

The Mystery of the Mark

**Anabaptist Mission Work
under the Fire of God**

Peter Hoover

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All translations in this book are original. For readability and to fit them into a book this size, all of them have been abridged. To read the full text in German, follow the references indicated.

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It is to you, very particularly to the boys and girls I taught in our community schools in Australia and America—my own children included—that I give this book. It is your story. Do not lose it!

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Dear Friends,

Not long ago my wife gave me a glossy Christian paper, a ladies' magazine. In it a believing mother (who herself was converted from a godless background) described how she raises her family. Of well over fifty children and young people she and her friend have kept in their homes, she writes, the majority have gone into full or part-time mission service. All her grown children, beaming from photos around the page, serve somewhere overseas.

How did she accomplish that? The sister describes, step by step, how she and her husband prepared their children for God's work. Praying for missionaries, saving pennies for missions, special dress-up nights and exotic dinners (children cutting green leaves from construction paper, laminating them, and learning how to eat from them with their fingers). In a special "bush week" her children camped in a back paddock boiling their water, cooking over charcoal, and walking miles to a friend's place "to market" in a little recreation of life in Africa.

The article comes with a list of 121 "inspiring missionary stories" to read to children, and a poem written by the author's daughter, now serving in Africa herself:

I'm thinking of a far-off place
Across the ocean's waves,
Where dark-skinned natives cry and sigh,
They've never heard that Jesus saves.
This is Africa!

I'm walking through a mud village,
The people are so poor,
There's filth, disease and nakedness;
Of dreaded death there's more and more,
This is Africa!

I'm walking down a jungle path,
To villages unknown,
To reap a harvest, golden grain
From seed which God alone has sown,
This is Africa!

We're giving of ourselves and time
For Christ has done the same!
We want to spread his kingdom far,
We'll give our lives in Jesus' name,
For Africa!

Some time before this I listened to an elderly man, an American Mennonite, describing his ministry. As a youth he had served (contrary to his church's teaching) in the US army. Riding into Manila harbour on the night of the Allies' attack he stood on the deck of a destroyer, cradling his gun, watching the city go up in explosions of light, the thunder of incessant bombing, and flames. Praying to God, thanking his Saviour, Jesus, for the New Testament in his shirt pocket that had stopped a bullet from entering his heart, he vowed he would someday return to Manila with the Gospel instead of a gun.

He did.

Because he only knew English and Plattdeutsch, he wrote up the "sinner's prayer" and had it translated into Tagalog. With this he went up and down the streets of Manila, making friends, and getting people to read the prayer with him. Everywhere he went, in Manila and throughout the islands, he "led hundreds to the Lord." Then, when he realised how God was using him, he began to make more and more trips to the Orient, to Eastern Europe and what had been the countries of the Soviet Union. On his last trip to Ukraine, he told the audience, he had led over a thousand people to the Lord, and that without speaking their language! All he used was signs and gestures and a printed card with the sinner's prayer in Ukrainian.

This way or that, “mission work” is getting accomplished in our time. But is it accomplishing the mission on which Christ sent his church into the world?

What are the fruits of the last 150 years of mission work, worldwide?

Without question, God deserves the praise and all nations stand indebted to courageous missionaries that have spread the knowledge of Christ around the world. By translating the Bible into hundreds of languages, braving wild frontiers, they have brought new light to tribes and cultures long in spiritual darkness. But in how many cases has evangelical mission work actually “spread the kingdom of God” throughout the earth, as the above poem suggests?

Would you, or would the missionaries you support, know for sure what that kingdom is—where it begins and ends, and how it should look on the earth today?

All sensational mission reports notwithstanding, the whole world has been moving steadily further from Christ during the last one hundred years. This, in spite of the fact that it has gotten fuller and fuller of Christian churches. In spite of Christian radio and TV, Christian web-sites beyond number, reaching more and more people and leading millions every year to pray the sinner’s prayer and “get saved.” For the faster world Christianity—evangelical “mission-minded” Christianity—spreads, the faster it comes apart at the seams and rots.

“Mission work,” we must conclude today, has brought the Bible to the world, but to a large extent it brought neither Christ nor his kingdom.

