

9

On to the Word

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a garment dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God” (Rev. 19:11-13).

The Word of God, for the first Anabaptists, was a man. A man whose voice we hear in our hearts and in the Scriptures.

Some years ago I heard a minister explain how the first Anabaptists used the Bible. He said their slogan was *sola scriptura* (only the Scriptures) and that they were known as “the people of the book.” At the time it sounded right, but since then I have made other discoveries.

The slogan *sola scriptura* was invented and used by Huldrych Zwingli (the Anabaptists’ mortal enemy) and the “people of the book” are the Jews or the Muslims.

The first Anabaptists aimed for something infinitely higher than *sola scriptura*. Their aim was full community with Jesus. And they were not “people of the book.” They were “people of the man.” The first Anabaptists did not read in the Gospels that the Word was made paper and ink. They read that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

In agreement with Jakob Kautz who taught that the written word is “only a witness, pointing to the inner Word,” Hans Denck wrote:

I value the Scriptures above all of human treasure, but not as highly as the Word of God which is alive, strong (Heb. 4:12), eternal, and free. The Word of God is free from the elements of the world. It is God himself. It is Spirit and not letter, written without pen or paper so that it can never be erased.

As a result of this, salvation is not bound to scripture, even though the Scriptures may help one on to salvation (2 Tim. 3:16). We need to understand, the Scriptures cannot possibly change an evil heart, even though they may educate it well. A godly heart, on the other hand, in which the little light of God shines, can learn from all things. We see then, how the Scriptures help those who believe toward salvation and holy living. But to those who believe not, they serve only for condemnation. . . .

If salvation depended only on reading the Scriptures or hearing them preached, many illiterate people, and many towns to whom no preacher has come, would be lost.¹

Before they burned him at the stake in 1528, Balthasar Hubmaier wrote:

The Word of God is water to all those who thirst for salvation and is made alive in us through the Spirit of God, without whose work it is only a dead letter.²

One Anabaptist testified before the court at Regensburg in Bavaria:

The Scriptures and the outer word are merely the witness of the inner Word of God. A man can well be saved without the preaching or the reading of the Scriptures. (Otherwise, what should happen with those who are deaf or cannot read?) We

¹ *Widerruf* . . . 1528

² From *Eine Christliche Lehrtafel, die ein jeder Mensch, bevor er im Wasser getauft wird, wissen soll*, 1526.

understand God our Redeemer, not through the lifeless letter, but through the indwelling of Christ.³

The Word of God is One

Because the first Anabaptists spoke of an inner and an outer Word, their enemies accused them of making two Words of God. “But the outer, preached or written word,” wrote Pilgram Marpeck, “and the inner Word are One.”⁴

Truly surrendered to Jesus, the Anabaptists found perfect unity between the voice of Jesus in their hearts and the Scriptures in their hands. Ulrich Stadler, Anabaptist servant of the Word at Austerlitz in Moravia, wrote in his book *Of the Living and Written Word, or of the Outer and Inner Word, and how they work in the Heart*:

The inner Word is not written, neither on paper nor on tables of stone. It is not spoken nor preached, but man is assured by it through God in the depths of his soul, and it becomes engraved in a heart of flesh through the Spirit by the finger of God.

Hans Denck wrote about the inner and the outer Word in three of his books. He taught that the inner Word (the voice of the Spirit) comes before the outer word (the Scriptures) and makes it possible for the latter to be received. Without the Word inside, the written word is unintelligible because “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God.” They are foolishness to him, “and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Hans Langenmantel wrote before they beheaded him at Weißenhorn in Bavaria in 1528:

Luther says he preaches the Gospel of Christ and with his physical voice he brings Christ into the hearts of his hearers. But

³ Quoted in Hermann Nestler’s *Die Wiedertäuferbewegung in Regensburg*, 1926.

⁴ From a letter to Helena von Streicher, ca. 1544.

