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On to Witness

Among the dairy farms at Goes on the Dutch island of Zuid Beveland, Joost Joosten grew up singing. He excelled in Latin at school, but his heart was in the songs he sang, and his parents found a place for him in the choir of the village church.

People noticed him when he sang—fair-haired boy with a clear voice—and liked him. In 1556 King Philip II of Spain visited the Netherlands. They gave him a high mass at Middelburg and called upon the choir from Goes to sing. Joost had turned fourteen. The king saw and heard him. After the mass he said: “Bring me that boy. He must go back with me to Spain!”

But Joost did not want to go to Spain to live in the richest royal court in Europe. He wanted something far better. He hid for six weeks until they gave up looking for him and the king was safely gone. Then, when he was out of school, he made known his desire to follow Christ. An Anabaptist messenger baptised him in a secret meeting, and the king’s officials started looking for him again.

They caught Joost in 1560 and put him in jail. Four interrogators from the Holy Office of the Inquisition came to question him. On five sheets of paper Joost wrote for them what he believed. He also wrote songs and sang in jail.

The inquisitors had Joost pulled on the rack. They had hot steel rods turned through his knees and pushed through his legs until



The village of Goes, in Zeeland, as seen from the church tower, today.

they came out at the ankles. But his heart could not be moved. Then the court convicted him and sentenced him to death.

They made a little house of straw on the town square. The people came by boat, on horseback, and on foot to see. They lined the streets and the sides of the square, surrounded by soldiers to hold them back . . . and waited.

The soldiers brought him in chains. The people had not seen him so pale or so thin before. Then suddenly, what was that? He was singing!

Joost Joosten was singing again . . . the same clear voice . . . a man's voice now . . . and some of them recognised the song he sang. It was one he had written as a new Christian: "Oh Lord Christ, in my mind I see you standing always before me!"

They put him inside the little house of straw. He was still singing when the flames roared up. It was the Monday before Christmas, 1560, and Joost Joosten was eighteen years old.

Witnessing

“Hans Koch and Leonhard Meister witnessed at Augsburg, Anno 1524 . . . an old man and a youth witnessed at Amsterdam . . . Thomas the printer witnessed at Köln am Rhein, Anno 1557.”

Witnessing to whom? Of what?

At first glance these *Ausbund* song headings may bring to mind the Anabaptists’ witnessing in court, or their willingness to speak with others of what they believed. But on second glance it becomes clear that “witnessing” in the sixteenth century involved more than it usually does today.

The Mennonite church into which I was baptised went “witnessing” once a month. My first turn came on a warm July evening in 1977. I travelled to London, Ontario, with a group of brothers in my friend’s Monte Carlo. Soft Evangelical music from the rear speakers calmed my trepidations as we entered Highbury Avenue and neared the intersection of Richmond and Dundas streets in the heart of the city. It was Friday evening. Tracts moved fast among throngs of pedestrians while the lights came on. Some sneered. Some asked questions. Most people respectfully took our *Just for You* tracts. A Jewish college professor asked us thoughtful questions. His wife, he said, was a Mennonite from Manitoba. Then, after we ran out of literature, we shared our impressions on the long ride home.

This, for us was “witnessing.”

The first Anabaptists did it otherwise. An eye-witness account from the mid-1500s reads:

The nine men knelt on the green meadow. Blood flowed over the sword. Three women were drowned. One laughed when they put her into the water. Then we buried them all together in one deep grave. . . . There was much weeping. Many people cried to God that he would give rest to the departed souls. But others mocked, saying they were the devil’s horde and served the Antichrist. . . .

This was done on Friday morning. Many important people had come riding in. They came lightheartedly, but we all went home in tears. I cannot describe everything I saw.¹

Menno Simons wrote:

If Socrates could die for his beliefs, if Marcus Curtius and Gaius Mutius Scevola could die for the city of Rome and the good of the state, if Jews and Turks brave death for the laws of their fatherland, why should I not offer my soul for heavenly wisdom? For the brothers? For what Christ has established?²

“Witnessing” to the first Anabaptists was to give one’s life for what one believed.

Christ the Faithful Witness

Following Christ the Amen, the faithful and true witness (Rev. 1:5 and 3:14), the Anabaptists became witnesses with him. Holding to the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 12:17 and 19:10), the Anabaptists overcame their fear of death. Their highest honour became the privilege of testifying for Christ at the cost of their lives (Rev. 20:4).

