

Wittenberg 2017

... to be conformed to the image of his son (Rom. 8:29) **Rediscovering discipleship in the Anabaptist movement 1524 – 1664** Wolfgang Krauss

Beer bottles. Luther Starkbier. Front of label: Heaven is a free gift. Back of label: I am displeased with anyone who despises music, as all fanatics do – for music is a gift of God, not of man.

A new Asterix comic book has just come out. It has good reviews, though it doesn't knock me off my feet. But I've been waiting a long time for Asterix and Obelix to go to Roman-occupied Palestine and cut themselves a slice, as a Jewish Rabbi and his disciples are about to do, but also to see how they deal with the Romans.

Or to go to Central Europe of the early modern period, to meet the various reformers. Stimulated by this idea, I once began an exhibit at an evangelical church congress in Frankfurt with these words:

It is the year of our Lord 1500. All of western Europe is occupied by the Roman Catholic Church. Then on October 31, 1517, a little monk, by then a theology professor, rises up and nails 95 theses against the abuses of the church on the door of the church in Wittenberg. From Wittenberg the fire of the Reformation spreads.

But a few years later Luther and other reformers have come to terms with those in power. "Cuius regio, eius religio," – "Whoever rules determines the religion" – is soon the motto. And the theological judgments against those who don't toe the line make sure that the right people rule.

Half of Europe is still occupied by the Roman Catholic Church, the other half is now occupied by the churches of the Reformation. The princes can now choose between two versions of the same state religion.

But starting in Zurich and then in small centers all over, a new radical movement is developing that keeps the ecclesiastical and state power in suspense. A group of radicals meets in Zurich for Bible study, primarily former students of the reformer Zwingli. They separate from Zwingli after he moderates his views and makes any further steps of the Reformation dependent on the agreement of the city council. Instead of this, by studying Scripture, by discussion and experience they find a new understanding of the church and what it means to be a Christian. They consciously orient themselves toward the preconstantinian church.

The church of Christ should be a voluntary group of mature Christians, independent of the state. Accordingly, they reject infant baptism and the oath of allegiance. They refuse armed defense of the government as this does not accord with their Christian convictions.

They present their arguments, based on Scripture, in public disputes. They soon stop talking about a new church; they begin to live it. The first baptism takes place on 21 January 1525.

Called "Anabaptists" by their opponents, they are persecuted by the reigning churches and government. Felix Manz is drowned in the Limmat River on 5 January 1527, with the sanction of his previous teacher Zwingli, the first Anabaptist martyr. Throughout central Europe thousands will follow him.

There were Anabaptist centers in many cities such as Strassburg, Augsburg, Nuremberg, Waldshut, Münster, the Netherlands, Moravia, and Tirol.

A Diverse Movement

The Anabaptist movement was not a uniform mass but a multi-faceted movement. It connected with the peasants who were striving for freedom. The desire for church reform joined forces with the hopes for a just society without exploitation and oppression.

Characterized by various leaders and regional differences, the movement divided into different wings. There was a significant difference between the pacifist wing and the militant, revolutionary Anabaptists of Münster in 1534/35. But also within these two wings there was great theological and social diversity. What else could be expected from a movement that rejected a centralized, hierarchical structure?

In addition to the basic convictions of the nonviolent Anabaptists, the Hutterites (named after one of their leaders Jakob Hutter) also wanted to follow the first Christians in their economic life. They organized their life together into communities. In these Bruderhofs they wanted to live an undefended, surrendered life in total community.

The excesses of the Anabaptist revolution in Münster (a revolutionary theocracy based on the Old Testament) were welcome ammunition for church and state to turn with their polemics and bloody persecution against all groups of the Anabaptist movement. In south Germany the Anabaptist movement was completely eradicated by the end of the 16th century. In Switzerland small churches survived in remote mountain valleys. From there, many moved into the depopulated Kurpfalz after the Thirty Years War. After 1683 many emigrated to North America. The Anabaptists/Hutterites in Moravia also endured heavy persecution. Their flight led them to Russia and from there to North America in the 19th century. Only in northern Germany and the Netherlands did the Anabaptists experience religious tolerance early on.