I say that there must first be something within us that can receive the physical voice.⁵

Leupold Scharnschlager, Anabaptist servant of the Word in Austria and Switzerland, wrote:

If the Scriptures are not opened in the heart by the Spirit of God, then not only they are dead, but Christ himself with his teachings, his life, his sufferings, and his death, yes, even his resurrection, is dead. To know all about these things without the Spirit of God within is useless, even though one may read about them and study them as long as he likes. Without the Spirit, one becomes learned, but he does not learn.⁶

Beyond Literalism

In *Gemeinschaft* with the inner Word, the first Anabaptists caught the spirit of the Scriptures. This kept them from the bondage of a systematic theology. It kept them from focusing on the details at the expense of the theme. And it kept them from an empty literalism in their interpretation.

When they burned Georg Blaurock and Hans Langegger at the stake, near Klausen in Austria⁷ in 1529, an eight-year-old boy stood wide-eyed among the spectators. His name was Peter. He could not forget. As a young man he began to follow Jesus, and at twenty-one years of age he was a servant of the Word. In his early twenties, Peter Walpot wrote one of the confessions of faith most widely used among the Anabaptists of Austria and Moravia. On taking the Scriptures literally, he wrote:

⁵ From *Ain kurzer Anzayg, wie doctor M. Luther ain zayt hör hatt etliche schriffthen lassen ausgeen vom Sacrament, die doch straks wider einander*, 1527.

⁶ Quoted in the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für die Geschichte Mährens und Schlesiens*, 1928

⁷ After World War I, the city of Klausen, and the surrounding territory became a part of Italy. In Italian, it is known as Chiusa.

Because Jesus said, “I am the true vine,” he was not physically a grapevine. He is called a lamb, but he is not physically a lamb. He called Simon Peter a rock, but Peter did not turn into stone. He remained human. Paul says of Sarah and Hagar that they were the two testaments. Should that make them literal documents? No, they only stood for the documents.

Jesus said, “I am the door into the fold, and I am the way.” He said that whoever believes on him will have rivers of living water flowing from within him. But he does not mean a literal river. Jesus spoke of a man having a beam in his eye, but this does not mean a literal log or the tongue of a wagon. He said to Mary on the cross: “Woman, behold your son,” and to John he said: “Son, behold your mother.” According to these plain words, John would have been the natural brother of Jesus, but he was not. His mother was someone else. Jesus said the seed is the Word of God and the field is the world. The seven fat cows and the seven lean cows were seven years—the Scriptures speak many times in words like these. If we should take everything literally many foolish things would happen. In the same way, when Jesus said the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, it was not physically the case, but it stood for those things.⁸

Beyond “Biblicism”

“The Anabaptists,” some take for granted, “were avowed Biblicists. They gave the Bible first place in their lives and died in its defense. . . .”

But were they?

That the first Anabaptists followed Jesus and all his teachings in the Bible is apparent. But that they felt about the Bible like modern day Biblicists or Fundamentalists is not so clear.

The first Anabaptists must have known the German word for Bible (*Bibel*). But they never used it. They spoke of the writings

⁸ From *Fünf Artikel des grössten Streites zwischen uns und der Welt*, 1547.

(the Scriptures)—or the holy writings (not in capital letters, in spite of modern German rules on the capitalisation of nouns).

The first Anabaptists stated no opinions on the correct “version” or “translation” of the Bible. German translations were just beginning to appear. Not all of them were accurate, and the principal one came from Martin Luther, their arch enemy. Beyond this, only a few Anabaptists such as Menno Simons, Conrad Grebel, and Hans Denck, could read the Latin Vulgate (the Roman Catholic Bible).

The first Anabaptists had no clear position on the “canon of Scripture.” They accepted, and freely quoted from all the books of the Apocrypha, including the third and fourth books of Ezra and the third book of the Maccabees. They seem to have been influenced by the books of Pseudo-Dionisius, the Gospel of Nicodemus, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and literature on the saints. The *Ausbund* commemorates in song the deaths of Saint Laurence, Saint Agathe, Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine, and others. The *Martyrs Mirror* includes more of the same.

For more than 150 years after the beginning of the Anabaptist movement they wrote very little on what they believed about the Scriptures. That belief, while they followed the Word of God riding on a white horse and dressed in a garment dipped in blood, needed no explanation.

Beyond Mysticism and Pietism

“What were they then,” a sister asked me, after I spoke about the first Anabaptists following the Word that lived in their hearts. “Were they some kind of mystics or Pietists?”

No.