To the contrary, the more missionaries have gone out, the more churches and towns and nations have turned into trade fairs of the Antichrist behind them. Look at what happened to Africa or Latin America. For every mission that depends on capitalist prosperity to support itself spreads the germ of Western

imperialism and corruption (the survival of the fittest, “happiness” through getting more stuff) like an evil virus along with it. The poverty and misery such missions hope to eliminate being more often than not the tragic result, the “other side of the coin,” of the independent affluent lifestyle (every family with its house and car) their workers enjoy at home.¹

So, what in the light of all this is the church’s mission, your mission from Christ, today?

On what type of missionary service do you want your children to go?

Questions like these led to the writing of this book, and I pray that the witness of Truth shining through it will not only help you accomplish Christ’s mission for eternity but bring you face to face with the reality of his kingdom today.

Peter Hoover

Detention River, Tasmania

20 September 2008

¹ In a book I just picked up at a Christian mission in Australia, Rich de Vos, one of the wealthiest men on earth and “a radiant Christian,” describes how “compassionate capitalism” (involving as many people as you can in your money-making schemes) is not only financially sound, it is our hope for the future, the salvation of the human race, and the end result of the Christian Gospel that produced the American Way (Rich being the founder of Amway Corporation). Everything the book teaches stands in blatant opposition to what Jesus taught—the antithesis of the Gospel—yet its principles have become generally accepted among Christians in our time.



500 km (275 miles) from Bozen in South Tyrol to Austerlitz in Moravia.
100 km (55 miles) from Bozen to Innsbruck.

1

Jakob and Trindl

A dark fall sky hung over the Sisters Hills on Saturday, the fifth of April, while we picked up potatoes at a farm on Rulla Road. Right after our noon meal, David, our young *Weinzedel* (work co-ordinator), asked us to hurry and come with him, quick before it rains. We found the farm high above the sea, surrounded by forested ranges but opening into the loveliest of Tasmania's valleys through which a railroad looped around its potato field, separating it from a dammed up creek and several hundred cows grazing on steep green paddocks beyond.

Within minutes our crew spread out, lots of talk and laughter from the school children, a girl in long skirts and a veil, several bearded men, all with feed sacks, picking up potatoes the big machines had left behind. "Gleaning," they called it in Bible times. And like the poor that did it then, we do it now to feed many mouths at our community while our bank account is bare.

Certainly, we need potatoes. And with everyone helping cheerfully our work went fast and well. But my mind, this Saturday morning, did not stay in the potato field on Rulla Road. With famine in Africa, war in the Middle East, all of Australia and the rest of the world losing its way and rushing down the broad road to destruction, is this—building a church community in this lovely but out-of-the-way place—really what Christ most wants us to do?"

2 The Mystery of the Mark

How, I asked myself, do we as a community carry out Christ's "great commission" in our time?

Lugging my sack through the field, the years my wife and I lived in Latin America passed before me—"witnessing" from door to door, holding street meetings, giving out literature, living in the city and preaching the Gospel in countless homes and churches from northern Mexico to southern Chile. Great years those were. Great opportunities. But when I remembered what we missionaries left behind us, and what has become of it now, I could not help but think of Jakob and Trindl.

Jakob, a young hat maker of what is now South Tyrol in Italy, and Trindl Purst who married him, a hired maid. I started thinking about them early this Saturday morning when I translated a letter he wrote in 1536.

Jakob wrote to Christ's followers and "seekers" in Moravia. Almost five hundred years later I translated his letter for more followers of Christ and other "seekers" around the world. While doing so, the time gap between us seemed to melt away, and before I knew it, a stream of obvious connections, astounding parallels, joys, fears, and challenges we share, began to tear me from the present and carry me out into beautiful, but dangerous and unfamiliar ground.

Where will our Lord Jesus take us in this new century? If we steadfastly keep on following him, what place will remain for us and our children in a world moving rapidly away from God?