In the course of time, the remaining Swiss Anabaptists, as well as the north German and Netherland groups gathered by Menno Simons, developed into solid churches. The rulers, who had grown more tolerant in the meanwhile, named them after their Dutch leader: Mennonisten, later Mennonites. Only the Netherland churches still call themselves Doopsgesinde/Taufgesinnte.

Unfortunately, Asterix has still not made it into the Reformation. But also at that time people talked about a magic potion. More about that later.

About myself: At age 14 a life crisis, political and personal. Vietnam war – what was the purpose? At age 15 a tentative decision to follow Jesus at a Mennonite summer camp. Since then I have been taking one step after the other. After studying German and English in Heidelberg, I worked for peace with the German Mennonite Peace Committee for almost 25 years. Since 2009 I have been living in Augsburg where I am trying to arouse remembrance of a history that is largely forgotten and suppressed. I would love to take you all on a tour of my city. You can find more about Augsburg, where about a thousand Anabaptists lived their discipleship, in the flyer.

The question is to rediscover what following Jesus means. Discipleship – that is the subject matter of the New Testament. Come, follow me, Jesus says to all kinds of people, poor, rich, young, old, women and men. But for over a thousand years discipleship has not been the subject matter of the church. After Emperor Constantine's military victory under the sign of the cross in the year 312, the church and the Roman empire were so closely connected that discipleship and loving one's enemy were suspect. Although the Christians of the first three centuries renounced war, now the church said that military service had to be rendered to the Christian state; anyone

who refused was excluded from communion and later from the church. They legitimized and supported the state in their teachings, and soon it no longer occurred to anyone that being a Christian meant loving one's enemy and refusing to kill him. There were islands of discipleship: the monasteries where men and women (separately) could live the fullness of Christ. For most Christians the Ten Commandments were sufficient.

Luther's Reformation abolished the monasteries but did not change this constantinian character of the church. Luther was concerned with God's mercy and the justification of the sinner. He placed his Reformation under the protection of the princes and preached faithfulness to the state – in small territories – more than ever. You can see it if you look at the Bible verses on the Rathaus in Wittenberg. Discipleship is not mentioned in the basic Lutheran confession, the *Confessio Augustana*. Instead, four out of twenty-eight articles condemn people who at that time wanted to follow Jesus.

Article 9 says: "We condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptizing of children."¹ And in Article 16 the Anabaptists are condemned because they teach that taking part in government and, above all, participating in war, is not Christian. The gospel is irrelevant to such worldly things, for it "does not teach an outward and temporary righteousness but an eternal righteousness of the heart" and has nothing to do with governing. But what about Jesus' command to bless instead of cursing?

In 2005, the 475th anniversary of the *Confessio Augustana* brought me to Augsburg. I helped organize a conference focusing on Article 16 of this Lutheran confession, read out in Augsburg in 1530 before the Kaiser. It is valid still today and printed in Lutheran hymnals. Our conference of 2005 cast a critical light on the license to "practice just war without sinning" as formulated in Article 16.

Luther himself wrote the following words condemning Anabaptists in the foreword to a writing by Justus Menius: "It is a sure sign of the devil that they creep into houses ... instead of entering openly, as the apostles did and as all decent preachers do every day. They are murderous preachers. ... I have admonished both the authorities and their subjects not to tolerate such sneaks, murderers, and hedge preachers. For God is not there but surely the devil himself, however much he glistens."² He was quick to speak of the devil, also in reference to the Jews or the peasants. The Anabaptists had no choice but to be an underground church. They could not preach nicely from the pulpit like "decent" preachers, paid by the state. If they tried, as they did in Augsburg in 1532, they and their listeners were immediately arrested.

Philipp Melancthon, who worked with Luther, tried to build a bridge to the Catholics with the Augsburg Confession, reconciling mutual enemies. The Kaiser and the Catholics did also oppose the Anabaptists, but they rejected the Confession. Melancthon espoused the death penalty for Anabaptists in several legal theological opinions. In an essay of 1528 he defends infant baptism and calls Anabaptism a "horrible, gruesome teaching of the devil and an error."

