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On to Christian Families

On the Koppenstraat in the Dutch city of Briel, Anneken Jansz led a sheltered life in the large house of her parents. They had money and she was their only child.

Anneken, in the flower of her youth, met a young man called Arent. He was a barber-surgeon and their love led to marriage. They should have been happy. But money, parties, nice dresses, and expensive wines did not meet the longings of their hearts. Then one night another youth came to the Jansz home. His name was Meynaert and he spoke of following Christ.

Before he left, he baptised Arent and Anneken upon the confession of their faith.

Because they got baptised, Arent and Anneken had to flee. They left her parents' home and escaped across the English Channel to London. There a baby, Esaias, joined their family, but Arent took sick and died. Anneken packed her few belongings and returned to be with believers in the Netherlands.

Back in the Netherlands, on a wagon loaded with people travelling from Ijsselmonde to Rotterdam, Anneken and a companion, Christina Michael Barents, sang Christian songs. It was a cold morning in December. A passenger suspected that they were Anabaptists and reported them as soon as they got to the city. The police arrested them as they boarded a boat to Delft.

For one month the women were in jail. Anneken cared for Esaias, now a year and three months old, and wrote a confession of faith. Then they sentenced the two women to die.

On the morning of the planned execution day, Anneken woke up early and wrote a letter:

Esaias, receive your testament:

Listen, my son to the instructions of your mother. I am now going the way of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs to drink from the cup from which they drank. I am going the way of Christ who had to drink from that cup himself. Since he, the shepherd, has gone this way, he calls his sheep to come after him. It is the way to the waterspring of life.

This is the way the kings from the land of the rising sun came to enter the holy age. It is the way of the dead who cry from beneath the altar: "Lord how long?" It is the way of those who are sealed in their foreheads by God.

See, all these had to drink from the cup of bitterness like the one who rescues us has said: "The servant is not greater than his Lord, rather it is good enough for him to be made equal to him." No one comes to life except through this way. So go through this narrow gate and be thankful for the Lord's chastening.

If you want to enter the holy world and the inheritance of the saints, follow them! The way to eternal life is only one step wide. On one side is the fire and on the other side the sea. How shall you make it through? Look my son, there are no short cuts. There is no easier option. Every alternate route leads to death. The way of life is found by few and walked upon by fewer yet.

My child, don't follow the crowd. Keep your feet from the way of the majority because it leads to hell. But if you hear of a poor, needy and rejected little group that everyone makes fun of and hates, go there! When you hear of the cross, there is Christ!

Don't draw back from the cross. Flee the world. Hold to God and fear him alone. Keep his commandments. Remember his words. Write them on your heart and bind them to your forehead. Speak of them day and night, and you will become a fruitful plant. Keep

your body holy for the Lord's service so that his name will be made great in you. Do not be ashamed to confess him before men. Do not be afraid of men. Rather leave your life than depart from the truth.

My son, struggle for what is right, unto death! Put on the armour of God. Be a true Israelite. Kick injustice, the world and all that is in it away with your feet and love what is from above. Remember that you do not belong to the world, just like your father and mother did not belong to it. Be a true disciple of Christ and have no community with the world.

Oh my child, remember my instructions and do not leave them. May God let you grow up to fear him. May the light of the Gospel shine in you. Love your neighbours, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. Do not keep two of anything because others are sure to need what you do not. Share everything God gives you as a result of the sweat of your brow. Distribute what he gives to you. Give it to those who love God and hoard nothing, not even until the next morning; then God will bless you.

Oh my son! Lead a life that fits the Gospel, and may the God of peace make you holy in body and soul! Amen.

Oh holy Father, sanctify the son of your maidservant! Keep him from evil for your name's sake.¹

After writing the letter, Anneken folded it and tied it up in a piece of cloth along with a few coins she had left. She dressed Esaias and at nine o'clock, in the white winter sunlight, they led her and Christina down the street of Delft toward the city gates and the River Schie.

Crowds of people lined the streets. On the way, Anneken called out: "I have a baby five quarters of a year old. Who will take him?" A baker, a poor man and father of six, reached out and took Esaias. Anneken gave him the folded piece of cloth with

¹ Abridged from *Der blutige Schauplatz oder Märtyrer-Spiegel der Taufgesinnten* (Scottdale, 1915). The English *Martyrs Mirror* does not include the complete account of Anneken Jansz.

the coins and the letter. Then they tied the women up, broke the ice, and threw them into the river to drown.

It was January 24, 1539.

