

On to Christian Service

The Mennonite church called my father into the *Dienst* (service) when I was five years old. After that he went to sit with four other *Diener* (servants) and one elder behind a bare wooden pulpit along one side of the meetinghouse, and my brother David took charge of me in the young boys' corner. Our oldest *Diener*, Elam Martin, was a full servant (*voller Diener*). He did the baptizing and the marrying in our congregation. Sometimes we called him our bishop, although he was not ordained to any special office. Our one elder, my great-uncle Samuel Horst, took care of the church's money.

My wife first attended meetings among the Old Colony Mennonites at Chortitz, Manitoba. There, speaking Low German, they had a *Lehrdienst* (teaching service). The *Lehrdienst* included all the ordained men of the congregation who as individuals were often called *Lehrer* (teachers).

Both traditions, I learned later, are of Anabaptist origin: servants and teachers, the teaching-service of the Lord's church. Menno Simons explained them in his *Brief and Clear Confession of 1544*:

The apostles ordained bishops and teachers wherever they established congregations. They ordained men who were sound in the faith and did not want pay. These were men of God, servants of Christ who laboured, taught, sought out, pastored, and kept watch only through love. They did not do this only one or two

hours a week. They did it at all places and at all hours in synagogues, streets, houses, mountains and fields.

As freely as they had received the Gospel they were ready to give it. But the new congregations, driven by love and the Spirit of God supplied the watchers of their souls with all the necessities of life. They assisted them and provided everything the servants of Christ could not obtain themselves.

Training for Service

In the same tract, Menno Simons continued:

Brothers, humble yourselves and become blameless disciples so that you may become servants called by the church community. Try your spirit. Prove your love and your life before you begin to teach. Do not go on your own account. Wait until you are called by the Lord's church. Once you are called by the Spirit and constrained by love, then watch diligently over the sheep. Preach and teach valiantly.¹

The brothers who gathered at Strasbourg in 1568 gave direction for training:

Let the servants of the Word travel through the communities to prevent, as much as possible, any spiritual lack. Let them comfort the brothers and sisters with wholesome teaching. Let ordained servants accompany the younger ones on these journeys so that the young may be instructed in the ways of the household.²

Who Calls the Servant?

“The calling of servants, according to the writings, takes place in two ways. Some are called by God alone without any agent,” wrote Menno Simons. “This was the case with the prophets and

¹ *Een korte ende klare belijdinge . . . van der mensch-werdinge onses lieven Heeren Jesus Christi . . .* 1544

² *Artikel und Ordnung. . .* 1568



Pilgram Marpeck, who lived in this house (on the left, with the bay window) held a good job at Rattenburg on the Inn. A mining engineer and government official, he lived far more comfortably than most people of his time. But when he turned to Jesus and became a servant of his church community, he lost everything he owned. Not just once, but time and again, as he moved from place to place to tend to Jesus' flock in need.

apostles. Others are called through the Lord's church as may be seen from Acts 1:23-26."

Dirk Philips wrote:

God punished Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who undertook to do things to which they were not called. God will punish all men likewise who go forth without being sent by him. Let everyone see to it that he does not run ahead on his own before he is called of the Lord or by his church community in the right way.³

Anabaptist leaders meeting at Wismar in Mecklenburg decided in 1554:

No one is to undertake of himself to go from church to church, preaching, unless he is sent and ordained by the congregation or the elders.⁴

A Servant's Work

"A servant is to preach the gospel and feed the flock," wrote Dirk Philips. "Preaching is more important than feeding the flock with the sacramental signs. But in this passage the Lord puts them together."

³ *Enchiridion*, 1564

⁴ *Besluyt tot Wismar*, 1554

Trachselwald Castle in the Swiss Emmental held many Anabaptist prisoners. One of them, a servant named Benedikt Brechbühl (of the village of Trachselwald), after getting arrested and banished several times, led a group of refugees to settle in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the beginning of a large Mennonite settlement at that place, in 1717.



At Strasbourg, the Anabaptist leaders defined the servant's work:

Servants and elders are to take care of the widows and orphans among us. They are to visit and watch out for the physical needs of families in danger, especially where men are in prison. They are to bring them food if necessary and comfort them so that everyone may feel secure in the love of the brotherhood, and so that the men suffering in prison may have rest in regard to their families.⁵

Signs for Service

Some people in the sixteenth century said they would believe the Anabaptists if they could prove by special signs that they were called of God. To this Dirk Philips replied:

To require signs and not be satisfied with the Word is an evidence of unbelief. Jesus did not praise the Pharisees for wanting a sign. He praised the centurion for his humble attitude.

Suppose these people would see us doing miraculous signs. Would they not follow the Pharisees' example and ascribe our abilities to the devil? The Jews require a sign and the Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified. . .

⁵ *op. cit.*

Paul explicitly describes how a bishop shall be qualified. But he does not say that a bishop has to perform miracles. Nor do we read that Timothy, Titus, or other godly leaders of the early church did miracles. A man may be a bishop and not perform any sign, but he must preach the Gospel and feed the flock of Christ (Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2).

It is true that miracles testified to the Gospel in the beginning. They confirmed and verified the Gospel because the Gospel was new. But signs are no longer needed. The law was also given with miraculous signs. But when Josiah found the book of the law, nothing extraordinary happened. He just read it and carried out what it said. In the same way we must be satisfied with the Gospel that has now come to light. We must rest in this and remember that it is an “evil and adulterous generation that looks for signs.”

Those who insist on signs and wait on workers of miracles are in error. They should watch out lest they accept and receive Satan, mistaking him for Christ. Satan is very clever and a good hypocrite.⁶

The Servant's Dues

The first Anabaptists opposed the state church idea of supporting religious leaders with taxes and obligatory tithes. Simon Stumpf and Felix Manz both admonished Zwingli that servants of the Gospel were “not to live from tithes and wages,” but were to be supported by voluntary gifts from the church community. Conrad Grebel wrote the same in his letter to Thomas Müntzer.

Menno Simons counselled servants to despise money and if necessary to “do manual labour like Paul: rent a farm, milk cows, or learn a trade if possible. Then whatever you fall short of will doubtlessly be given to you by the brothers, not in superfluity, but as necessity requires.”

⁶ *op. cit.*

The elders at Strasbourg wrote:

Servants of the Word cannot fulfil their calling without neglecting their earthly labour. They have great responsibilities and are often gone from home for several days and sometimes weeks at a time. Therefore it is right and proper that we supply them with perishable and earthly goods. Especially responsible are the members of the congregations that they serve.⁷

The first Anabaptists considered the work of preaching and establishing congregations so important that they did not want their servants tied down with material responsibilities. At the meeting in Schleithem, in Switzerland in 1527, the leaders decided that “the shepherd shall be supported by the community that has chosen him. He shall be given what he needs so that he may live of the Gospel as the Lord has commanded.”

Dangerous Service

The challenge faced by Anabaptist messengers and servants of the Word were well illustrated by the meeting at Schlatten. During the meeting they had decided:

When a shepherd is banished or martyred another man shall be called right away so that God’s little flock may not be destroyed.

Right after the meeting Michael Sattler with his wife, as well as Wilhelm Reublin and his wife, Matthias Hiller, Veit Verringer, and a number of other Anabaptist men and women fell into the hands of the police. They lay in prison until one by one they either recanted or were drowned or burned at the stake. Those were the options faced by servants of the Word in the sixteenth century.

But in weakness and great tribulation the work of Christ went on . . .

⁷ *op. cit.*