Menno Simons wrote:

The heavy cross of Christ is the mark of the true church, the cross which is carried for the sake of his Word. Christ said to his disciples, “You will be hated of all nations for my name’s sake.” Paul wrote: “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. . . .” “The cross was the mark of the first church. Now it is that again, here in the Netherlands.”³

All who wish to go in by the right door, Christ Jesus, must sacrifice all they have. They must take upon themselves the heavy cross of poverty, of distress, of disdain and sorrow and sadness. They must follow the rejected, the outcast, and bleeding

¹ *Ausbund*, 26

² *Christelycke leringhen op den 25. Psalm*, ca. 1538

³ *Een Klare beantwoordinge, over een Schrift Gellii Fabri*. . . 1554

Christ . . . until through great tribulation they enter the kingdom of God.⁴

Preaching and the Cross

“The yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light,” taught the Anabaptists, “but his cross is heavy.”

Preaching that does not involve cross bearing looks suspicious. Menno Simons wrote:

Do not hope that the time will come when the Word can be preached without the cross. Oh no! It is the Word of the cross and it will remain that to the end. The Word has to be preached with much suffering and sealed with blood. . . . If the head had to suffer torture and pain, how shall his members expect peace? If they called the master of the house a devil, will they not do so to those of his household? Christ said, “You will be hated by all men for my name’s sake.”⁵

Conrad Grebel wrote:

Christians who believe right are sheep in the midst of wolves—sheep for butchering. They must be baptised in fear and distress, sorrow, persecution, suffering, and death.⁶

A large part of the *Ausbund* consists of encouragement for Christians carrying the cross. One of Menno Simons’ most meaningful books is *The Cross of the Holy Ones* published in 1554.

Hated Without a Cause

Persecuted but not forsaken, troubled on every side yet not distressed, perplexed but not in despair, cast down but not destroyed, the first Anabaptists believed it necessary to bear in

⁴ *Eyne troestelijke vermaninge van dat lijden, cruyze, vnde veruolginge der heyligen . . .* 1558

⁵ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers . . .* 1539

⁶ *Ein Brief an Thomas Müntzer*, September 5, 1524

their bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus so that his life might become apparent in them (2 Cor. 4:8-11).

Menno Simons wrote:

With my wife and children I have endured misery and persecution for 18 years. . . . While they (the Protestant preachers) repose on beds with soft pillows, we hide in out-of-the-way corners. While they listen to music at weddings and banquets, we listen for dogs to bark, warning us of impending arrest. While they are greeted as Doctor, lord, and teacher, we are called Anabaptists, night preachers, deceivers, and heretics. People salute us in the name of the devil. While they are handsomely rewarded for their services with large incomes and good times, we get fire, sword, and death.⁷

Leonhard Schiemer wrote:

We are scattered like sheep without a shepherd. We have left our houses and lands and have become like owls of the night, like game birds. We sneak about in the forest. Men track us down with dogs, then lead us like lambs back to town. There they put us on display and say we are the cause of an uproar. We are counted like sheep for slaughter. They call us heretics and deceivers.⁸

Christoph Bauman, a Swiss Anabaptist wrote:

Where shall I go? I am so ignorant. Only to God can I go, because God alone will be my helper. I trust in you, God, in all my distress. You will not forsake me. You will stand with me, even in death. I have committed myself to your Word. That is why I have lost favour in all places. But by losing the world's favour, I gained yours. Therefore I say to the world: Away with you! I will follow Christ.

It was long enough, world, that I floated about in you, oh treacherous sea. You deceived me long enough. You detained me. While I was a slave to sin, and wronged God, you loved and honoured me. But now you hate me. I have become a spectacle to

⁷ *Een Klare beantwoordinge, over een Schrift Gellii Fabri. . . 1554*

⁸ *Ausbund*, 31:4-5

the world. Everyone in every place shouts “Heretic!” after me, because I love God’s Word. But I have no greater treasure than God’s Word, so I will not allow myself to be turned from it—to be turned away from my God and my Lord. I will keep on being “obstinate.”

I have no place left to me on the earth. Wherever I go I must be punished. Poverty is my fortune. Cross and sorrow have become my joy. Bonds and imprisonment have become my garment. Such is the heraldry of my king!

Even among animals of the forest I find no rest. People chase me up and drive me away. I cannot come into any house. People drive me out. I must duck and dodge and creep about like a mouse. All my friends have forsaken me. All streets are barred for me. The people are determined to capture me as soon as they find me. I suffer at their hands. They rough me up and beat me. They hate me without a cause.

The people begrudge me the crumbs from their tables. They are unwilling to let me drink water from their wells, and they do not want me to enjoy as much as the light of the sun. I have no peace among them. They will not let me enter their doors. They are ashamed of me because I choose to follow Christ.

I am sold into the hands of my enemies and betrayed above all by those to whom I have done the most good. I served them cheerfully by day and by night. But now they lead me like a lamb to the slaughter. I sought their salvation but they rejected my efforts. They curse me for it and drive me away. They drive me into distress. . . out of their houses, their fields, their woods, and their forests. Wherever I lodge they chase me out. They treat me brutally. They hunt me like a man hunts a deer. They set traps for me and search for me, ready to hit me over the head, stab and bind me. I am forced to forsake my shelter and go out into the rain and the wind.