A Spiritual Family

During the violent years of the Anabaptist revival, ordinary family ties took second place. Many, like Anneken Jansz, suffered the rejection of well-to-do families for their decision to follow Christ. Many, like her, also lost their marriage partners and needed to give up their children. But they willingly suffered the grief of giving up earthly family ties for the joy of belonging to the family of God. Even the joy of marriage gave way to the “union between God and man that weighs a thousand times more than the union between men and women.”²

Peter Rideman wrote:

Marriage takes place in three grades or steps. The first grade is the marriage of God with the soul of man. The second grade is the marriage of the spirit with the body. The third grade is that of one body to another, that is, the marriage of man with woman. Bodily marriage is not the first, but the last and lowest grade. It is visible and serves as a picture of that which is invisible, that of the middle and highest grades. Just as man is the head of the woman, so the spirit is the head of the body and God is the head of the spirit.³

Natural Families

God’s adopted children become one spiritual family. But within this spiritual family there are natural families too.

² *Die Fünff Artickel darmb der Größt Streit ist Zwischen unns und der Wellt*, 1547.

³ *Rechenschaft*, 1540

The one who follows Christ is ready at all times to give up natural family ties—parents, children, or marriage partners—for his sake. But Jesus Christ did not reject or minimise family life. He obeyed his parents, respected the families of his followers, and blessed their children. In all this the Anabaptists chose to follow him instead of the Church of the Dark Ages.

For a thousand years the church of the Dark Ages had taught that the relationship between men and women was evil, that it was holier to stay single than to marry, and that the Holy Spirit left the room during the act of marriage. The marital relationship was forbidden on Sunday because it was the day of the resurrection, on Monday in honour of the faithful dead, on Thursday because of Jesus' arrest, on Friday for the crucifixion, and on Saturday for the virgin Mary. That left only Tuesday and Wednesday. But even then, Catholic couples needed to confess what they did in private. The "sin" of the marital relationship was put nearly on the same level as adultery or immoral perversion.

The Reformers did not break with this position altogether, nor with Augustine of Hippo's ideal of marital relationships without passion. Martin Luther in his book *The Estate of Marriage* wrote:

Intercourse is never without sin; but God excuses it by his grace because the estate of marriage is his work and he preserves in and through the sin (of intercourse) all that good which he has implanted and blessed in marriage.

The first Anabaptists could not accept such a dual position. They saw enforced celibacy and a frowning on the act of marriage as another "sure sign of the Antichrist." They believed that Christian marriage is God's order and design. Large families of home-educated children, wives who found joy in submission to their husbands, grandparents, handicapped and older single people who received loving acceptance became part of their way of life.

Hans Betz wrote:

The Scriptures tell us that every man should have a wife for his body, a wife to bear him children so that they can be multiplied on this earth. God already commanded Adam and Eve to get busy in this way in the Garden of Eden. Marriage should be held in the same honour today, in purity and according to God's command. Marriage is honourable and good for all. The bed of the married couple is not defiled. In fact, God takes pleasure in it.⁴

Due to persecution there were many Anabaptist widows and orphans, but there were also many weddings. Some people who lost their partners soon married again to care for their children. But others lived for years without knowing whether their partners were dead or alive.

Celibacy

Those who lived in an unmarried state received the full support of the Anabaptist brotherhood. In fact, the first Anabaptists saw value in celibacy, even though they did not think it should be enforced. They were quick to appoint single brothers as servants of the Word and to send them out as messengers to preach and baptise. Single sisters stood out for their dedication to the work of the church community, and many witnessed to their faith at the price of their lives. Jakob Hutter, before they burned him at the stake on February 25, 1536, at Innsbruck in Austria, wrote to the believers in the Tirol:

I also need to speak to you about marriage because there are so many single brothers and sisters among you. My desire is that every one of them would know how to handle and keep themselves.⁵

Celibacy, when practiced among the Anabaptists, took place in the wholesome context of the Christian home and community,

⁴ *Ausbund*, 102:7-8

⁵ From *Jacob Hueters Schreiben an die gmain im oberland . . . ca. 1535*

never in separate institutions. The Anabaptists expected men and women, both single and married, to uphold the New Testament ideal of moral purity.

Wholesome Teaching on Marriage

The first Anabaptists did not think, like Luther, that everyone should get married to put an end to sexual immorality. Rather, they taught the necessity of following Christ in a holy walk of life both within and without marriage. Marriage is not a concession to man's evil nature. It is a holy institution, a picture God gave to show his love for the church.

Swiss Anabaptists published a booklet on marriage as early as 1527. Dirk Philips later wrote another book on the subject. Godly marriage and home life were put into proper perspective by many other Anabaptist writers such as Peter Walpot, who wrote:

It is a command of God to honour father and mother and to keep marriage intact, and it is natural to love one's children and one's wife. But Christ said: "The one who loves these more than me is not worthy of me. . . ."

Christ says that what God has joined together, man should not take apart. It is important that we investigate carefully whether it is God who has led a man and a women together or if they simply came together in the world. Many come together as prostitutes and rascals and have a priest (who is usually a rascal too) marry them. Can this be God's work?