Without a doubt, the first Anabaptists felt the influence of mediaeval mysticism, but they left the mystics behind when they got up to follow Jesus. The mystics, and later on the

Pietists, found their delight in secret communion with Jesus alone. They managed to “follow Jesus” in such a way that most of them could keep on living in peace in the state churches. For the Anabaptists, this was unthinkable.

Both the mystics and the Pietists found their delight in experiences of the soul and in revelations that threatened to eclipse the example of Jesus in the Gospels. But the Anabaptists found their delight in the Word of Christ. Menno Simons wrote in 1539:

I have received no vision or angelic inspirations. Neither do I desire such, lest I be deceived. The Word of Christ alone is sufficient for me. If I do not follow the Word, then all I do is in vain. Even if I had special visions and inspirations they would have to agree with the Word and the Spirit of Christ, or else they would be mere imaginations, deceit, and Satanic temptation.⁹

The Word, Above All Human Authority

Dirk Philips, after he left a Franciscan monastery and joined the Anabaptists at Leeuwarden in Friesland, wrote:

The Gospel of Jesus is the real truth, and the only foundation on which everything must be built (1 Cor. 3:11). Beside this truth and this foundation there is nothing that will stand before God.¹⁰

Conrad Grebel wrote to a friend in 1524:

Do your utmost in preaching the Word of God without fear. Set up and defend only the institutions that are of God. Count as precious only that which is good and right, only that which can be found in the pure, clear Scriptures. Then reject, hate, and curse all proposals, all words, all opinion, and all institutions of all men, including your own.¹¹

⁹ *Die oorsake waerom dat ick M. S. niet of en late te leeren ende te schrijuen*, 1542

¹⁰ From *Enchiridion oft Hantboecxken van de Christelijcke Leere ende Religion, in corte somma begrepen* . . . 1564

¹¹ From a letter to Thomas Müntzer, September 5, 1524.

Michael Sattler wrote:

Let no one tear you from the order that is laid down in the Scriptures, the order sealed by the blood of Jesus and witnessed to by many of his followers.¹²

The Word in Their Hands

Martin Luther condemned the Anabaptists for “taking the Word of God into their own hands.” His charge was not without foundation.

The first Anabaptists rejoiced in “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes . . . and *our hands have handled*, of the Word of Life” (1 John 1:1). They took Peter literally where he said that “no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” They believed that no church leaders nor denomination held the exclusive right to handle the Word of God. And they believed that the written word was for all to hear, see, touch, and understand. Conrad Grebel wrote in 1524:

Just as our forefathers fell away from the true God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ and of the right faith in him . . . so today, too, every man wants to be saved by a superficial faith without fruits. . . . In the same error we too lingered, as long as we heard and read only the evangelical preachers. But after we took the Scriptures into our own hands and consulted them ourselves on many points, we have been instructed.¹³

Grebel criticised Martin Luther for his “irresponsible sparing” of the German populace by not giving them the Scriptures to handle and interpret for themselves. Grebel saw Luther as guilty of “hiding the Word of God, mixing the commands of God with commands of men, and damaging and frustrating all that comes from God.”

¹² *Ein Sendbrief an die Gemeinde Gottes in Horb*, 1527

¹³ Letter to Thomas Müntzer, 1524.

The Word Prohibits What It Does Not Command

The first Anabaptists believed that churches do not have the right to make rules about things on which the Scriptures are silent. Conrad Grebel, who frequently mentioned the “example and commands” of the Scriptures (*Beispiel und Geboten*), wrote:

Whatever we have not been taught by clear teaching and example we should take as something completely forbidden, just as if it were written: “Do not do this.” If the apostles did not do it, we should not do it either.¹⁴

Dirk Philips wrote:

Whatever God has not commanded, that he prohibits us to command. Therefore all worship and practice that is not instituted by a direct command of God is wrong, no matter how many human arguments defend it.¹⁵

Menno Simons wrote:

Beware of all innovations and teachings that do not come from the Word of Christ and his apostles. . . . Point to Christ and his Word at all times. Let all those who would introduce anything more than what Christ teaches in his Word be anathema. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).¹⁶

The Old and the New Testaments

The Protestant Reformers, the first Anabaptists believed, got the old and the new covenants of God confused because they did not approach the Scriptures through Jesus. They tried to climb in

¹⁴ From a letter to Thomas Müntzer, September 5, 1524.

