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## In Spite of Terrible Mistakes

Nearly everyone at the Sankt Pelagius school of the Chorherrenstift in Bischofszell in the Thurgau liked Ludwig. He was a quiet well-mannered student. Like many Swiss boys of his age who came from wealthy homes, he studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. His teachers saw in him the makings of genius, and by the time he was seventeen he matriculated in the philosophical faculty of the University of Basel.

In his studies of the classical works, including the New Testament, Ludwig became steadily more fascinated with the life of Christ. By the time he was twenty, he had decided to become a priest, and they ordained him in the beautiful city of Konstanz, down by the lake where the bishop lived.

While serving as chaplain at Wädenswil, south of Zürich, Ludwig found his longing to know Christ leading him closer to events taking place in that city. In 1523 an article of his, against the use of images in worship, fell into the hands of Huldrych Zwingli who published it. With this, Ludwig Haetzer, the young priest from the Thurgau, became a Reformation personality.

The leaders of the Swiss Reformation respected Ludwig's command of languages and his talent for writing. In 1524 they gave him his first commission, the translation of a Latin book for the evangelization of Jews. Ludwig did an excellent job.

Before he was altogether done, the Reformed leaders began to involve him in a much greater work, the translation of the Scriptures into German.

As a translator of the Old Testament, Ludwig travelled to Augsburg in Bavaria to work with scholars there. They had him work on the Psalms. It was an exciting job. Ludwig bypassed the Latin Vulgate and worked directly from handwritten Hebrew manuscripts. He met all the important people of Augsburg and accepted an invitation to stay with a couple, Georg and Anna Regel, on their country estate, the Lichtenberg, not far from the city.

Georg and Anna accepted Ludwig and loved him as their son. Anna, especially, who spent many hours with him while he worked at his papers in the house, developed a close relationship with him. But the Regels had unusual friends. It wasn't long until Ludwig discovered that Anabaptists visited the Lichtenberg. Then, one night the armed guard of the Duke of Bavaria came galloping in. They surrounded the house and arrested Georg and Anna for questioning while Ludwig escaped and found his way back to Zürich.

During the fall and winter of 1524 Ludwig worked with teams of translators, many of them highly educated men much older than he, in Swabia and Bavaria. Then they sent him to work on the book of Isaiah in Basel. It was in Basel that his polite, thoughtful ways led him into trouble. A girl who did the cleaning at the house where he stayed fell hopelessly in love with him. At first Ludwig tried not to pay her special attention. But little by little he felt stirrings in his own heart, and when she asked him to come to her room one night, he went.

It was so easy. No one found out about it, and no one suspected anything. But Ludwig felt terrible. He felt sinful and contaminated—a translator of the Scriptures, an earnest Christian, one regarded highly by everyone—and now a

fornicator. He could not stand it and asked for leave to go to Strasbourg.

Little by little as he grieved for his sin, Ludwig felt the peace of God returning. In Strasbourg he met Hans Denck, and they became close friends with much in common. Their education and interests were alike, but Hans Denck was an Anabaptist. When the news came of Felix Manz's drowning in Switzerland, the Protestant authorities expelled Hans Denck from Strasbourg, and Ludwig decided to follow him.

They travelled through Bergzabern and the Kurpfalz to Worms on the Rhein and worked on translating the minor prophets. When the evangelical preacher, Jakob Kautz, tacked his theses to the door of the church and called for a public debate, Hans and Ludwig took part. But the authorities expelled them from the city, and Ludwig returned to Strasbourg.

To his surprise, the Reformed leaders at Strasbourg had found out what took place that night in Basel. The girl had confessed it, and when they questioned him, Ludwig could not deny it. Then, out of a job and out of favour with nearly everyone (including the Anabaptist congregation at Strasbourg), he followed Hans Denck to Augsburg and Nürnberg in Bavaria.

Ludwig studied and wrote. He kept in touch with Georg and Anna Regel at the Lichtenberg, which he considered his home. Two years later at Regensburg in Bavaria, he baptised several people, and the Anabaptist movement took root in that city. Then, back in the Thurgau in Switzerland, he married a young woman who had worked for the Regels and who had since joined the Anabaptists.