Those who have been brought together by the devil live under the devil's power. Where greed and money have led to marriage, shall such a marriage be of God? The one who separates himself from an evil marriage to follow Christ is not separated by man but by Christ and his Word. Even though we may call it a marriage separation (*Ehescheidung*), it really is no separation of a marriage. . . . But those who get divorced apart from Christ and

his Word, simply on human grounds like the rascals of this world get divorced, do what is wrong and sinful.⁶

The first Anabaptists looked at marriage vows like they looked at baptismal vows. They believed that there was no way of breaking them without incurring condemnation. Anabaptist couples committed themselves to each other for life and worked out problems as they came along. Divorce was not an option for believing couples. Menno Simons in his book *The True Christian Faith* wrote:

I write this so that everyone might wake up, repent, and lament before God his past disgraceful conduct. I write it that they may defile no longer their neighbours' beds, nor violate young women. Let everyone live in honour, each with his own wife, the unmarried keeping from all immorality. If an unmarried brother cannot restrain himself, let him seek a godly wife in the fear of God. If he has committed fornication but not yet married another, let him honour the girl he disgraced. Let him lift her up from shame, marry her with Christian love according to the word of God and teach their children and children's children what Tobias taught his son: "Beware of all harlotry and take not a strange woman. Keep to your own wife."

Directions for Young People

"Those who give themselves in marriage," counselled Anabaptist leaders in Strasbourg, "shall do so with the counsel and knowledge of the elders. They shall begin marriage in the fear of God and inform their parents of their plans."⁷

"The church community will not marry young people of believing parents without their parents' consent," decided the leaders of the Dutch Anabaptists. "But parents must have a valid reason to refuse consent. In the case of young people who have unbelieving parents, they shall seek their advice and honour

⁶ *Fünff Artickel* . . . 1547

⁷ *Artikel und Ordnung* . . . 1568

them. But if their parents refuse to give consent for marriage, the believing young people will submit themselves to the judgement of the brothers.”⁸

The Place of Children

Even in heavy persecution, the first Anabaptists dedicated much time to their children. Menno Simons wrote:

Admonish your children daily with the Word of the Lord. Set a good example. Admonish them to the extent of their understanding. Constrain and punish them with discretion. Use moderation, without anger or bitterness, so that they do not get discouraged. Do not spare the rod. Use it when necessary and think on what is written: “He that loves his son spans him often so that he may have joy in the end. But he who is too lenient with his child takes his side and is frightened whenever he hears a cry.” An unrestrained child becomes headstrong like an unbroken horse. Do not turn him loose when he is young, or he will be stubborn and disobedient when he grows up. Correct your son. Keep him from idleness or else you will be put to shame on his account.

If you believe that the end of the righteous is everlasting life, and if you believe that the end of the wicked is eternal death, then do your utmost to lead your children right. Pray to God for grace. Pray that he would keep them on the straight path and lead them with his Spirit. Watch over your children’s salvation like you watch over your own souls. Teach them. Show them how to do things. Admonish them. Warn, correct, and punish them as occasion requires. Keep them away from undisciplined children from whom they hear only lying, cursing, fighting, and mischief. Direct your children to reading and writing. Teach them how to spin and do other useful jobs suitable to their age. If you do this, you will live to see much honour and joy in your children. If you

⁸ *Besluyt tot Wismar*, 1554

do not do these things, heaviness of heart will consume you. A child left to himself disgraces both his father and mother.⁹

A Married Monk?

Many loving letters written by Anabaptist prisoners to their husbands or wives have been preserved. And the great love they shared becomes apparent in the accounts of wives and husbands encouraging one another before or during their executions.

Michael Sattler and his wife were a case in point. Michael had been prior of a Benedictine monastery and his wife had been a Beguine nun. But on May 15, 1527 he told the German court:

When God called me to be a witness to his Word, I left the monastery and took a wife according to God's rule. I did so when I contemplated the unchristian position in which I was, and when I saw the monks and priests in such great pride and luxury, seducing this man's wife, that one's daughter, and the other one's maid. Paul said that in the last days men would forbid to marry and command to abstain from foods which God has made to be enjoyed with thanksgiving.¹⁰

Michael Sattler and his wife, travelling home together from a meeting of Anabaptist leaders, fell into the hands of the authorities. After they burned Michael at the stake, they turned their full attention on his wife, coaxing, threatening, and pleading with her to recant. But she refused to listen to them. She kept the type of Christ and his church unbroken until they drowned her in the Neckar eight days later.

Willing to build with Christ, or if necessary, to forsake with Christ their family ties, the first Anabaptists moved . . .

⁹ *Kindertucht*, ca. 1557

¹⁰ From the eye-witness account of the trial by Klaus von Graveneck.