In 1530 he writes in a letter to Friedrich Myconius, "All Anabaptists, even if they are otherwise perfectly blameless, reject part of their civic duty. Even if the issue is insignificant in and of itself, at this time and with so many crises it is extremely dangerous ... Therefore, even if they do not teach revolutionary (although certainly a blasphemous) ideas, it is my opinion that

¹ Trsl. Glen L. Thompson, Northwestern Publishing House 2005.

<http://www.stpls.com/uploads/4/4/8/0/44802893/augsburg-confession.pdf>

² Vorrede zu Justus Menius, "Von der Wiedertäufer Lehrer und Geheimnis."

the government is obliged to kill them.” Luther signs his opinion “Mihi placet, even though it is gruesome to watch [when they are executed].”

In Zurich, the group of former students and colleagues of Zwingli’s develop their own convictions. Simon Strumpf contradicts Zwingli when he says the decision of the tempo of the Reformation should be left to the city council: “Master Ulrich, it is not up to you to leave this decision to the council. The decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides!”

On September 5, 1524, Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz’s group writes to the mid-German reformer Thomas Müntzer. They agree with his criticism of infant baptism: Baptism should be a sign of a change of heart and that “one’s sins are washed clean by faith and the blood of Christ,” that one has died to sin ... that one is living a new life, by a new spirit, and “that one is certain of being saved if, through inward baptism, one lives according to the actual meaning of faith.” They note: “According to our understanding, not even an adult should be baptized without the rule of binding and loosing”³ – that is, not without being ready for mutual admonition and encouragement as in Matt. 18. And to Wittenberg they write: “Water does not strengthen or increase faith, as the educated men in Wittenberg say; it is not a very strong comfort or final refuge on one’s deathbed.”

They criticize Müntzer’s translation of the mass into German, saying it should be completely abolished. The Meal of the Lord should be a simple celebration: with plain bread and simple dishes, as a sign of a life of brotherhood and readiness to suffer for following Jesus. It means “becoming one body with Christ and the brothers ... Even though it is only bread, if faith and brotherly love are present it should be accepted with joy. If we would celebrate it this way in the church, it would illustrate that we are truly one loaf and one body, that we are and want to be true brothers.”⁴ They did not yet celebrate it this way themselves.

Today we would say, they were mapping out a new understanding of the church as a free entity. “Become a witness to the Word [of God] and establish a Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule as we find it stated in Matt.18:15-18 and practiced in the Epistles.”

To this belongs renunciation of armed protection and being prepared to suffer: “We should not protect the gospel and its followers with the sword, and they should not use it themselves. As we have understood from our brother, that is also your opinion. True Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep to be slaughtered. They must be baptized by fear and pain, persecution, suffering, and death; proved in the fire. They will reach the homeland of eternal peace not by strangling physical enemies but by killing their spiritual enemies. They use neither a worldly sword nor warfare. They have completely abolished killing – unless we belong to the old law. But there too [in the Old Testament], if you think about it, after they had conquered the promised land, war was nothing but a plague.”

The letter is signed with their names⁵ and the phrase “your brothers and seven new young Müntzers against Luther.”

In December 1524, in his “Protestation und Schutzschrift,” Felix Mantz repudiates the accusation of the city council of Zurich that he is an agitator and a monster because of his doubts regarding infant baptism.⁶ He declares that infant baptism is not biblical and challenges Zwingli

³ Fast, 20

⁴ Fast, 16

⁵ Conrad Grebel, Andreas Kastelberg, Felix Mantz, Heinrich Aberli, Johannes Panicellus, Hans Oggenfuss, Hans Huiuff, your countryman from Halle

⁶ Fast, 29

to a disputation. In the disputation held by the council on 17 January 1525 the biblical arguments are rejected. The council commands that all babies should be baptized, at the latest eight days after birth. In order to monitor this, a baptism registry is introduced. Anyone who does not comply is to be banished within eight days. The opponents of infant baptism are issued a prohibition of assembly, the ringleaders Grebel and Mantz a public gag order. Those who are not citizens of Zurich are expelled from the city.