More and more, as Ludwig studied the life of Christ, he turned against his university education. After publishing a book against the foolishness of much learning, and while working on a translation of the Apocrypha, the Protestant authorities caught up with him at Konstanz on November 28, 1528. They charged

him with disturbing the peace and with living in adultery with Anna Regel.

Ludwig did not deny it, and her name was discovered as an acrostic in one of his hymns. But he spent his time in prison profitably. He prayed and wrote songs. Convinced at last of the Lord's mercy, even in this time of humiliation and distress, he wrote eight hymns. The brothers in Moravia used most of them in their hymn collections, and the Swiss Anabaptists included his poetic version of 1 Cor. 13 in the *Ausbund*. It ends with the words:

Love will never come to nothing. Everything has an end but love.  
Love alone shall stand.

Love clothes us for the wedding feast because God is love and love is God. He helps us out of all distress, and who shall take us far from him? Knowledge swells but love builds up. Everything done without love comes to ruin. Oh love! Oh love! Lead us with your hand and bind us together. False love is that which deceives us. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

On February 4, 1529, they led Ludwig Haetzer to the town square of Konstanz. He walked calmly to his death. In clear words he spoke to the crowds who had gathered, warning them to repent and turn to God. The people felt sorry for him. He was young and good-looking. Of his extraordinary intelligence they had no doubt. But they could do nothing more than watch through tears as he knelt, willingly, for the executioner's sword.

## **A Counterattack**

The Anabaptists, like Samson, were a threat to the enemies of God. Their movement was a spiritual attack on those enemies and, like Samson, they suffered the effects of a massive, spiritual counterattack.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ausbund*, 57:6-7

The Anabaptists didn't fall into just a few errors in passing, just a few misjudgements quickly corrected. Like Samson, they committed all-involving, history-changing blunders that all but wiped them from the face of the earth.

Ludwig Haetzer,<sup>2</sup> who translated the prophets into German, yielded to temptation. Hans Pfistermeyer,<sup>3</sup> who gave his testimony before the Protestant court, recanted when they put him under pressure. So did Jakob Kautz,<sup>4</sup> the man who tacked the theses onto the church door at Worms. But even beyond the effects of these personal failures were the effects of the terrible mistakes the Anabaptists made together.

## **Mistaken Teachings**

Apart from the Scriptures, the Anabaptists had no literature in the beginning. Neither did they have established teachings. But as the movement grew and their literature and teachings took form, mistakes became apparent in both.

The Dutch and north German Anabaptists did not believe that Jesus got his flesh and blood from Mary, or that he had an ordinary human body. They believed that Mary was only a recipient of the Holy Spirit's work within her and that his body, as a result, was totally celestial. They (especially Menno Simons) defended this view at length, using unscientific "facts" to prove themselves right. This mistaken teaching, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in chapter eight of this book.

<sup>3</sup> Hans, who had been an outstanding leader among the Anabaptists of Switzerland, is quoted in chapter nine of this book. After he recanted, he became a tool of the Reformers to bring those who had been his fellow-Anabaptist prisoners back to the state church. He was not as successful in this as the once widely used Anabaptist messenger and author, Peter Tasch, of Hesse, who recanted in 1536. Peter convinced hundreds to come back to the state church before he died in immoral disgrace.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in chapter seven.

emphasis placed upon it, discredited them with the state churches and kept sincere seekers from joining them.

Other Anabaptists strongly believed in keeping the Sabbath,<sup>5</sup> or else in not keeping any day special at all. Some believed in paying military taxes, while others, notably the brothers in Moravia, strongly opposed it. But in few areas did the Anabaptists differ more from their descendants than in their teaching on divorce and remarriage.<sup>6</sup>

It was not uncommon for Anabaptists to lose their married companions when they decided to follow Christ. Unbelieving husbands disowned their wives, and unbelieving wives deserted Anabaptist men. After discussing what to do about it, Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Leenaerd Bouwens, Gillis of Aachen, and three other Anabaptist leaders decided in 1554:

If an unbeliever wishes to separate for reasons of the faith, then the believer shall conduct himself honestly. He shall not marry again as long as the unbeliever remains unmarried. But if the unbeliever marries or commits adultery, then the believing mate may also marry, subject to the advice of the elders of the congregation. . . .