Even those who want to be Christians condemn me. Because of God’s name they expel me out of their church. The hypocritical masses make a fool out of me. They say I belong to the devil and that I do not have a God. They do all this because I hate their sectarian and treacherous ways, and because I avoid the way of

sin people raise a great cry after me: “Heretic, get out of here!” They throw my past sins before me and say: “Let the hangman dispute with him!” They put me on the rack and torture me. They tear my body apart.

God, will you not kindly look into this and see what the people are doing? I commend myself to you and leave myself in your hands.⁹

The cross was heavy, but the Anabaptists gladly endured it to gain eternal joy. Leonhard Schiemer ended his description of the Anabaptists’ tribulation with these words:

Oh Lord, no tribulation is so great that it can draw us away from you. . . . Glory, triumph and honour are yours from now into eternity. Your righteousness is always blessed by the people who gather in your name. You will come again to judge the earth!¹⁰

Christoph Bauman’s account ends likewise with words of mercy and hope:

God, I pray from my heart that you would forgive the sins of those who trouble me. And do keep all your children safe, wherever they are in this valley of sorrows—driven apart, tortured, imprisoned, and suffering great tribulation. Father, most precious to my heart, lead us into the promised land. Lead us out of all pain and martyrdom, anguish, chains, and bonds into your holy community. There you alone will be praised by the children you love: those who live in obedience to you! Amen.¹¹

What About the Children?

Every parent who joined the early Anabaptist movement knew what his decision would bring upon his family: poverty, suffering, and most likely flight. Parents knew at baptism that their finding peace with God could well leave their companions in a widowed state or their children as orphans. Along with the

⁹ *Ausbund*, 76

¹⁰ *op. cit.*

¹¹ *op. cit.*

joy of seeing sons and daughters baptised came the dread of seeing them burned at the stake.

Menno Simons wrote:

Believing parents are minded like this about their children: they would a hundred times rather see them in a deep dark dungeon for the sake of Christ, than sitting with deceptive priests in an idol church, or in the company of drunken dolts in a tavern. A hundred times rather would they see them bound and dragged before the court, than to see them marry rich companions who do not fear God—feted in dances, song and play, pomp and splendour and musical instruments. A hundred times rather would they see their children scourged from head to foot for the sake of the Lord than to see them dressed in silks, jewellery, or costly trimmed and tailored clothes. Yes, a hundred times rather would they see them exiled, burning at the stake, drowned, or being pulled apart on the rack for righteousness' sake than to see them live apart from God—than to see them be emperors or kings only to end up in hell.¹²

The Flame of God

Martin Luther and his colleagues met at Speyer on the Rhein in 1529. They gathered to define the evangelical liberties of the new Protestant states of Germany, and to establish the Protestant church in “peace, liberty, and the blessing of God.” At the same meeting they passed a resolution: “Every Anabaptist, both male and female, shall be put to death by fire, sword, or in some other way.”

But Martin Luther and his colleagues could not carry out their plans at once. Neither could the Roman Catholics, Huldrych Zwingli, nor John Calvin. The flame of the Anabaptist movement, instead of flickering out, grew brighter.

Kaspar Braitmichel wrote:

¹² *Van dat rechte christen ghelooue . . .* ca. 1542

The authorities wanted to extinguish the light of truth, but more and more kept getting converted. They caught men and women, young men and girls—everyone who gave himself up to the faith, and who separated himself from the ungodly affairs of society. In some places all the prisons were full. The persecutors wanted to frighten them. But they sang in prison and were so joyful in their bonds that the prison keepers feared instead. The authorities no longer knew what to do with them all. . . .

The Kurfürst arrested—due to the emperor’s mandate—around 450 believers. His subordinate, the Lord Diedrich von Schönberg had many Anabaptists beheaded, drowned, and killed in other ways at Alzey. His men searched for them, dragging them from the houses of the city and leading them like sheep to the slaughter in the city square.

Of these believers, not one recanted. They all went joyfully to their death. While some were being drowned and beheaded, the rest sang while they waited their turn. They stood strong in the truth they professed and sure in the faith they had received from God. A few of them whom they did not want to kill right away they tortured by chopping off their fingers, by burning crosses into their foreheads, and through many other evil means. But the Lord von Schönberg finally asked in despair: “What shall I do? The more I sentence to death the more there are!”¹³

The stronger the winds of persecution the higher leaped the flames of the Anabaptist revival. German courts soon discovered that the joyful testimony of Anabaptist believers during public executions stirred the masses. This led to the gagging of the condemned and in some cases the screwing of their tongues to the roofs of their mouths or the calling in of military bands to keep the crowds from hearing what they said. But the first Anabaptists’ witness could not be extinguished. Even with their tongues cut out, their hands tied behind them, and a bag of gunpowder pulled up beneath their jaws, they could lift a finger and smile.