Criticism of infant baptism was widespread. Nevertheless, the group of former disciples of Zwingli, meeting in Zurich, were the first to take the leap. Despite the prohibition of assembly, Grebel's group meets in the evening of 21 January 1525 to discuss how to proceed. Georg Blaurock, a priest from Graubünden, asks Grebel to baptize him. He does so, and then Blaurock baptizes Grebel, Mantz, and ten other brothers. In moving words, Kaspar Braitmichel describes this later in the Hutterian *Chronicle*:

“One day when they were meeting, fear came over them and struck their hearts. They fell on their knees before the almighty God in heaven and called upon him who knows all hearts. They prayed that God grant it to them to do his divine will and that he might have mercy on them. Neither flesh and blood nor human wisdom compelled them. They were well aware of what they would have to suffer for this. ... And so, in great fear of God, together they surrendered themselves to the Lord. They confirmed one another for the service of the Gospel and began to teach the faith and to keep it. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways.”⁷

From now on, their opponents speak of re-baptisers or Anabaptists. Historians today speak of the Anabaptist movement, but they simply call themselves brothers and sisters. The next day they celebrate the first Lord's Supper of the Anabaptist movement. It takes place according to the theological and practical guidelines laid out in Müntzer's letter. With this, a change takes place in the group of former critics of Zwingli. They begin, concretely and an actual fact, to be “one body with Christ and the brothers.” In many places, with many forms.

“This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways.” With this statement the chronicler Braitmichel names, in retrospect, a central aspect of the developing Anabaptist understanding of the church. Church is separated from world.

Why such rage and determination to wipe them out, expressed in condemnation, persecution, and execution to the point of ecclesiocide? A church is murdered, is to be obliterated. Menno Simons writes to his brothers and sisters: They are not persecuting you, they are persecuting Jesus.

The Anabaptist movement dismisses the alliance between church and state that has existed for more than a thousand years, since Constantine. Taking the early church as their model, they see themselves under obligation to their Lord first of all. “Discipleship” is the keyword of Anabaptist theology and practice. The church, freed from its constantinian chains, differentiates itself from society as a whole and shows plainly what human community should look like in God's point of view.⁸ With this it puts in question the basic understanding of the medieval body politic in which everybody was a nominal “Christian.” Infant baptism secured the existence of

⁷ *Chronicle*, 45

⁸ “Separation” is not an obsolete idea but a central biblical concept with tremendous social and political significance. Without separating from the world, the church loses what it is that makes it a church. cf. John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution, Let the Church Be the Church*, Scottdale, 1971, p. 107

this “christendom.” The governing authorities, and the churches that were allied with them, saw this as insurrection, as a threat to the existence of society, and as blasphemy.

What was later understood as a special Mennonite teaching derived from a central understanding of the church, based on the New Testament. The emphasis of a voluntary decision of faith grows out of this whole concept, as do freedom from violence, love to ones enemies, integrity, brotherhood, disassociation from the state and its violent methods, inwardly and outwardly. It becomes real in the famous refusals: refusal to swear oaths, refusal to participate in state-sanctioned violence, rejection of infant baptism and of hierarchy.

It is not the Anabaptists who have separated from the church; rather, the powerful church established since Emperor Constantine has separated itself from a church that desires to follow its Lord without power and force. The constantinian church conforms to society; the post-constantinian church sees itself as a contrasting society – an appropriate concept introduced by the Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink.⁹

A meeting of Anabaptist leaders from Switzerland and southern Germany that took place in Schleithem bei Schaffhausen adopted a statement on 24 February 1527 with the title “Brüderliche Vereinigung etlicher Kinder Gottes sieben Artikel betreffend,” (Brotherly Union of some children of God concerning seven articles), also known as the Schleithem Confession. In Article 4 this too speaks about how the church should be distinguished. At the end of the paragraph the expectation is stated that “Thereby shall also fall away from us the diabolical weapons of violence – such as sword, armor, and the like, and all of their use to protect friends or against enemies ...”¹⁰ Seen in this way, nonviolence is not a main point but a result of the otherness of the church, an expression of its nonconformity in its discipleship of the Prince of Peace.