If a believer and an unbeliever are in the marriage bond together and the unbeliever commits adultery, then the marriage tie is broken. If the unbeliever says it was an accident and desires to mend his ways, then we permit his believing wife to return to him and admonish him—if conscience allows it and in light of the circumstances of the case. But if the man is a bold and headstrong adulterer, then the innocent party is free. She shall, however,

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<sup>5</sup> Notably Oswald Glait, prominent and widely respected Anabaptist messenger in Moravia and Silesia. Glait published a tract on keeping the Sabbath. A song in his memory *Ein anderes Lied von Bruder Oswald den man zu Wien heimlich ertränkt hat um der göttlichen Wahrheit willen* is preserved in the *Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*.

<sup>6</sup> Sixteenth century polemics against the Anabaptists mention their teaching on divorce and remarriage as another example of their “heresy.”

consult with the congregation and remarry according to their decisions in the matter.<sup>7</sup>

In other writings Menno Simons reinforced this teaching:

Divorce is not allowed in the Scriptures except for adultery. Therefore we shall not to all eternity consent to it for other reasons. . . . We acknowledge no other marriage than that which Christ and the apostles taught in the New Testament: that of one man with one woman (Matt. 19:4). A married man and woman may not be divorced except in case of adultery (Matt. 5:32), for the two are one flesh.<sup>8</sup>

The Swiss Anabaptists in a booklet on marriage stressed the fact that the union of believers with Christ is more precious than the union between husbands and wives. They taught the permanence of marriage, and that it shall not be broken except in case of adultery. But then, with the counsel of the congregation, they did allow the “innocent party” to marry again.

The Anabaptist leader, Rauff Bisch of the Kurpfalz, said at the Frankenthal disputation in 1571:

We believe that nothing may terminate a marriage except adultery. But if the unbeliever wants to divorce because of the faith, we would let him go as Paul says in 1 Cor. 7. We believe that the cause for divorce should never be found in the believer.<sup>9</sup>

The Anabaptists of Hesse, in central Germany, stated in 1578:

We believe and confess that a man and woman who have by divine foreordination, destiny, and joining in marriage become one flesh may not be divorced because of excommunication,

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<sup>7</sup> *Besluit tot Wismar*, 1554

<sup>8</sup> *Grontlijcke onderwijs oft bericht, van de excommunicatie . . .* 1558

<sup>9</sup> From *Protocoll, Das ist Alle handlung des gesprechs zu Franckenthal inn der Churfürstlichen Pfaltz, mit denen so man Widertäuffer nennet*, first published at Heidelberg in 1571.

belief or unbelief, anger, quarrelling, hardness of heart, but only in the case of adultery.<sup>10</sup>

The Anabaptists in Moravia included the following among their five articles of faith in 1547:

If the unbelieving one departs let him depart. . . . A brother or sister is not under bondage in such a case.<sup>11</sup>

Most Anabaptists emphasised the fact that “nothing can break the marriage bond except adultery.” But the presence of divorced and remarried couples among them caused personal hardship and earned them much criticism. On at least one occasion a brother who had remarried, Klaus Frey of Ansbach in southern Germany, was executed for bigamy.

After the sixteenth century the Anabaptists’ descendants gradually changed their position. By the end of the 1800s (and the rise of Fundamentalism in America) the Mennonites, the Amish, and the Hutterites all took a firm stand against a second marriage or living with another partner after a divorce.