We know nothing more of the future than Jakob did when he wrote his letter (hiding in a shepherd's hut up on a mountain, with Trindl expecting a baby, the police after them, and their entire church fellowship in peril of their lives):

The love of God compels me, brothers and sisters, to tell you how it goes with us here: Our Lord's children, our dear brothers and sisters, rise up to grow in godly righteousness and truth like lovely sweet-

smelling flowers, like a garden that greens up after welcome showers in May! They flourish in the fear of God, in godly love and peace. Like the holy prophet Isaiah and holy David say, their hearts are aflame, blazing with the eternal light and the fire of God!

Oh how richly and beautifully has God equipped them with all graces, even though they are nearly all simple people, uneducated men and women, that have only rarely heard the Gospel preached. They have thrown their hearts into what they do for God, and I trust God will bring them through to perfection. My heart and soul takes such delight in them, the pleasure garden and paradise of God! “Praise God!” I shout from the heart. “Honour and thank him! Exalt his holy name through Jesus Christ, for ever and ever! Amen.”¹

Jakob loved nothing more than to see the fellowship of Christ’s followers blossoming on earth, in the 1530s. But he held no illusions about how it would go:

I have to tell you brothers and sisters that our stay here (in South Tyrol) is no longer a secret. Cries of alarm about us go up on all sides. Godless thieving priests, the watchers and messengers of Satan, the hounds of hell are baying us from their pulpits, warning the folk against us, telling them we hide in the hills to deceive them, while they force the innocent to come to their cursed mass and sacraments.

Like Christ predicted, they threaten us with judgement, with torture and the hangman. The godless sea of Sodom rages and roars around us. I fear it will not end until Jonah gets cast into it, to be swallowed by a whale again. The whale in this case being that fearsome tyrant, that enemy of God’s Truth, the emperor Ferdinand of Austria with all his men,

¹ From a letter to the believers in Moravia, delivered by Walsl (Balthasar) a carpenter, in 1536. All excerpts in this chapter from the same letter.

together with that accursed pope and his hounds of hell. But God will command the whale and the sea to cough up his own! They shall be delivered from the belly of the earth and the power of godless men. Like Jonah, they shall be saved and freed to rise with Jesus from the dead! To go with him in great power and glory to eternal blessedness in the splendour of God! May God help us! Amen.

Toward the end of his letter, Jakob accurately predicted what happened within a few days of writing it:

Brothers and sisters, we expect disaster to fall any day, any hour. We constantly expect the police, the hangman's helpers to break in upon us and for our trial to begin. But we have given ourselves to this and expect nothing else. May God give us grace and strength, may he fill us with love, with faith and perseverance to witness and fight for the truth to the end! We want nothing other than to leave a good example behind for you, than to point out the way for you to follow Christ. We want to keep the faith and die like men. May God keep us true to our resolve! Amen.

God's pleasure garden, his church community, endangered in a godless world but flourishing under his fatherly care—the more things change, the more they stay the same, I decided as my potato bag grew heavy, the clouds darkened and the first rain began to fall on Saturday afternoon.

Outwardly we face no persecution. We live in a benign post-Christian society that tolerates us along with many other "alternative lifestyles." Yet underneath the surface, under the guise of broad multiculturalism, the battle grows dirtier and more desperate all the time—a violent conflict of ideologies, a spiritual war of worldwide dimensions. Fearsome tyrants, the enemies of God's truth with their hounds of hell (blind religious leaders), bay us louder than ever with cries of, "Dangerous cult!

Discrimination!” and “Child Abuse!” for how we live and raise our families. The last thing Satan wants is solid communities of faith—large families subject one to another and to God—in a world he has nearly taken for his own.

Individuals he can handle. “Lone Ranger” Christians here and there he always gets sooner or later. But entire groups of Jesus’ followers, the kind that stick together in common resistance to the ways of the world, he hates. He kills. He must destroy with a passion, one way or another, if only he can.

Within a few days of writing this letter, Jakob and Trindl fell into the authorities’ hands. So did many of their brothers and sisters. But those that survived kept right on following Christ. In a few turbulent years their fellowship grew and spread—it *flourished*—through centuries following, through blood and war and tears, through struggle and flight, through perils of want and perils of plenty, growing, spreading, branching out, from South Tyrol to Moravia and Slovakia, through Romania, Russia and North America, suffering trials from within and without, almost extinguished in dark times of apostasy and ruin, only to blaze up brightly again, until it got all the way to Tasmania, centuries later, on the other side of the world.