¹⁵ *Enchiridion*, 1564

¹⁶ *Kindertucht. Een schoon onderwys ende leere, hoe alle vrome olders haer kinderen (nae wtwijzen der schriftueren) schuldich ende ghehouden zijn de regieren, te castyden, te onderrichten, ende in een vroom duechdelick ende godsalich leeuen op te voeden. . . ca. 1557.*

some other way, through the “doctrines” of Paul, through the laws of Moses, or through the Old Testament prophets. This made them “thieves and murderers.” It made them take wrong examples from the wrong people, and led them to use the written Word in a way that did more harm than good.

The Protestant Reformers failed, for instance, to follow Jesus’ example in loving his enemies because they looked to David’s example in war. They did not follow Jesus’ example in economics because they looked to Abraham and Job. They did not understand Jesus’ kingdom because they looked at the kingdom of Israel.

The Anabaptist servant of the Word, Hans Pfistermeyer, testified before the Swiss authorities at Bern in 1531:

The New Testament is better than the Old. The Old was fulfilled and interpreted by Jesus. Jesus taught a higher and better way and made with his people a new covenant. I make a great difference between the Old and New Testament and believe that the New Covenant which was made with us is much better than the old that was made with the Jews.¹⁷

In a public debate at Frankenthal in the Kurpfalz in 1571, the Anabaptists said:

The Old Testament writings offer strong proof that Jesus is the true God and Saviour of whom all the prophets testified. . . . Moses points us forward to Christ our Saviour. . . . We believe that the New Testament surpasses the Old. The parts of the Old Testament that can be reconciled with the teachings of Christ we accept. . . . If teaching necessary for salvation and a godly life was not taught by Christ and the Apostles, but is found only in the Old Testament, we would like to see it.¹⁸

¹⁷ From *Ein christenlich gespräch gehalten zu Bernn zwischen den Predicanten und Hansen Physter Meyer von Arouw den Widertauff, Eyd, Oberkeyt und andere Widertoufferische Artikel betreffende*, 1531.

¹⁸ From *Protocoll, Das ist Alle handlung des gesprechs zu Franckenthal inn der Churfürstlichen Pfaltz, mit denen so man Widertäußer nennet*, 1571.

Dirk Philips might have expressed the same willingness, but he did not expect to see anything like it. He wrote:

False prophets disguise their teachings by appealing to the letter of the Old Testament, which consists of figures for things to come. Whatever they cannot defend by the New Testament they try to establish with the Old. This has given rise to many sects and many false religious forms.¹⁹

Afraid of the Word

In Canada, where I spent my childhood, some believed that people who “read the Bible too much” got strange ideas, lost their minds, or left the church. One older man explained it like this, “The Bible is like a stream. As long as you are content to drink from the surface, its water stays clean and pure. But if you get in too deep, you stir it up, and its waters become muddy and unfit to drink.”

The first Anabaptists faced similar logic. For a thousand years the church of the Dark Ages had convinced the people the Scriptures were dangerous. The people had come to believe that if an “unlearned” man handles the Bible, he may offend God and bring damnation upon his soul.

Following Jesus, the first Anabaptists lost these fears. They no longer worried about “getting in too deep” or about bringing condemnation upon themselves. Veit Grünberger, Anabaptist messenger arrested at Salzburg in Austria in 1576, mentioned in a letter from prison that he hoped to learn at least one hundred chapters from the New Testament by memory. He regretted that he had not known the Scriptures sooner so that he could have memorised the entire New Testament.

The Anabaptists started with the Gospels, but they did not neglect nor minimise the remainder of the written Word. “Read the epistles with diligence,” wrote Wolfgang Brandhuber. “Ask

¹⁹ *Enchiridion*, 1564.

God to help you understand them and he will teach you all things if you attend his school and accept his discipline.”²⁰

“When we hear or read the Scriptures, it is just as if we heard the Lord Christ or his apostles speaking to us,” wrote Leupold Scharnschlager. “Everyone knows that the materials with which they are written are in themselves dead ink and paper, but if we comprehend them right, they are more than that.”²¹

The Scriptures helped the first Anabaptists into Gemeinschaft with Jesus. They felt totally at home in the Scriptures. But they feared them too—when people misused them.

