

# 16

## On with the Message

*Oid, oid, lo que nos manda el Salvador.  
Marchad, marchad, y proclamad mi amor.  
Pues he aquí, yo con vosotros estaré  
Los días todos hasta el fin os guardaré.*

*Id, id por el mundo. Id, Id y predicad el evangelio,  
Id, id va adelante el todopoderoso Salvador.  
¡Gloria, gloria aleluya a Jesús!  
¡Gloria, gloria aleluya a Jesús!  
Nuestras almas él salvó, nuestras manchas él lavó,  
¡Proclamemos pues, a todos su amor!<sup>1</sup>*

The mighty strains of a missionary hymn stopped me beneath the window of the chapel where my students were in chorus practice. In passing I had caught the words and they held me transfixed.

*Mirad, mirad, la condición del pecador,  
¡Qué triste es! ¡Qué llena de dolor!  
Sin luz, sin paz camina hacia la eternidad,  
Y no conoce el gran peligro en que está.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Take heed, take heed to the Saviour's command! March on, march on, proclaiming his love! He said he would be with us and keep us unto the end of the world. Go out, Go out into the world! Go out and preach the Gospel! Glory hallelujah to Jesus! He saved our souls, he washed away our sins. Let us proclaim to all the world his love!

The message gripped my heart, as always. Only this time more so. It was a missionary hymn. Dry leaves swirled through the dead grass of December. The hills of Santa Ana, El Salvador stood above great spreading trees along the road through Zacamil. I thought of the bombs we had heard at close proximity a few nights before. (They had bombed a bank close to the mission in the capital city.) I thought of the rattle of machine gun fire, bullet-pocked bunkers on flood-lit bridges, helicopters flying in formation at tree-top level, heavy artillery pointing down on all sides, buses with tires shot out and laden with bombs set across the highway, and tiny houses flying white flags.

*Salid, salid, embajadores del Señor,  
Buscad, buscad el pobre pecador.  
Aprovechad el tiempo que el Señor nos da,  
Pues pronto el día de salud acabara.*<sup>3</sup>

I knew that the young people singing this song were conscious of its words. Many came from non-Christian homes. A number of them were orphaned in early childhood. Numerous boys had been inducted into the army and had either escaped or explained their way out of boot camp by proving to the generals their Christianity.

*Id, id por el mundo. Id, id y predicad el evangelio.  
Id, id va adelante, el todopoderoso Salvador. . .*<sup>4</sup>

So soon they would be back in the cities to put this song to practice. First-generation Anabaptists singing a missionary

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<sup>2</sup> Look, look at the condition of the sinner! How sad it is! How filled with pain! Without light, without peace he walks toward eternity and does not know the danger he is in!

<sup>3</sup> Go out, go out, ambassadors of the Lord! Search for the poor sinners. Make good use of the time the Lord gives you, because the day of salvation will soon be over!

<sup>4</sup> Go out, go out into all the world! Go out and preach the Gospel! Go out and follow your Saviour who goes before you. . .

hymn—how I loved the spirit of these Salvadorean and Guatemalan young people! Theirs was the spirit of Christianity’s oldest extant missionary hymn, written by an Anabaptist in Moravia in 1563.<sup>5</sup>

“The Swiss Brethren movement began,” observed a scholar, “because Conrad Grebel had the courage to make an unreserved personal commitment to this ideal (the ideal of a voluntary Christian community) regardless of the consequences. . . . Where others shrank from adoption of the full New Testament ideal because of fear that it could not be carried through in practice, as for instance, Luther, Grebel acted. He chose to follow the vision without calculation of possibilities or practicalities, believing that the truth commands: it does not merely advise.”<sup>6</sup>

The Anabaptists sent out *Sendboten* (messengers) at once, even though the task of evangelism has never been carried out under greater difficulty. An eye-witness of the beginning of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland wrote:

Suddenly one saw a great many people, as though ready for a journey, girded with ropes, passing through Zürich. In the marketplaces and squares they stood and preached a better life, conversion, freedom from guilt and brotherly love.<sup>7</sup>

Every Anabaptist messenger, if caught, faced torture and death. No roads were safe. They travelled on foot, through forests and mountain ranges, and preached by night. They were the only evangelical missionaries of their time. Every European country prohibited them. Coming from underground churches that had little or no money, they could not depend on regular support. But they “steadfastly witnessed to the Word of the Lord, by life and work, by word and deed. They spoke with power of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, pp. 650-652

<sup>6</sup> Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel*, (Goshen, 1950) pg. 213

<sup>7</sup> From Joseph von Beck, *Die Geschichts-Bücher der Wiedertäufer in Oesterreich-Ungarn* . . . (Vienna, 1883).

kingdom of God. They called all men to repentance, to turn to God from the vanity of the world and from a sinful and wretched life. God gave his blessing to this work and it was carried out with joy,” wrote Kaspar Braitmichel of the Bruderhöfe in Moravia, in the mid-1500s.

