for a blind man. He still cannot see.³

The second step to understanding Jesus' teachings is to let his Spirit teach us. Only after the Spirit of God "shines in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge" (2 Cor. 4:6) can we hope to understand the Gospels. "The understanding of the truth does not come from human study," testified an Anabaptist before the court at Regensburg in Bavaria. "It comes only to those to whom it is given by grace through the light of his Spirit."

Before they beheaded him at Konstanz in 1529, Ludwig Haetzer wrote:

He who goes only by the Scriptures receives knowledge. But it is a useless knowledge that does not change anyone for the better. No man, no matter how learned he may be, can understand the

³ Vom Fläschlen . . . 1527

Scriptures until he comes to know them and learns them in the most inward part of his soul. If he speaks about the them before this takes place, he speaks like a blind man about colour.⁴

The third step in understanding Jesus and his teachings is to love him. Before his death in the massacre at Linz, Wolfgang Brandhuber wrote:

Oh brothers, if true love is missing, what does it help to know much, to speak or to teach? Oh brothers, let every man act according to the truth in his heart, before the face of God. . . May the Father of all Grace give to those that hunger the true Bread and the ability to discern the Scriptures and the way they are tied together, because the Spirit of God does not want to be bound.⁵

Teachings in the Heart

Obedying the teachings of their consciences and obeying the teachings of Jesus in the Scriptures was for the first Anabaptists the same thing. They made no difference between the Word in their hearts and the Word of the Gospels, but looked to the complete Word of Christ as their highest authority.

The “outer Word” (the Scriptures written with paper and ink) the Anabaptists taught, is nothing but the lamp from which the light of the true Word shines. Ulrich Stadler, servant of the Word at Austerlitz in Moravia, wrote:

The outer Word is only a sign of the inner Word, like the sign on an inn telling of the wine in the barrels inside. The sign is not the wine. It satisfies no-one’s thirst. But we know when we see it that the wine is there.⁶

⁴ Quoted in Karl Hagen’s second volume of *Deutschland’s literarische und religiöse Verhältnisse im Reformationszeitalter* (Erlangen, 1841-44).

⁵ From *Ein sendbrief von Wolfgang Brandhueber an die gmain Gottes zu Rottenburg am In*, 1529

⁶ Vom lebendigen Wort und geschriebenen, ein kurzer Unterschied und Bericht, ca. 1530

Hans Denck who found the “wine of the inner Word” when he decided to follow Jesus at any cost wrote in 1525:

When Christ the sun of righteousness arises in our hearts, then the darkness of unbelief is overcome for the first time. . . . The man who does not listen to the voice of God speaking within him, but who tries to explain the Scriptures for himself (which only the Spirit of God is able to do) makes a total abomination out of the secrets of God which the writings contain.⁷

Concealed within the written word, the first Anabaptists found a great treasure—the dwelling place of Christ. Balthasar Hubmaier, before they burned him at the stake, wrote:

The Scriptures are the friend of God. Christ Jesus lives in the Scriptures, and in them he makes his home and rests.⁸

Putting the Teachings to Practice

The first Anabaptists did what children might do with the Scriptures. They read them to see what Jesus said and did so they could imitate him. They believed that by putting his teachings to practice they could please him and live with him forever.

Menno Simons wrote:

The bright light of the Gospel shines again in these last and dreadful times. God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is gloriously revealed. His gracious will and holy Word concerning faith, the new birth, repentance, baptism, the nighttime meal, and all of his saving teachings and example has again come to light. It has come through seeking and prayer, through action, through reading, through teaching and writing. . . . Now let us go on and build his church community in the apostle’s way.⁹

⁷ From the written testimony of Hans Denck, presented to the court at Nürnberg, in January, 1525.

⁸ Preislid des göttlichen Wortes}, ca. 1526

⁹ *Onderwijs . . . van de excommunicatie*, 1558

“The words I have spoken to you,” said Jesus, “are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). The Anabaptists, by putting his words to practice, discovered that this was true. Menno Simons wrote in 1552:

The brightness of the sun has not shone for many years. Heaven and earth have been as copper and iron. Brooks and springs have not run nor dew descended from heaven. Beautiful trees and verdant fields have been dry and wilted—in a spiritual sense. But in these last days God in his love has opened the windows of heaven again. The dew of his Word has fallen upon us so that the earth produces green branches of righteousness bearing fruit for God. The holy Word and the sacraments of our Lord have been rescued from the ashes.¹⁰

What is Heresy?

When the first Anabaptists put Jesus’ teachings to practice, people called them heretics. That was because they had forgotten, after a thousand years, what Jesus had said and done. This led Menno Simons to ask:

Who are the real heretics and deceivers? Who are they that teach contrary to the teachings of the holy church? According to the venerable Bede, the word *heretic* means one who picks out, one who chooses or gleans. . . . Men cry against us saying: Heretics! Heretics! Drown them, kill them, and burn them! And this for no other reason than that we teach a new life, baptism on confession of faith, and bread and wine for all members in a blameless church community.¹¹

While identifying the real heretics (and who they were not), Menno Simons wrote:

I have taught no other baptism, no other supper, no other ordinance than that which was implied by the unerring mouth of

¹⁰ *Een grondelicke en klare bekentnisse* . . . 1552

¹¹ From *Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels in den water duer menno Simons wt dwoort gods*, first published at Antwerp, ca. 1542.

our Lord Jesus Christ and the example of his holy apostles. . . Put your trust in Christ alone and in his Word. Put your trust in the sure instruction and practice of his holy apostles. Then by the grace of God you will be safe from every false teaching and the power of the devil. You will walk with a free mind before God.¹²

The Rediscovery of Jesus' Teachings

The story of King Josiah finding the book of the law while cleaning out the temple in Jerusalem, moved the first Anabaptists and became Menno Simons' theme when he wrote:

Behold, the book of the law, the saving Gospel of Christ which was hid for so many centuries by the abominations of the Antichrist, has been found! The book of Christ, by the grace of God has been found again! The pure unadulterated truth has come to light . . . at the expense of much of the property and blood of the saints.¹³

And as in Josiah's day, the discovery of the book had far-reaching effects. Menno Simons described them in *The Cross of the Holy Ones*:

God has again, in these last days of unbelief and abomination . . . opened the book of eternal truth which had been closed for so many centuries. He has raised the dead from their graves. Those who all their lives lay in wickedness he has called to a new and blameless life. Yes, God is calling the distressed, starving sheep out of the jaws of ravening wolves. He is leading them out of the desert of human teachings to the green pastures of the mountain of Israel—to the care and custody of the eternal shepherd, Jesus Christ, who bought them with his blood.¹⁴

Guided by Jesus' gentle teachings, the Anabaptists found their way . . .

¹² From *Christelycke leringhen op den 25. Psalm*, ca. 1528.

¹³ *Van dat rechte christen ghelooue ende zijn cracht*, ca. 1542

¹⁴ *Eyne troestliche vermaninge van dat lijden, cruyze, vnde veruolginge der heyligen, vmme dat woort Godes*, 1558