What might Jakob and Trindl, with the handful of believing farmers and tradesmen around them, have known about effective mission work that we should know today? Could the work Christ began in South Tyrol in the 1520s—the work of which Jakob and Trindl were part—hold a clue to how we may fight and overcome in today’s war for the souls of men?

Yes, I concluded after serious investigation, it holds that clue. But only for those on whose foreheads a mark appears—the “mark and seal of all true children of God” as Jakob called it.²

² In another letter addressed to a group of captured believers at Hohenwarth in Lower Austria, 1534.

For unless one wears that mark, one gets stamped with the “mark of the beast” and destroyed as rubbish by God.

What is that mark and how does one get it?

I set out to find the answer in a cheerful matter-of-fact way, expecting to come upon it, perhaps, in half an hour’s reading. But my search, tracing the footsteps of Jesus’ followers through places I could not have imagined or dreamed, has taken me years. It has opened my eyes to other worlds. It has set me on a mission and transformed my life.

This book is the story, and I can guarantee you only one thing—it will take you as well through places you did not expect. No matter from which direction you come, it will not make much sense to you at first, and only a rare few will make it through the first three chapters. But if you persist, if you are a genuine seeker, ready to climb the mountains and plunge through the fire, to feel the blade of a double edged sword thrust between your ribs, making you let go of all you have to find the Truth, you too may spot in this story the footprints of Christ, and set out with him to new heights on a journey of your own.

Bon voyage!

2

The Work

With potatoes to sort, onions to glean, a new paddock to seed for the goats (besides teaching school and helping to build a church community from scratch) I have no time to write this book. But—I decided while working with the rest above Rulla Road—it must get written, in answer to my own questions and others who have been asking them with me.

Last week, after I spoke about missions, a new sister commented, “Obviously you don’t include us in that, for we don’t have missions or missionaries as such.”

That started me thinking.

No mission? No missionaries? Well, I guess we don’t, in a modern Evangelical sense. Certainly we don’t have a “mission board,” people sent out on “terms,” or coming back “on furlough.” We don’t give out mission reports or solicit donations for what we do. And when we try to explain our “church work” to Australian authorities—raising pigs, doing metal fabricating, making wooden furniture, all at a place where we keep turkeys, goats and laying hens—we get puzzled stares. Yet, as this new sister herself stands to witness, had it not been for an earnest sense of mission to the world, neither she nor any of the rest of us would belong to this church community in Tasmania.

What needs definition, obviously, is the word “mission” itself.

What in your mind is a “mission” or a “missionary”? What do you expect your church’s mission work to accomplish?

Two weeks after Susan and I got married in 1981, we set out as church planters under the Mennonite church, to Mexico. “Open Door Ministries,” our organisation called itself. In our ten-year-old GM pickup, a squeaky ice-chest on the seat between us, all our earthly possessions on the back (the pickup just over half full), we crossed the Ambassador Bridge out of Canada and the great adventure began.

For several months we learned Spanish while building a primitive dwelling for ourselves outside the village of Páramo de Morelos in Chihuahua state. No electricity had come to this part of the world. We fetched our water from several kilometres away. The closest telephone (a hand-crank model, no direct dialling) was a long ways off and thieves promptly took most of what we had brought along.

Poverty, struggles in the church, the collapse of the Mexican economy and the great challenge of getting new Spanish believers to mesh with us foreigners in meaningful brotherhood soon convinced us that mission work was no easy assignment. Once I knew the language, I became involved in Spanish publishing, and my ordination as a minister took us to most of the countries in Central and South America. For around ten years we lived in Costa Rica and later in Chile. New churches, indigenous groups, far more “seekers” than I could name or number, became familiar to us.

But in all this true-to-form mission work—the work of modern day evangelism and church planting, as everyone understands it—I also had questions. The more attached I became to Latin American seekers, serious about following Christ, the more I wondered what we missionaries were leading them into. Had any of the churches we established become working models of Jesus’ kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, on earth? We said so, but without much evidence to prove it.