## **A Mistaken Emphasis**

Even though Christ was not an ascetic as were some of the first Christian religious orders, a trend toward asceticism developed early in the Anabaptist movement. It was the trend that eventually came to pattern the lives of their Old Colony, Amish, and Old Order Mennonite descendants. *Is ’s nett zu scheh?* (Isn’t it too nice?) was a question I heard innumerable times during my growing up years in southern Ontario. Anything from dress material to living room stoves to lawn chairs and painted barn siding could be condemned by the brotherhood simply because it was “too nice.”

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<sup>10</sup> From *Das Bekenntnis der Schweizer Brüder in Hessen*, 1578.

<sup>11</sup> *Fünff Artickel* . . . 1547

To associate what is nice with what is evil happened easily in the sixteenth century. Comfortable houses, nice clothes, and orderly, easy lives belonged to the “world” and only dungeons, flight, torture, grief, and anxiety remained for the true followers of Christ. The Anabaptists, living in such an other-worldly atmosphere of persecution, had no time for humour or recreation. At first from necessity, but soon from a brotherhood emphasis on strict asceticism, they ruled out many normal comforts of life. In Switzerland the Anabaptists even condemned congregational singing as a frivolous concession to the senses.<sup>12</sup>

Most early Anabaptist leaders had studied in the universities of central Europe. But they rejected their education, and with it their knowledge of the fine arts, philosophy, and culture. At the same time they made sure that their children had no access to them.

The Anabaptists became pilgrims and strangers—literally. Following Christ, nothing earthly mattered anymore. Driven out of the cities, their children grew up far removed from central European society. They slept on straw on the earthen floors of mountain homes. They spoke the coarse dialect of the peasants and dressed in homemade clothes. Within a few generations this austerity narrowed them—especially those of Switzerland and the moors of Friesland, Groningen, and around the Baltic Sea—into such closed-minded, rural, ethnic groups that it became hard for new converts to know or join them.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Conrad Grebel, in his letter to Thomas Müntzer, gave the following reasons why it is wrong to sing in a worship service: There is no example for it in the New Testament. It does not edify. Paul forbids it (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16). We are forbidden to practice what the New Testament does not command. Christ requires preaching, not singing. Human beings may not add to the words of Christ. Singing is not ordained by God and must be rooted out by his Word.

<sup>13</sup> With this it must be said that between 1675 and 1720 nearly twenty five percent of the names in police records regarding Anabaptist arrests in the

## Mistaken Prophecies

Free to read and understand the Scriptures for themselves, the Anabaptists began at once to study the prophecies of Daniel and the book of Revelation. Many of them concluded that the coming of Christ, the defeat of the wicked, and the peaceful reign of a thousand years was soon to begin. Nowhere did this belief gain a more firm ground than in southern Germany under the teaching of men like Hans Hut and Melchior Hofman.

About the same age as Conrad Grebel, Melchior Hofman spent his boyhood in the German city of Schwäbisch-Hall. He liked to read. For hours he would sit and read the mysterious books of Johann Tauler, Meister Eckhart, and Heinrich Suso, his favourite authors. But his father apprenticed him to a furrier in a city coat maker's shop.

Before Melchior turned twenty, his employer sent him north to buy furs. Once he knew the trade well, he travelled to East Prussia, Scandinavia, and Livland (modern Estonia) to look for them.

In the 1520s Livland was an unhappy, strife-torn place. Between the Baltic Sea and the great forests of Russia, it was a Slavic country "christianised" by the Roman Catholic order of the Brothers of the Sword. The bishops of the conquering church and the knights who protected them struggled for control of the rich grain lands of Livland, while the common people worked for them from dawn to dusk with little pay. Melchior Hofman soon saw the injustice, felt the tension, and began to point men to the teachings of Christ to find a better way.

At first Melchior thought Martin Luther could help. But when his studies of prophecy and his call for righteous living led him into conflict with Luther's followers, he saw that he had to take

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Canton of Bern, Switzerland, were new family names, suggesting that they were still winning a substantial number of converts to the church.

his own way. The authorities of Livland deported him, and in 1525 he moved on to Stockholm in Sweden.