¹³ *Geschichtbuech*, ca. 1570

Companies of mounted soldiers authorised to kill Anabaptists on the spot roamed through southern Germany. At first there were four hundred soldiers, but the number soon had to be increased to a thousand. The chronicle of the brothers in Moravia, at the end of a report of 2,173 people put to death for what they believed said:

No man was able to take out of their hearts what they had experienced. . . . The fire of God burned within them. They would die the most violent death, in fact they would have died ten times rather than forsake the truth to which they had married themselves. . . . They drank from God's fountain of the water of life and knew that God would help them to bear the cross and overcome the bitterness of death.¹⁴

Powerless Against the Truth

The first Anabaptists comforted one another with the promise that men are “powerless against the truth” (2 Cor. 13:8), and that no enemy could do to them what God would not allow. Kaspar Braitmichel wrote:

God said through the prophet that whoever persecutes his people pokes him in the eye. God allows such people to make many plans, but he does not allow them to carry them all through. David sang: “The kings of the nations rise up and rulers take counsel with one another against the Lord and his Anointed One. But he who lives in the heavens will laugh at them and will frighten them with the pouring out of his wrath.”

God lets those who persecute his children dig their own grave. He lets the stone they throw up fall down onto their own heads. God meets those who make plans against him in such a way that it becomes clear what is happening—for glass cannot smash the rock. Neither can a flying piece of paper or a bit of straw withstand a roaring flame.

¹⁴ *Geschichtbuech*, ca. 1570

Many times God allows those who persecute his children to go ahead with their plans for a while in order to prove the faithful. The faithful need to drink from the cup of suffering until it is empty. But in the end, those who persecute God's children must drink their own mud soup and crunch down the bits of broken glass they have prepared for others.¹⁵

When they beheaded the seven Anabaptists at Schwäbisch-Gmünd Berthold Aichele, provost of the Swabian League, was the man in charge. Berthold was a ruthless killer, the man who ordered the massacre of the believers at the Mantelhof in Württemberg who got caught in a meeting on New Year's day, 1531.

By the mid-1530s Berthold could boast of having killed at least forty messengers and one thousand, two hundred other "Anabaptist heretics." But God spoke to him through the lives of his defenseless victims. He saw their faces as they died and heard their testimonies, including that of the miller's son.

Finally, after the public execution of the messenger Onophrus Griesinger¹⁶ at Brixen in South Tyrol, he could take no more. Convicted mightily, he lifted his hands toward heaven and cried to God for mercy. In a loud voice for all those assembled to hear, he promised before God never to lay hands on an Anabaptist again.

The lamb, Christ Jesus, overcomes!

¹⁵ *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Onophrus Griesinger, beheaded on October 31, 1538, had, before his conversion, been the clerk of a mine in the archbishopric of Salzburg. He led large numbers to the Lord throughout the Austrian Alps. Caught several times, eluding spies and with the price of eighty guilders on his head, he held large unexpected meetings in public places and directed refugees to the Bruderhöfe in Moravia. After a three-day communion service in the jurisdiction of Schöneck in 1538, they caught him and threw him into the castle dungeon at Brixen. Tortured on the rack and by other means, he wrote six hymns before his death.

Where, O death, is Your Sting?

Johannes Faber, Dominican friar of Heilbronn in Baden-Württemberg wrote:

How does it happen that the Anabaptists so joyfully and confidently suffer the pain of death? They dance and jump into the flames. They see the flashing sword without dismay, and speak and preach to the spectators with big smiles on their faces. They sing psalms and hymns until their soul departs. They die with joy, as if they were in a merry company, and remain strong, confident, and steadfast until their death. Persisting defiantly in their intention, they also defy all pain and torture.¹⁷

Johannes Faber concluded that the Anabaptists' courage must be the result of "a powerful deception from hell's dragon." But the Anabaptists knew better.

South German authorities beheaded Gotthard of Nonnenberg and Peter Krämer at the Windeck castle in 1558. A song in the *Ausbund* tells about their deaths:

The people were surprised. They said, "What is this? They go to death willingly, even though they could be free." Gotthard answered, "We do not die. Death just leads us to heaven where we shall be with all of God's children. We have this as our sure hope. Therefore we enter the gates of death with joy!"¹⁸

Witnessing fearlessly to their faith, the Anabaptists followed Christ . . .

¹⁷ From *Von dem Ayd Schwören. Auch von der Wiedertaufer Marter. Und woher es entspringe, dass sie also fröhlich und getröst die pein des Tods leiden. Und von der Gemeinschaft der Wiedertäufer*, published in Augsburg in 1550.

¹⁸ *Ausbund*, 21:12