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On to an Ethical Way of Life

As a child, Ursula Hellrigl had to leave her home in the deep valley of the River Inn. Travelling fast, at night, through the forests and along mountain trails from Austria, she arrived with her parents at Auspitz in Moravia. There, upon reaching her early teens, she decided to follow Christ and joined the community through baptism. When the families from Auspitz needed to flee, in 1535, Ursula and a company of refugees fell into the hands of the police at Passau in Bavaria. She was fifteen years old.

Ursula steadfastly resisted the tortures through which the authorities tried to get her to recant. Even though she rarely caught a glimpse of him, she knew that the young man she admired, the “lively and quick-witted” Hans Fuchs who had travelled with the group from Moravia, was also in prison. He was sixteen years old. But they sent him to Venice as a galley slave, and transferred her to the dark, evil, castle of the Vellenberg, above the city of Innsbruck in Austria.

Ursula was grief-stricken, homesick and lonely. Her mother had died in prison, and two older brothers were also imprisoned, but she no longer knew where. Then, after five years of miserable confinement she learned of another Anabaptist in the castle.



Cattle brought down from the Alm, through the village of Götzens in Tyrol with its notorious Vellenberg prison, now a private residence. Even though life continued as usual for those that did not join the Anabaptist movement, large numbers of farmers and tradesmen—even persons in authority, and of noble families—secretly supported them and deplored harsh government action against them. Some supplied hidden believers with food and warned others of impending danger.

Austrian authorities had thrown Jörg Liebich, an Anabaptist messenger, into the dungeon of the Vellenberg after they caught him preaching in the upper Inn Valley. People said the place was haunted and on several occasions evil apparitions rose up in his cell. The devil tempted him in visible form. But after Jörg had suffered months of mental and physical agony, the lord of the castle suddenly put Jörg into a comfortable room and gave him good food to eat. They brought Ursula into the same room and chained her one foot to one of his. Then they left them alone day after day. Kaspar Braitmichel wrote:

What the devil and his children wanted to see is easily apparent. But they kept themselves pure and feared God. They did not allow themselves to be led astray by any temptation.¹

Both Jörg and Ursula spent their time with Christ. While the days grew long, Ursula wrote a song:

Eternal Father in heaven, I call to you from my innermost being. Do not let me turn away from you, but keep me in your truth until the end. Oh God, keep my heart and my mouth. Watch over me every hour. Do not let me turn away from you because of anxiety, fear or distress. Keep me steadfast in your joy. . . . I lie here in

¹ *Geschichtbuech*, ca. 1570

chains, waiting on you God, with a very great longing (*mit sehr großem Verlangen*) for the time when you will set me free.²

Hope and Ethics

The Roman Catholic authorities of the Vellenberg, knowing human nature, expected to see Jörg Liebich and Ursula Hellrigl fall into sin. But they did not understand the prisoners' great longing to see Christ, and how that longing purified them as Christ is pure.

Menno Simons wrote in 1541:

The Word of God is stirring up our German countries with its teachings. The finger of God can be felt in this while the Word becomes daily more powerful and clear. The haughty are humbled. The greedy learn to share. Drunkards become sober. The immoral become pure. Men fear to think a thought or do a deed contrary to God's Word and will.³

Shining Lights

"Walk worthy of the Lord and the Gospel," wrote Menno Simons. "Do whatever God asks of you without complaining. Act so that none may truthfully accuse you. Be sincere. Be blameless in this crooked and perverse generation. Shine like beautiful lights, like torches in the dark night of this evil world."⁴

Hans Denck wrote in 1525:

All unbelief is sin. . . . Only when the law has done its work in us and when we stop seeking our own good can the Gospel find room in our hearts. We get faith by listening to the Gospel.

² *Ausbund*, 36. In the *Ausbund* the song is mistakenly attributed to Anna of Freiburg.

³ *Van dat rechte Christen ghelooue* . . . ca. 1542

⁴ *Een lieffelijke Vermaninghe aen den verstrooyden, en onbekenden kinderen Gods, Anno LVI.*

Where there is faith, there is no sin. Where there is no sin, there the righteousness of God dwells. The righteousness of God is God himself. Sin is that which is contrary to God. All believers were at one time unbelievers. To become believers their old man had to die. They had to stop living for themselves (like they did in unbelief), and they had to let God begin to live in them through Christ. They had to stop living in an earthly way and start living in a heavenly way.⁵

Anabaptist leaders meeting at Schlatten in Switzerland clearly separated the works of darkness from the works of light:

Things that are not united to God cannot be other than abominations from which we must flee. By this we mean all Roman Catholic and Protestant activities, such as church services, public meetings, politics, the swearing of oaths, and drinking houses. . . . From all these things we shall be separated. . . . Neither will we use unchristian, devilish weapons such as swords and armour, for Christ said “resist not evil.”⁶

The Ethic of Decency

Menno Simons wrote:

We know that he who fears the Lord is honest, chaste, and sober. He will never drink, talk, sing, and dance with frivolous women.⁷

Keep strict watch over yourselves, both outwardly and inwardly. Trim, teach, purify, warn, and chasten your hearts with the Word of God. Curb your thoughts. Subdue and distinguish your evil desires in the fear of the Lord, for blessed are the pure in heart.