In Sweden (a good place to find and work with furs) Melchior published his first book, a study on Daniel, chapter 12. It upset the city authorities, and he left for Kiel in Danish Holstein. By now a regular speaker in Protestant churches, he spoke often on the last days and on the prophetic symbolism of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant. Little by little he developed a three-dispensational theory of end-time events. He taught that the first end-time period was the age of the early church. The second period was that of the power of the popes (the various beasts of Revelation). The last period was to be the one of Enoch and Elijah, the two witnesses, in which evil would be overcome and Christ would return to reign on the earth for a thousand years.

As in Sweden, Melchior's teachings made trouble in Danish Holstein, and in June, 1529, he with his wife and baby arrived as refugees in the Protestant city of Strasbourg.

In Strasbourg Melchior joined the Anabaptists and found enthused listeners to his prophetic explanations. One couple in particular, Leonhard and Ursula Jost, gave him their loyal support. Both of them claimed the gift of prophecy and spoke about the visions they had seen. Melchior published their prophecies in two books, and after many in northern Germany and the Netherlands had read them, he travelled to those regions himself to visit interested contacts.

Everywhere he went, Melchior found open ears for his good news of the coming kingdom of Christ. In the East Friesian city of Emden he baptised over three hundred people in a few weeks' time. Then, travelling back to Strasbourg through the valley of the Rhein, he welcomed more and more converts into the Lord's *Bundesgemeinde* (fellowship of the covenant). The year following he visited Amsterdam, baptizing fifty people, and Leeuwarden in Friesland, where Obbe Philips joined the brotherhood. Filled with prophetic zeal, Melchior Hofman

became the Lord's instrument to transplant the Anabaptist movement from central Europe to the lands along the North Sea.

As the Anabaptist movement grew in the Netherlands and northern Germany, the prophetic teaching of Melchior Hofman came to incorporate a social problem of long standing. For many years the common people of the region had lived on vast estates of the landed gentry. Year after year the lords of these estates saw their wealth increase, but the common people who worked for them got poorer as their numbers multiplied. To them, the hope of Christ's prompt return, the overthrow of the rich and the establishment of justice and equality in a kingdom of peace seemed like promises too good to be true. But, as Melchior pointed out, they stood in the Scriptures, and all it would take was faith and a willingness to act upon these promises for them to become reality. First dozens, then hundreds and thousands of people, their eyes bright with the hope of imminent relief and glory, joined the new Anabaptist movement in the low countries.

Nowhere did the message of Melchior Hofman find a better hearing than in the old city of Münster in Westfalen on the lowland plains along the Rhein. The people around Münster spoke Plattdeutsch. For years they had watched heavily laden barges bring tradegoods into the city. Then, on long muddy roads between clumps of dark forest and scattered farmsteads across the plain, merchants left with horses and mule trains to carry their goods into the uplands of Germany.

Münster was a trading city under the charter of the Hanseatic League. Its weavers' guild and even its industrious monasteries were some of the wealthiest in northern Germany. But in spite of the city's wealth, many of its residents were poor. When the poor people of Münster heard of the peasant's revolt in the south and of the Anabaptist's message of a coming kingdom of peace, they responded with their whole hearts. They began to seek for the truth, and Berndt Knipperdolling, a cloth merchant who

lived near the Sankt Lamberti church, became their leader and spokesman.

In 1531 a new priest came to Münster. He was Berndt Rothmann, a young man educated in the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Warendorf in Westfalen.<sup>14</sup> He spoke well and with Berndt Knipperdolling defended the cause of the people.

Berndt Rothmann's teaching awakened within the people a great desire to know the real Christ. Soon after coming to Münster, he published a resumé of the teachings of the Gospel,<sup>15</sup> and by 1532 the people threw the images out of the Sankt Lamberti church and declared it an evangelical meeting place. Then two Anabaptist messengers, Bartholomeus Boeckbinder and Willem de Cuyper, converts of Melchior Hofman arrived. On January 5, 1534, they began to baptise the believers of Münster.