The sixth of the Schleithem articles speaks specifically about the question of violence: “The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.” In the framework of the order of the state, the state’s monopoly on the use of force (according to Romans 13:1-7) is conceded for the sole purpose of curbing evil and protecting the good. However, this purpose is not to be carried out by Christians. For “within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used [according to Matt. 18] for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.” The nonviolent discipline of the church is seen as an alternative to state-sanctioned violence.

The title of my lecture comes from the Schleithem articles. The article on the sword raises the question, among other things, of whether a Christian can take part in the government. No, it says, it does not conform to following Jesus. When they wanted to make Jesus a king (John 6:15) he fled. “Thus we should also do as He did and follow after Him, and we shall not walk in darkness. For He Himself says: “Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” [Matt. 16:24]. He Himself further forbids the violence of the sword when He says: “The princes of this world lord it over them etc., but among you it shall not be so” [Matt. 20:25f]. Further Paul says, “Whom God has foreknown, the same he has also predestined

⁹ Gerhard Lohfink, *Wie hat Gott Gemeinde gewollt? Zur gesellschaftliche Dimension des christlichen Glaubens*, Freiburg, 1982

¹⁰ translation taken from

[http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleithem_Confession_\(source\)](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleithem_Confession_(source))

to be conformed to the image of his Son," [Rom. 8:29]. Peter also says: "Christ has suffered (not ruled) and has left us an example, that you should follow after in his steps" [1 Pet. 2:21].

Michael Sattler, a former Benedictine, is assumed to have kept the minutes for the Schleithem Anabaptist conference. A few days later he was back in Habsburg Austria, at the church he had founded in Horb on the Neckar. He was arrested with his wife and other church members. After two months in prison he was tried down river in Rottenburg.

Sattler only had two years for his work as an Anabaptist. His radical thoughts about the kingdom of God, his concrete experiences in discipleship and in the community of the body of Christ probably began already when he was with the Benedictines. An accusation by their opponents claimed that the Anabaptists wanted to introduce a new monasticism: No longer were only the religious in the monasteries to orient their lives according to the Sermon on the Mount, but all Christians and the church as a whole!

Michael Sattler offered those who condemned him a remarkably paradoxical challenge: "When a Turk comes, do not resist him. For it is written (Matt. 5:21), 'Thou shalt not kill.' We should not fight the Turks or other persecutors, but hold to God in intense prayer, asking him to resist them."

In the record of his trial, which was combined into a pamphlet with the Schleithem Articles and widely circulated, it says: "What impertinence, to favor the greatest enemy of our holy faith before us!" The judges laughed and put their heads together. One said, "Yes, you miserable, desperate villain ... Should we dispute with you? The hangman will dispute with you!"

Sattler was serious. The Ottomans should not be fought with military force; there should be no taxes levied for the Turkish war, no sermons preached, demonizing the enemy to incite war fever. There should be resistance, but a resistance using spiritual weapons. Urgent prayer should petition defence and resistance from God.

Unfortunately it was never tried. How would a mass refusal to fight have affected the Turkish conquerors? What effect would the "intense prayer" of millions have had on Sultan Suleiman II, the Magnificent, and his Muslim soldiers? "Christian" propaganda in sermons and pamphlets portrayed them as monsters and the last enemies of God. Yet in areas conquered by the Ottomans, Christian churches were allowed to continue – even if with restricted rights and no longer as ruling authorities. In areas conquered by the "Christians" on the other hand, Muslims had no chance.

Sattler's suggestion of offering no resistance against the Turks and "all persecutors" indicates that he saw his judges in a similar category to the Turks – as persecutors. He adds one more observation: "The Turk is a true Turk and knows nothing of the Christian faith; he is a Turk according to the flesh. You, on the other hand, want to be Christians and say you belong to Christ, yet you persecute Christ's true witnesses. You are Turks according to the spirit."