Even though I led repentant souls to Christ, I was never sure what would follow. Would the longsuffering poor (brown-

skinned mestizos) we brought into the church ever learn to accept their lot alongside the flourishing rich (white-skinned North Americans)? Was it really possible to build a stable multi-ethnic church, some of whose members were rich enough to afford several vehicles, take expensive holidays, and build luxury homes, while others slept in hammocks in houses with dirt floors and didn't have enough to buy a bicycle?

Sure, I heard all the "logical explanations." By the time my fellow missionaries got done explaining things, it sounded perfectly sensible that a white baby born with a heart disease should be flown at once to an American hospital for attention, while a brown baby, born in the same church fellowship, with the same condition, should die. But is everything "sensible" always right? Was it right, in my own case, to be earning wages in US dollars (working for a foreign-based publishing company), earning in an hour what few of my Latin brothers and sisters earned in a day?

I began to doubt many things, and in that doubting period I turned to reading a tattered book my mother had picked up years before in a second-hand shop in Canada: *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* Written by Roland Allan, an Anglican priest in China, it had never caught my interest before. But now, after our own experience and trials in church building, it dawned on me like a light from heaven.

Indigenous churches! Fully self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating missions. Mission workers travelling about like Paul, never buying land, never getting locally involved with finances, just starting churches and moving on. Why hadn't we thought of that before?

For several years we missionaries in Latin America discussed Roland Allan up and down. Even though our bishops at home did not like it, indigenous vs. foreign-controlled missionary churches became our buzz-word, our ideal. Then I made an even greater discovery. On a snowy afternoon in Lancaster,

Pennsylvania, deep in the basement archives of the Mennonite Church, I came upon another book. Printed in Argentina in 1947, it bore a signature inside its front cover,



and its neatly underlined texts, marginal notes and frayed edges told of constant heavy use by its owner.

This book—*New Testament Order for Church and Mission*, step by step instructions on how to build indigenous churches—I soon learned, had spent many years in Africa. How did it get there, and who was Elam W. Stauffer?

The Work Begins: Pennsylvania, 1930s

Elam Stauffer grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. With his young wife, Elizabeth, he gathered eggs and milked cows on a small farm near Mannheim. But everything changed quickly when the Mennonite conference to which he belonged sent him to Africa in 1933.

The great change, both for Elam and the church, had taken a long time coming. For centuries the Mennonites had slumbered in cosy security amidst rolling fields, stone barns and houses set among flowering fruit trees in eastern Pennsylvania. Cautiously conservative, they had raised their own, bringing large families and hundreds of grand and great-grand children into the church. Clinging to Jesus' teachings, they steadfastly refused to send their sons to war, or dress their daughters like the world. But for generation after generation no new family names got added to church registers. Weavers married Brubakers, Horsts married Nolts, Hesses married Martins, and Martins married Weavers again—endless webs of family relationships getting related in more and more ways.

Until revival broke loose.

Suddenly, in the 1870s young Mennonite preachers appeared from “out west”—out in Illinois where they had attended D. L. Moody’s Bible School. Like a forest fire their new style of preaching, English preaching for the first time in Mennonite churches, swept the congregations of eastern Pennsylvania. Revival meetings lasted week after week. At altar calls in packed churches, some that responded had to step to the front on backs of benches after aisles got full. Everywhere, everyone, it seemed, was gloriously “getting saved.” Then Sunday Schools, mission conferences and young people’s Bible Schools drove the need to “spread the good news of salvation” deep into the hearts of “awakened” souls.

For generations Mennonite children had only heard earnest admonitions in German, delivered with tears in the manner of their Anabaptist forefathers. Long winter evenings they had spent around the lamp, listening to stories from the Martyr’s Mirror. Now they heard well-dressed young men, clean-shaven and educated, shouting the gospel in English—the gospel being one’s need to “accept Jesus as a personal Saviour,” so one could have “assurance of salvation.” Now they heard missionary stories.