Just as there are many wicked men who violate poor simple, women, so on the other hand we find shameless women and girls. Many times they are the reason that such disgrace is sought and practiced upon them. Although many are not guilty of the deed,

⁵ From the confession Hans presented to the court at Nürnberg in Bavaria in January, 1535.

⁶ *Brüderlich Vereinigung etzlicher Kinder Gottes sieben Artikel betreffend*, February 24, 1527

⁷ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

they are guilty of having too much to do with male companions. By their bold singing, dancing, drinking, kissing, flirting, primping and fixing up, they kindle the fire of base passions, which continue until they are consumed.⁸

Ethics and Education

The educated scoffed at the first Anabaptists for following unlearned men. But they were mistaken. Numerous early Anabaptist leaders had studied at the best universities in northern Europe, and even those of humble origin soon became “learned” in the Scriptures. Felix Manz read and interpreted the Hebrew Old Testament to a study group in his home. Conrad Grebel, writing to his brother-in-law and former teacher in the university of Vienna, Dr. Joachim von Watt, told of his Bible class where they were studying the Gospel of Matthew in Greek. A Latin poem by Conrad Grebel appeared in a book published by Huldrych Zwingli.

The first Anabaptists, although they disapproved of much that went on at the universities, did not in any way disapprove of learning. Their children learned to read well and much. Menno Simons, who wrote a great amount in Dutch and Latin wrote:

I have never disdained education, nor proficiency in languages. In fact I have honoured and coveted both from my youth. But unfortunately I have never attained to them. I am not so bereft of common sense that I should disdain the knowledge of languages (Hebrew and Greek) through which the precious Word of Grace has come to us. Rather, I wish that I and all the godly ones would be at home in these languages, if we would employ them in genuine humility to the glory of God and the service of our fellowmen.⁹

Education for the Anabaptists involved the learning of both spiritual and elementary facts. They learned not to exalt

⁸ *Van dat rechte Christen ghelooue . . .* ca. 1542

⁹ *Eyne klare vnwedersprekelike bekentenisse vnde anwijsinge . . .* ca. 1554

themselves but to use their learning for the good of others. Especially in Moravia the education of children become an important work of the Lord's community.

The Ethic of Selflessness

The first Anabaptists, following Christ, lived for others. Hans Leupold, beheaded at Augsburg in 1527, said:

If we know of anyone who is in need, whether or not he is a member of our church community, we believe it our duty, out of love to God, to help him.¹⁰

Speaking about the state churches, Menno Simons wrote:

These people boast of being true Christians in spite of the fact that they have lost the sign of true Christianity altogether. Many have plenty of everything. They wear expensive, stylish clothes. They ornament their houses with costly furniture. They have money and live in luxury. But they allow their own members—those who have been baptised and who have partaken of the same bread with them—to beg. They allow the poor, the hungry, the suffering, the old, the lame, the blind, and the sick to beg for bread.¹¹

A Protestant attending an Anabaptist meeting near Strasbourg in 1557 reported the questions put to the converts who were baptised:

¹⁰ Hans Leupold, who wrote the triumphant song *Mein Gott dich will ich loben* . . . (*Ausbund*, 39) shortly before his death, was arrested with 88 others in the home of the sculptor Adolf Doucher, in Augsburg, on Easter Sunday, 1528. After his trial in which he gave a clear and complete testimony he was sentenced "from life to death" by the city court. Hans cried out at once: "No indeed, gentlemen of Augsburg, but from death to life!" causing great fear to come upon the people. They beheaded him on April 25, 1528 and after burning holes through their cheeks they banished the rest, including his wife and two children, the youngest of which was five months old. Hans was a young man and a leader in the church community. He had been baptised for almost a year.

¹¹ *Opera Omnia Theologica*, Amsterdam, 1681

Are you ready if necessary to give all your possessions to the service of the brothers? Do you promise not to fail any brother that is in need if you are able to help him?¹²

For many Anabaptists the evidence of selflessness was freedom from private property in total community of goods.

Business Ethics

Conrad Grebel had a special problem with Christians charging interest on loans. He and most other Anabaptists taught that charging interest was of the devil, and they did not believe that Christians could be bankers, financiers, or owners of large businesses. Peter Rideman wrote:

We allow none of our number to work as a dealer or a merchant since this is sinful. The wise man says, “It is almost impossible for a dealer or a merchant to keep himself from sin. Like a nail sticks between the door and the hinge, so does sin stick between buying and selling.” Therefore we allow no one to buy to sell again as the dealers do. But to buy what is necessary for the needs of one’s house or craft, to use it and then sell what one produces, we consider right and good.¹³

Daily Ethics

For a thousand years the church of the Dark Ages had taught people that only a few (the “religious”), could live an ethical life, and that the great majority of Christians (the “secular”) needed to live in sin. A truly ethical lifestyle, they taught, was characteristic of religious orders, but apart from them it could not be expected.

¹² From A. Hulshof *Geschiedenis van de Doopsgezinden te Straatsburg van 1525 tot 1557*, Amsterdam, 1905.