A remarkably paradoxical love of enemy. The Turks, Sattler says, are true Muslims, Turks according to the flesh. As such, they know nothing of Christ and his spirit of love, even to the enemy. His judges, on the other hand, and the entire "Christian" western world that stand behind them claim to be Christians but act contrary to Jesus' teachings. They persecute his witnesses and therefore are Turks according to the flesh. If he were not a pacifist, Sattler would rather fight with the Muslims against these so-called Christians. The Kaiser himself intervened in this trial in Rottenburg and demanded the death penalty.

Sattler's suggestion could easily be made today. The Islamic terrorists, the so-called IS, see their fight as Jihad, a holy war, thus a spiritual contest. It would be appropriate to respond spiritually and fight with spiritual weapons.

On 21 May 1527 sentence was pronounced and carried out: “Between the counsel of his Imperial Majesty and Michael Sattler, it is judged that Michael Sattler should be given over to the executiner. He shall lead him to the square and cut out his tongue, then bind him to a wagon and with red-hot tongs tear through his body twice. Then, when he is brought to the gate, he should be ripped five times in the same way.” This took place. Then he was burned to powder as a heretic, and his fellow prisoners were executed by sword, the sisters drowned. His wife, after pleading, admonishing, and threatening [on the part of the executioners] remained faithful and after a few days was also drowned.¹¹

I recently discovered a similar suggestion when I read again Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s speech in Fanö in 1934: “Peace means giving oneself completely to God’s commandment, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying down the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God . . . Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God. They are also won when the way leads to the cross. Who of us can say that he knows what it could mean for the world if a people, instead of taking up their weapons, would receive their attackers praying and defenselessly – and thus armed with the only good weapons?”

Bonhoeffer studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930/31. As he says himself, until then he was only a theologian; now he became a Christian. His conversion took place, in part, through the animated church life of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The second factor was a dialog with his classmate, Jean Lasserre of the Reformed Church in France. Lasserre had coined the phrase “constantinian heresy” for the insistence on the legitimacy of military force for Christians. Bonhoeffer experienced a liberation from the constantinian captivity of the church. His speech in Fenö in 1934 and “Discipleship” later in 1937 are a testament to this liberation and conversion to God’s love of enemy.

It is hardly known that besides Bonhoeffer’s book, Harold S. Bender’s authoritative essay “The Anabaptist Vision” in 1948 greatly furthered the new understanding of discipleship in North American Mennonite theology.¹²

Of course there are many other Anabaptists who could be cited besides Sattler. Hans Denck and Menno Simons will suffice. Hans Denck, 1495 – 1527, strongly influenced by medieval mysticism, formulates a mysticism that is breathtaking, often charismatic as regards the spirit, but very practical and completely in agreement with Schleithem in its emphasis on discipleship.

“No Christian who wants to bring honor to his Lord can use force or be a ruler. For the governance of our King consists only in teaching and in the power of the Spirit. Whoever truly acknowledges Christ as Lord should not act contrary to his commandments.”¹³

He sees discipleship as a dialectical way when he writes: “The means is Christ, whom nobody can truly recognize unless he follows him with his life. And nobody can follow him before he has recognized him.”

Menno Simons, 1496 – 1561, condemns the violence of the Anabaptist revolution in Münster. He gathers those who were scattered when the uprising in Münster was defeated and conveys to them a consistent but combative attitude of peace. “You people of God! Arm

¹¹ Heinold Fast, *Der linke Flügel der Reformation*, Bremen 1962, 74.

¹² William Klassen in Gameo 1989

¹³ translation taken from: *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, ed. Daniel Liechty, p.120

yourselves and prepare for battle – not with physical weapons as the bloodthirsty world does but with firm confidence, patience, and prayer alone.”¹⁴

I do not have time to discuss all the various positions on the question of violence. There were two violent incidents, the revolution in Münster as well as Hubmaier’s attempt at a governmental Anabaptist reformation in Waldshut and Nikolsburg, in which Christians were supposed to participate in state-sanctioned violence.