David Livingstone, Mary Slessor, Alexander Mackay “Uganda’s White Man of Work”—growing up in an awakened Mennonite home, Phebe Yoder knew all these stories by heart and many more. Nothing stirred her more deeply, nothing aroused her admiration like these missionaries’ choice to “give their lives for the salvation of the heathen,” so when she sensed the Lord’s call, she answered, “Yes, Jesus, I will go with you to Africa!”

Only one problem. Phebe was twelve years old and the Mennonites did not yet have missions in Africa.

Sunday after Sunday, Phebe dropped coins into the mission offering box. As a teenager she entered a Mennonite high school

and later got a teaching degree from a Mennonite college. Year after year she attended mission conferences but no doors opened to Africa. Mennonites by this time were sending missionaries to India and South America, but Africa stayed out of the picture and to Africa Phebe felt called to go.

Finally she heard the Lord telling her something else. He told her to mark her offering envelopes “for Africa Mission.” Mennonite leaders got the offerings and laid them aside, wondering what to do with them. Then the Lord told Phebe to get a nursing degree. And shortly thereafter the Mennonites of Lancaster County, who had been praying for a long time that God should lead them, felt a clear call to open a new mission in Africa. Elam and Elizabeth Stauffer, John and Ruth Mosemann, they decided, should go as mission workers, and Phebe Yoder should accompany them as a nurse.

Everything worked out marvellously.

Elam Stauffer and Orie Miller (chairman of the newly created Mennonite mission board) set out in December, 1933, stopping in England and Germany to learn all they could from Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran mission boards also at work in Africa. Some thought Elam and Orie should go to Ethiopia to look for a place. Others suggested Sudan. But when they got to Africa and learned that missionaries already in Ethiopia would not welcome them, and when it turned out Sudan had no railroad (Orie, with his business interests at home, did not have time for a slow trip up the Nile), they chose Tanganyika Territory.

What a surprise awaited them in Dar es Salaam, the Tanganyikan capital city! Once again the brothers felt God’s direct confirmation of their plans. All missionaries in the country had gathered in the city to share experiences and map out the future. The Anglicans, they decided, should stick to the coast. The Lutherans and the African Inland Mission (Brethren, Baptist), would take the interior, while the Mennonites would

stick to the northwest corner of the country, close to Lake Victoria. Everyone shook hands, prayed together, and agreed to respect one another's territories, not "reaping where they had not sown."

After the meeting and an eye-opening train trip far inland, a friendly AIM missionary accompanied Elam Stauffer over 300 km further, both men riding bicycles, to the shore of the lake where they chose a bare hill, ten km from the nearest African village on which to build a new "station." Orie Miller sent a telegram to America advising the remaining missionaries to come to Africa at once. All doors are open!

Four hundred and seventy-five Mennonites from Lancaster County chartered a special train to New York to see Elizabeth Stauffer and the Mosemanns off. For two hours they sang and prayed aboard the ship, the S.S. Deutschland, whose captain said he was proud, on behalf of his shipping line, to have brought the Mennonites across to America, and now to be taking them back, across the Atlantic, as missionaries. Everyone joined in to sing, "Love lifted me," "Oh for a heart to praise my God," and "God be with you till we meet again!" before the final words and tears of parting at midnight, John Mosemann shouting back as the great liner slid away from the pier, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us! Overhead is his banner! What a blessing it is to carry the gospel to the whole world!" The next morning the New York Times ran a story of the Mennonites bravely beginning mission work in Africa.

Praise God!

But even though I found Elam Stauffer's book years later—and even though its message had a lasting impact on me and my fellow missionaries in Latin America—it was on a trip to Italy, not to Africa, that I found my first clues to an infinitely greater and higher calling.

God did not send Jakob and Trindl out to build indigenous churches or take the "good news of salvation" to lands overseas.

He sent them out with his mark on their foreheads and coals of fire in their hands.

The Work Begins: South Tyrol, 1520s

We crossed the Brenner Pass into Italy¹ on a grey morning in the fall. Great patches of snow still clung to rocky heights on both sides of the Autobahn, heights that lost themselves in cold Alpine fog. Then, all at once the Autobahn up from Innsbruck became the Autostrada del Brennero, *Maut* (highway toll) turned into *pedaggio* and we came swooping out of the tunnel, down grand curves on the viaduct descending through Ponticolo and the Frazione Céves into the Italian city of Vipiteno (Sterzing, in German).