Heinz Kraut, Anabaptist messenger from Frankenhausen in Thüringen, fell into the hands of Martin Luther’s men on November 20, 1535. Resolving to win him over to their side, the Lutherans imprisoned him at Jena and had their best scholars, Kaspar Kreutzinger and Philipp Melancthon dispute with him.

The Lutheran scholars quoted scripture after scripture in defense of their positions. Finally Heinz could keep quiet no longer. “You, Master Philip,” he said, “have killed more people with your dead Scriptures than have all the hangmen in Germany!”

The Lutherans answered by beheading Heinz Kraut at Jena on January 26, 1536.

“The Scriptures are valuable for those who use them right,” testified one Anabaptist at the Regensburg trials in Bavaria. “But their misuse is the source of all heresy and unbelief. To the scribes and the Pharisees the Scriptures were not a guide to Christ, but a hindrance and eventually a punishment.”²²

²⁰ *Sendbrief*, 1529

²¹ From *Erleütterung durch auszug aus Heiliger Biblischer schrift. . . zu dienst und fürderung ains Klaren urteils von wegen unterschied Alts und News Testaments. . . genant Testamenterleütterung*, ca. 1544.

²² Quoted in Hermann Nestler, *Die Wiedertäuferbewegung in Regensburg*, 1926.

“Man’s salvation is not to be bound to the outer word,” stated another Anabaptist defendant at Regensburg. “Salvation is a matter of the inner Word alone.” And to this Ulrich Stadler added that it is dangerous to bring people to depend on the outer word because it “makes an idol out of the preacher, out of the writings and out of their words. But all these are merely images, signs, or tools.”²³

Bold with the Word

Because they had full confidence in the Word of Christ and in their Spirit-led understanding of it, the first Anabaptists lost their fear of men. Before the court that sentenced him to death, Michael Sattler said:

We will be convinced through the Scriptures. If we see that we are wrong we will gladly bear our punishment. But if, according to the Scriptures, we are not wrong, then I hope before God that you will all change your minds and allow yourselves to be taught.

At this the judges “stuck their heads together and laughed.” Michael’s request to use the Scriptures in their original languages as a basis for discussion seemed ridiculous to them. “You shameless and renegade monk,” sneered the presiding secretary, “shall we dispute with you? We’ll let the hangman do that!”

When the chief judge, Count Joachim von Zollern, asked him if he wanted to receive a just sentence, Michael replied: “Servants of God, I am not called to judge the Word but to be a witness for it. . . . We are ready to suffer for the Word of God whatever punishment you lay upon us. We will stand fast on our faith in Jesus as long as we have breath, that is, until we can be shown from the Scriptures a better way.”

“Yes, you will be shown,” retorted the secretary. “The hangman will show you. He will dispute with you.”

²³ *Vom lebendigen Wort und geschriebenen . . . ca. 1530*

“I appeal to the Scriptures,” was Michael’s last reply.²⁴

The Word and the Cross

After a recent church division, one minister said: “The other group wants to live only by the Word of God. You know, that is a dangerous position for a conservative church to take.”

He was right. Living only by the Word of God is dangerous. The day Menno Simons decided to do it, he became a hunted man. Dutch authorities set a price on his head. Giving him a bed became a capital offence. He fled by night. He preached much. He suffered much and finally died, an old man with a crutch, banished to the cold windswept moors of Schleswig-Holstein along the Baltic Sea. But Menno was not sorry: “Which of the two shall we follow?” he asked. “Shall we follow the truth of Christ Jesus, or shall we follow the lies of the world? If you answer that we should follow Jesus, your judgement is right. But the result for the flesh will be anxiety, the loss of our belongings, arrest, banishment, poverty, water, fire, sword, the wheel, shame, cross, suffering, and bodily death—then eternal life. If you answer that we should follow the world than you judge wrong. Even though the result of such a choice brings us honour and liberty, even though it brings us ease and material advantages, it ends in eternal death.”²⁵

The cross the Anabaptists carried was heavy. But they carried it for the Word, dressed in a garment dipped in blood, who led them . . .

²⁴ From the eyewitness account of Klaus von Graveneck.

²⁵ *Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels . . .* ca. 1542