¹³ *Rechenschaft*, 1540

The Reformers saw it differently. They did away with monasteries and religious orders and believed that all men should live right—at least on the Lord’s day.

But the first Anabaptists did not involve ethics with place nor time. In touch with the Lord Jesus they lived to please him every day of the week. For this reason, the keeping of a “Sunday-Sabbath” held no significance for them.

Mang Karger, converted in South Tyrol in Austria (now northern Italy) testified before the Roman Catholic court in 1529:

In the beginning God made the earth in six days, then he rested on the seventh. This is where the keeping of the Lord’s day came from, and this is where I will leave it. The Scriptures do not forbid working on Sunday and it is not a sin, but one should celebrate it and keep it holy, unlike the priests who spend their Sunday forenoons in idolatry and their Sunday afternoons in adultery.¹⁴

Benedikt Kamperer’s wife, Agathe, also interrogated in 1529, said:

Concerning the keeping of special days, there is no day more holy than another. Sunday is the day appointed to get together, preach the Gospel, and discuss it. But people are misusing it now and spending the day as free time to do evil deeds.¹⁵

Wolfgang von Moos, testifying at Vill near Neumarkt in South Tyrol, simply said he believed nothing about keeping special feasts, Sundays, and holidays other than what is written about them in the New Testament.

Ethics on Test

Jesus warned his disciples against doing good works to be seen of men. At the same time he told them to do good works so that

¹⁴ *Geschichtbuech*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

others would see them and glorify God. The Anabaptists, facing both challenges, drew unusual observations from their enemies. Ulrich Zwingli, after calling the Anabaptists *satanas in angelos lucis conversos*,¹⁶ wrote in 1527:

Their life and conduct seems at first impression irreproachable, pious, unassuming, attractive, yes above this world. Even those who are inclined to be critical will say that their lives are excellent.¹⁷

A Reformed pastor of Appenzell in Switzerland said:

The Anabaptists are people who at first had been our best propagators of the Word of God.¹⁸

Other reformed preachers from the canton of Bern informed the Swiss court in 1532:

The Anabaptists have the semblance of outward piety to a far greater degree than we and all the churches that unitedly confess Christ with us. They avoid offensive sins that are very common among us.¹⁹

These facts disturbed Heinrich Bullinger, a leader of the Swiss Reformed church, very much. He wrote several books against the “shameless rabble” (the Anabaptists) in which he said:

Those who unite with them will be received into their church by rebaptism for repentance and newness of life. Then they lead their lives under a semblance of a quite spiritual conduct. They denounce covetousness, pride, profanity, the lewd conversation, and immorality of the world. They shun drinking and gluttony. In short, their hypocrisy is great and manifold.²⁰

¹⁶ devils transformed into angels of light

¹⁷ From *In Catabaptistarum Strophas Elenchus*, 1527

¹⁸ Walter Klarer, quoted in J.J. Simmler, *Sammlung alter und neuer Urkunden*, (Zürich, 1757)

¹⁹ W. J. McGlothlin, *Die Berner Täufer bis 1532*, (Berlin, 1902)

²⁰ From *Der Widertöufferen Ursprung, fürgang, secten, wäsen, fürnemme und gemeine . . .* 1535

The Jesuit priest, Christoph Andreas Fischer, leader of the Counter-reformation in Austria spoke of the Anabaptists:

They call each other brothers and sisters. They use no profanity nor harsh speech. They do not swear nor carry weapons. In the beginning they would not even carry knives. They are modest in eating and drinking. They do not wear stylish clothes. They do not go to law before the magistrates, but they suffer everything in make-believe patience.²¹

In 1582, Franz Agricola, Roman Catholic theologian of the Dutch province of Limburg, wrote in his book *Against the terrible errors of the Anabaptists*:

Among the existing heretical sects there is none which in appearance leads a more modest or pious life than the Anabaptists. They are irreproachable in their outward public life. They do not say lies. They do not deceive, swear, fight nor speak harshly. They avoid intemperate eating and drinking. No personal outward display is found among them, but humility, patience, uprightness, neatness, honesty, temperance and straightforwardness in such measure that one would suppose they had the Holy Spirit of God!²²

Following Christ into an ethical lifestyle, the first Anabaptists moved . . .

²¹ Some of the books written by this man against the Bruderhöfe in Moravia are *Von der Wiedertaufer verfluchtem Ursprung, gottlosen Lehre, und derselben gründliche Widerlegung*, 1603 (The cursed origin of the Anabaptists, their godless doctrine and its thorough refutation), *Der Hutterischen Wiedertaufer Taubenkobel in welchem all ihr Mist, Kot und Unflat zu finden ist*. . . 1607 (The Hutterite Anabaptist pigeon house in which all their manure, mud, and garbage is to be found . . .) and *54 erhebliche Ursachen warum die Wiedertaufer nicht sein im Lande zu leiden* . . . 1607 (54 valid reasons why the Anabaptists cannot be tolerated in the land).

²² From *Erster evangelischer Prozess wider allerlei grausame Irrtümer der Wiedertäufer*, (Köln, 1582).