Frazione Céves—didn't its German-speaking residents call it *Tschöfs*? And, while Vipiteno was still the Habsburg city of Sterzing (SHTAYA tzing) hadn't a young man of this place distinguished himself as the dreamy apostle of a new social order for South Tyrol and the world? As if on a drive through time and space the Valle Isarco (Eisack Valley), with its facts, its faces and its bold ideas, opened up and widened out before me as we emerged from the Alps. Another world. How deeply and permanently it would shape my own destiny and that of my wife and children I could not, at the time, have dreamed.

The young man of Tschöfs, Michael Gaismair, grew up in the 1490s with more opportunities than most. His father, Jakob, owned shares in silver and tin mines up the valley besides farming on the river flats and keeping the local castle's goats. Michael learned how to read Latin. He made many friends and

¹ The Italian province of South Tyrol (Trentino – Alto Adige) is of modern creation. Until the end of World War I all of Tyrol was governed by the Habsburg rulers of Austria from its capitol at Innsbruck. To avoid confusion in this book, South Tyrol's place names are all given in German, with their Italian equivalents (as they appear on modern maps) used only in captions and footnotes as necessary.

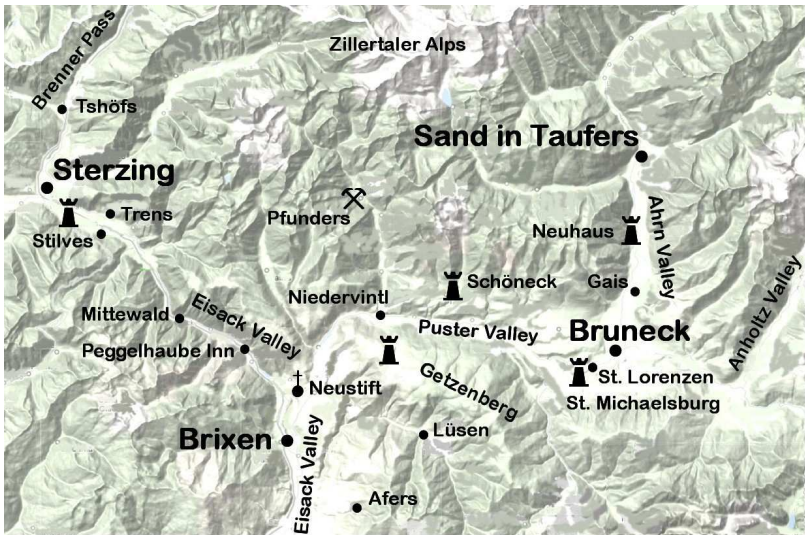
had places to go and things to do until late at night. Too many nights, and too late sometimes, for his own good. After he turned seventeen he suddenly found himself getting married—to one of the wealthiest and most popular girls in town—and becoming a father almost right away.

Michael and Madl (Magdalene) named their little boy Michael Jr. and took him with them to the Inn Valley when Michael got a job—working as a secretary at the silver mines in Schwaz. And from then on, everything could have gone well. The new Gaismair family could have found its niche in the upward-spiralling society of mine owners, merchants and petty nobility in mountainous Tyrol. All the better after Michael got a higher-paying job as secretary to the regional governor, Leonhard von Völs.

But . . . Michael had a conscience, and he lived in rapidly changing, exciting times.

Sailing across the border from Austria into Italy without stopping (no guards, no customs left in a newly united Europe) I could not help but see how Michael Gaismair's time resembled mine—in which more and more people discover one another and make new connections with so much information, a one-world language, Google-Earth, cell phones. In Michael's time bold men conquered empires and discovered worlds across the sea while the newly developed art of printing let loose a flood of information, as much of it vile as holy, to swamp Europe, causing "seekers" of all types (Michael among them) to question authority and long for the Truth.