The American church historian Clarence Bauman writes in 1968: “Being directly gripped by the human person of the Savior meant an understanding of the relationship between God and man that contradicted the entire European theology. In the Anabaptists’ view of God, the aspects of majesty, of world power, of the theoretical and the sacred, which were so characteristic of the mainline church, were missing. The Anabaptists simply believed that Christ “is present daily and always among those who love and fear him...” For them, discipleship meant binding themselves to the person of the living Christ. On the one hand, Christ went ahead of his people, chronologically through history, on the road to the cross. On the other hand, his work envelopes our activity as a body its members. This participatio in the continuous work of Christ’s redemption is determined by the will to active, corporeal sonship of God.”¹⁵

This binding to the person of the living Christ is what gave the uneducated peasant Fritz Erbe the strength to endure first seven years in the *Storchenturm* in the city wall of Eisenach, followed by eight years in the southern tower of Wartburg, starting in 1533. After he discovered a fire and saved the castle, he was at least given straw in his dungeon. The Lutheran preachers of Eisenach did everything they could to bring him from his faith without success: he died after fifteen years imprisonment in deplorable conditions in the same Wartburg where Martin Luther was hidden 1521-22 and translated the New Testament.

Sonship of God motivated Dirk Willems to rescue his persecutor who had fallen through the ice. This man then arrested his rescuer. Dirk was burned as a heretic in 1569 outside the city of Asperen, Holland. Engraving in the *Martyrs’ Mirror*.

Sons and daughters of God met early on Easter morning 1528 in Augsburg in the house of Susanna Daucher to celebrate Christ’s resurrection. But the city guards ambushed their meeting. Eighty-eight brothers and sisters were imprisoned. Their leader Hans Leupold was executed, a brother and two sisters were branded on their cheeks (for giving Anabaptists food and lodging). A sister had her tongue cut out. Susanna Daucher was spared branding because she was pregnant, but she was expelled and had to leave two children behind. In other places many women died for their witness.

The title of today’s theme should be changed. Instead of “The Rejected Sons” it should be “The Rejected Sons and Daughters,” for in which thread of the Reformation did women play such a role as they did in the Anabaptist churches? In the Bible groups at the beginning of the movement they were allowed to speak; they held responsibility as hostesses. They proclaimed the gospel and took the risks of discipleship. In Augsburg at that time there were 45 sisters and 43 brothers among those arrested. In the hearing transcript one of the women said: She was not

¹⁴ Menno Simons, “Vom Kreuz Christi,” MW 1, 299.

¹⁵ Clarence Bauman, “Gewaltlosigkeit im Täufertum,” Leiden 1968, 187.

aware of any guilt. “In their meetings only the word of God was read and taught.” Before his execution, Hans Leupold asked in a song for forgiveness for his judges and executioners.¹⁶

Unfortunately I cannot go into their unique understanding of Scripture or the objection of most Anabaptist theologians to Luther’s emphasis: Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone. They saw this as constricting. They admitted Christ alone, but they noted that he was more than an instrument of justification.

Neither do I have time to trace the transformation of the living Anabaptist witness to a dry, principled ethic. It is connected with the pressure of persecution, the later repressive tolerance, the forced abandoning of mission and evangelization as a condition of settling in the Kurpfalz in 1664. The attitude of many Mennonites under the Nazis is nothing to be proud of. Mennonite soldiers – yes, they existed then – refused to swear allegiance to Hitler, but they pledged him unconditional obedience. The pacifist position was almost completely lost in Germany, and it was only regained slowly with the help of American Mennonites after 1945.

I cannot now go into the historical reconciliation process. But I will at least mention it.

There was a series of talks between the Vatican and the Mennonite World Conference from 1998 to 2003. The closing document bears the title “Called together to be peacemakers.” It formulates the guilt of the past and today’s regret on the part of the Catholic Church for the persecution of the Anabaptists. It establishes agreement on many points and dissent only on the question of baptism and whether Christians can be soldiers. But together they desire to follow their vocation as peacemakers.

The Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference also had discussions. In 2010 in Stuttgart they presented the report of the international Lutheran-Mennonite study commission: “Healing of memories, reconciliation in Christ.” Here too, discussion and homework is needed in the questions of baptism and participating in military force as a last resort. They want to continue their discussions and continue to think about these questions. For us Mennonites, Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession is still an affront. Within the Lutheran church it is controversial today whether Christians can take part in just war without sinning. This was illustrated by a recent bike tour from Augsburg to Wittenberg which included six Lutheran pastors. They returned CA 16 to Wittenberg and brought it to the Melanchthon House to be reworked.

The Lutheran World Federation met in Stuttgart in 2010. An entire day was reserved for the Anabaptist matter. “Should we ask the Mennonites for forgiveness for the persecution in the 16th century?” the presiding bishop Hanson from the USA asked. “Whoever agrees can kneel down.” My heart almost stopped. Before whom would they kneel down – surely, not before me? No, before God, I thought. And Bishop Hanson continued “or stand up.” Many kneeled, some stood. There were no opposing voices. Together we celebrated a service of reconciliation that lasted twice as long as planned. Small bowls of oil were passed around, and everyone could draw a cross on the hand, cheek, or forehead of his or her neighbor – a sign of reconciliation with Christ. Not with red-hot iron, as in the past, but with sacred oil.

Since then we have made a point of living reconciliation in various regions and cities, finding ways to remind ourselves of the many forgotten martyrs. They live in God’s memory, but

¹⁶ “Ausbund” song #39. The Ausbund is the oldest Anabaptist collection of songs. Its foundation is songs written by prisoners in the castle in Passau, and it was expanded through songs of other Anabaptist martyrs. First edition 1570 or 1571; oldest extant printed 1583.

they should also return to our memory as they have something to say to us. All Saints Day must become a truly ecumenical memorial celebration.

I've gone past my time, so I cannot return to Asterix and the magic drink that some people suspected the Anabaptists of the 16th century to have taken.

Leonhard Schiemer, participant of the Martyrs' Synod in Augsburg [in 1527]

The Little Bottle

The godless people say we sometimes drink something from a little bottle, the devil doesn't know what is in it. Whoever drinks from it is no longer happy, he doesn't act like he used to, he thinks nothing of money or of life. He has to do what we tell him.

The liquid in this little bottle is nothing else but a sorrowful heart that has been smashed, ground to powder, pounded with the mortar of the cross. For the grapes in God's vineyard (Is. 5:1-7) must be pressed, either in a wine press or by the tread of affliction, before they can be made into wine. ... Our dear brother and friend Christ drank of this herb or from this bottle on the cross, and it was mixed with vinegar and gall (Matt. 27:34). He also offered this bottle to the two sons of Zebedee saying, "Can you drink of the cup that I will drink?" (Matt. 20:22). On the Mount of Olives, when this bottle was filled for him, he trembled and sweated blood, fainted until an angel came from heaven to comfort him (Luke. 22:42-44). ... The Book of Wisdom says of this bottle: Eat and drink, my beloved, drink your fill (Wisdom 2; Song of Songs 5:1). Isaiah says, "Be drunk, but not from wine" (Is. 29:9). David says, "The cup that makes me drunk overflows" (Ps. 23:5, Vulgate).

It is all the same, whether you call it a bottle or a cup. If you call it a bottle, it is a parable, for a bottle is narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, just as the path of blessedness is narrow (Matt. 7:14), filled with fear and distress (4 Esdras 7:3-5).

But when one has overcome the distress, the bottle becomes wide, that is, God gives a person great comfort. ... This comfort is nothing else but a pre-taste of eternal life. Anybody who has tasted it sells everything he has and buys the whole field (Matt. 13:44). In this way the Spirit of Christ teaches and reveals things that no tongue has spoken and cannot be written on paper (2 Cor.3:5).

O merciful Father, help me in this hour ... If it is possible, take this cup from me. Yet Father, not my will but your will (Matt. 26:39). All things are possible to you (Mark 14:36). O eternal Father, you know that I have not set out on my own strength but only on your faithful promise ...

Written in prison. Leonard Schiemer was executed on 14 January 1528 in Rattenberg on the Inn.

The Lutheran Bonhoeffer also drank from this bottle. Let us encourage one another in following Jesus.