Things went fast. A young Anabaptist from the Netherlands, Jan van Leyden, came to assist Berndt Rothmann and Berndt Knipperdolling in the leadership of the new congregation. Within a short time he married Berndt Knipperdolling's daughter. Then, believing that Christ was soon to come (Melchior Hofman had predicted he would arrive already in 1533), Jan led the new believers in taking over the city hall on February 23. They made Berndt Knipperdolling mayor, and four days later they passed a law that all adults who refused baptism upon confession of faith had to leave the city.

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<sup>14</sup> The Brethren of the Common Life lived in religious communities throughout northern Europe. Founded in the 1370's by Gerrit Groote they developed a reputation for honesty and spirituality. They held all their things in common like the early Christians. The deeply spiritual writings of Gerrit Groote and Thomas a Kempis (who lived in a community of the Brethren at Zwolle in the Netherlands) still speak to those who seek Christ.

<sup>15</sup> This resumé has come down to us as the confession of faith of the South German Anabaptists, edited and enlarged by Pilgram Marpeck and Leupold Scharnslager in 1531.

In line with Melchior Hofman's prophecies, the Anabaptists began to speak of Münster as the New Jerusalem. Hundreds and soon thousands of newly baptised believers began to come on foot, by boat, and on horseback from all over the low countries. They came to live in what they believed was the city of Christ. In the city they surrendered all private property and returned to living in community of goods. Berndt Rothmann published a book on the restoration of the apostolic church. But the Roman Catholic and Protestant authorities of northern Germany did not leave the "New Jerusalem" in peace.

The bishop of Westfalen, Franz von Waldeck, called for arms and early in 1534 laid siege to Münster. The Anabaptists, under Jan van Leyden (who on August 31, 1534, declared himself the king of the New Jerusalem), took up arms. Berndt Rothmann published another tract in which he explained that the children of Jacob needed to help God punish the children of Esau. Then they went out to attack the bishop, and on several occasions drove him and his soldiers back.

Within the besieged city, the twelve apostles who served as King Jan van Leyden's council and the prophets who received visions and interpretations kept informing the people of what was about to take place. A young woman, Hille Feicken, received the revelation that she was to go out into the camp of the enemy and slay the bishop like Judith killed Holofernes. But her brave attempt ended in disaster. They caught her and promptly put her to death. Other prophecies also failed, and the messengers sent out to the Anabaptist brotherhoods of the Netherlands fell one by one into the enemies' hands and were killed.

By the end of 1534 things looked dark, and the hearts of the people began to waver. King Jan van Leyden had turned, like the kings of the Old Testament, to having more than one wife, and others followed him. Berndt Rothmann himself took nine wives. But supplies were running low, and sickness, hunger, and

treachery were taking their toll. On January 25, 1535, the bishop's army broke into the city and the last terrible battle began. Blood ran through the streets. Berndt Rothmann escaped, but they caught Berndt Knipperdolling, Jan van Leyden, and others. Put in iron cages for display, they got carried around the country for several months until the bishop's men tortured them to death and let the ravens eat their bodies hung from the tower of the Sankt Lamberti church.<sup>16</sup>

Melchior Hofman learned about the tragedy at Münster while sitting in the tower prison at Strasbourg. An old prophet in Friesland had told him that he would be in jail for six months, after which he would escape to lead the Anabaptist movement into victory over the whole world. But five years had passed, and his imprisonment was getting worse. His legs were swelling and he felt sick. They let his food down to him through the ceiling, and all pleas for paper and ink fell on deaf ears. For some time he wrote his ongoing prophetic revelations onto the flyleaves of the books he had with him. Then he tore his bed sheet into strips and wrote on cloth until he ran out of that too. But his prophecies failed. His singing and shouting in prison got weaker as his health declined. Those who had once shared his vision scattered and fell away.

Melchior Hofman died in his cell at Strasbourg ten years after the fall of Münster, in 1543, a broken man.

But it took more than personal mistakes, mistaken teachings, a mistaken emphasis, and mistaken prophecies to break the Anabaptist movement. It took . . .

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<sup>16</sup> The "Anabaptist cages" still hang as a warning to rebels, from the church tower today.