The messengers went out with joy, but many did not return. Sent out two by two, they took leave of their wives and children, hoping but not really expecting to see them again on the earth. They simply went out and preached at the cost of their lives. Menno Simons wrote:

We desire with burning hearts that the true Gospel of Christ would be preached throughout all the world. We desire that it may be taught to all men as Christ commanded, even at the cost of our life and blood.<sup>8</sup>

Kaspar Braitmichel wrote:

We practice the sending out of Christian messengers like the Lord commanded, saying: “As my father sent me, so send I you. I have chosen you and ordered you to go out and bring in a harvest.” To carry this out we send servants of the Gospel every year to all the countries to which we have a reason to send them. These men visit those who desire a better way of life, who eagerly seek and ask for the truth. Spies and hangmen notwithstanding, we visit those who seek, by day and by night, at the cost of the messengers’ necks, their bodies, and their lives. In this way, the Lord, like a good shepherd, carries his flock together.<sup>9</sup>

Roman Catholic authorities accused Josef Schlosser, Anabaptist messenger imprisoned in Poland in 1579, of being a deceiver of the people. “If you would be a good man,” the authorities said, “you would stay in your own country and leave other people alone.”

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<sup>8</sup> *Die oorsake waerom dat ick M. S. niet of en late te leeren, ende te schrijuen. . . ca. 1542*

<sup>9</sup> *Geschichtsbuech, ca. 1570*

To this Josef replied, “I deceive no one. The reason we go out into all countries is to obey the command of Christ to call people to repentance and to help those who want to lead a better life.”

So great was the hunger for the Gospel in Poland that they had to hide Josef in stocks in the castle dungeon to keep people away from his cell. In spite of the authorities’ dire threats, these people had been coming in a continuous stream to hear what he had to say.

### **Filling the Lord’s house**

Hieronimus Kräl, Anabaptist messenger imprisoned in a dungeon in Austria until his clothes had completely rotted away and he had only his shirt collar to send to his friends as a sign of his continued steadfastness, wrote:

We are not sent out for anyone’s harm or disadvantage. Rather we are sent out to seek the salvation of men and to show them the way to repentance and conversion.<sup>10</sup>

This sending out, in obedience to the command of Christ, continued year after year. Not only the men went. Leonhard Dax, a converted priest of München in Bavaria, joined the communities in Moravia. On the Sunday before St.~Martin’s day in 1567, they sent him out with his wife Anna, Ludwig Dörker, Jakob Gabriel Binder, Jörg Schneider, and a sister called Barbara from a new Bruderhof at Tawikovice near Mährisch-Kromau. Not long afterward they fell into the hands of the Protestant authorities at Alzey on the Rhine, 500 miles away.

Political unrest did not stop the messengers. In 1603, after years of oppression, plundering, and terror during the Hungarian revolution, the Anabaptist communities of that country sent six

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

messengers to East Prussia on the Baltic Sea. Sailing from Denmark, they were captured by a Swedish ship and taken to Sweden. Only after much difficulty did they reach their destination—a group of seekers in the Vistula Delta.

“We preach where we can,” said Menno Simons toward the end of his life, “both by day and night, in houses and in fields, in forests and wastelands, in this country and abroad, in prisons and bonds, in the water, the fire and on the scaffold, on the gallows and upon the wheel, before lords and princes, orally and by writing, at the risk of possessions and life. We have done so for many years without ceasing.”<sup>11</sup>

Invited or not invited, the Anabaptists preached the truth. Klaus Felbinger, a south German messenger wrote:

Some have asked us why we entered the territory of the duke of Bavaria. I answered: “We go not only into this land but into all lands as far as our language extends. We go wherever God opens a door. We go wherever God directs us to hearts who earnestly seek him and who are tired of the ungodly life of the world. We go to those who wish to amend their lives. To all such places we go and will go.”<sup>12</sup>

Kaspar Braitmichel wrote:

Since God the Almighty desired to build his house and cause his community to increase, he always provided a way of grace that more souls found their way out of the desolate and apostate nations into the brotherhood so that the Lord’s table and house were well filled.<sup>13</sup>

## The World Upside Down

The greater the first Anabaptists’ joy in the Lord and in one another, the greater their desire to bring souls into *Gemeinschaft*

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<sup>11</sup> *Opera Omnia Theologica*, (Amsterdam, 1681)

<sup>12</sup> *Abgeschrift des Glaubens welchen ich, Klaus Felbinger, zu Landshut den Herrn daselbst für mich und statt meines mitgefangenen Bruders zugestellt habe*, 1560

<sup>13</sup> *Geschichtsbuech*, ca. 1570



**The Gospel of the Kingdom** spread throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, as on this back street in Strasbourg, through aggressive person to person contact, and prayer.

them as though they were living saints.” Feared, admired, or cursed, the Anabaptist movement could not be ignored. Wolfgang Capito, a Protestant leader in Strasbourg, wrote in 1527:

I frankly confess that in most Anabaptists piety and consecration may be seen. They are zealous beyond any suspicion of insincerity. What earthly advantage could they hope to gain by enduring exile, torture, and unspeakable punishment of the flesh? It is not because of a lack of wisdom that they are somewhat indifferent toward earthly things. It is because of their divine motivation.<sup>15</sup>

Listening to Christ’s command to go out and preach the Gospel to all nations, the first Anabaptists followed him . . .

with Christ—and the worse the persecution they faced. Luther called them *Schwärmer* (swarmers). Both Protestants and Catholics called them vermin, gangsters, and thieves. Sebastian Franck wrote in 1531:

The Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered the land. . . They soon gained a large following and baptised thousands. . . . They increased so rapidly that the world feared an uprising by them, though I have learned that this fear had no justification whatsoever.<sup>14</sup>

Heinrich Bullinger, Reformed clergyman of Zürich, and bitter opponent of the Anabaptists reported that “people run after

<sup>14</sup> *Chronica, Zeytbuch und Geschychtbibel*, (Strasbourg, 1531)

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in C. A. Cornelius, *Geschichte des Münsterischen Aufruhrs* (Leipzig, 1860).