"Christianity" fails in my time—you know the story, people no longer bothering to go to church. Shocking secularism taking over on one hand with dangerous new "cults" running loose on the other. "Been there, done that," Sterzing and Michael Gaismair could have told us five hundred years ago. For the religious corruption of their day lagged nothing behind ours in monstrosity. The wealthy prince-bishop of Brixen (Bressanone



in Italian, just down the valley from Sterzing) ran the entire region like a mafia lord, and lived like one too—with concubines and lecherous monks aplenty. Students at universities, gone wild in a revived humanism, thought (and dressed) no less shockingly than now.

From the east the Muslims—come back to life after centuries of collapse—threatened to overtake Europe in Michael’s time. Not al Qaeda and oil prices, but the Turkish Sultan and oriental trade shook the world.

During all of this, however, no single issue, no monster stood as a greater threat to Europe and troubled Michael Gaismair more than money.

Money.

As Michael saw it (and as many of us have seen it today) the whole world revolved around money. Working as he did for the silver mines or for Leonhard von Völs, *Landeshauptmann an der Etsch*, (governor of South Tyrol), he had reasons to know. For money, in the Europe of Michael’s time, was just coming into power.

Money: From the devil or from God?

For one thousand five hundred years before Michael Gaismair appeared on the scene all earnest Christians taught against the accumulation of wealth. “The love of money,” they believed, “is the root of all evil.” It is easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to make it into the Kingdom of God.

That the pope at Rome and mediaeval lords lived in sinful wealth was to all earnest Christians most obvious. But even the pope and the lords did not risk having great amounts of money. Their wealth consisted mostly of positions and in properties they had inherited or conquered. Money—sinful money, especially the business of banking money to lend out on interest—stayed in the hands of non-Christians. In Europe, as well as in Muslim lands, that meant the Jews.

With the revival of Greek humanism however (a revival that began in Italy just before Michael’s generation) European church men and rulers began to change their minds. “Who says money is bad?” they began to ask one another. “If we had more money, we could do more good!” Money is power, they reasoned, and why should the power of money lie in non-Christian hands?

With this enlightenment, this *renaissance* (new birth) as they called it, powerful men and women throughout Europe increased their power by getting money. No longer did it matter so much who had the most land or the largest army. What mattered was who had the gold, the silver. And in this, Sterzing, Schwaz (pronounced SHVOTTSS), the snow-capped mountains of Tyrol with their hidden treasures of ore, stood squarely in the centre of it all.

One of Europe’s most important mints, mass producing the world’s first internationally standardised silver money, went up in the Tyrolean mining town of Hall, near Innsbruck. This, like

a pot of honey draws ants and flies, attracted Jewish bankers and greedy Christians to the Tyrol Michael Gaismair knew—and deplored.

Money Rules

Launched at a young age into supporting a family, it did not take Michael long to discover the truth about having or not having money. Even though his father owned a mine, the Gaismairs did not have the money or the means to smelt their own silver. The young *Bergknappen* (miners) his father hired to wrest the ore from poorly lit shafts at constant peril of their lives, could get nothing but the lowest wages—barely enough to feed and clothe themselves. Frequently his father could not pay them on time because all the ore the Gaismairs (and other Tyrolean mine owners) dug, went straight to the money people.

The rich Frundsberg family that lived in a castle at Schwaz, the Spaur and Thun families, and above all the Fuggers, fabulously wealthy Jewish bankers of Augsburg in Bavaria, bought and refined the ore. They paid what they liked, whenever they wanted to. But once the silver was refined they loaned it out, at exorbitant interest rates to small farmers, people building houses, tradesmen needing materials, and governments going to war.

So much money did *Jakob der Reiche* (Jakob the Rich), leading son of the Fugger family, loan to governments everywhere that people joked about him “owning Europe.” Michael did not think it funny. After Jakob der Reiche bailed out the House of Habsburg (rulers of Tyrol, most of Europe and the New World) with 600,000 Florins, a sum equal in value to billions of Euros today, they gave him the franchise of all Tyrolean silver until the debt got repaid.

The Fuggers moved quickly. Within a year’s time they controlled nearly all there was to control in Hall and the Inn



The Val Ridanna (Ridnaun Valley) up from Vipiteno (Sterzing) in South Tyrol. At the foot of the mountain in the background (the 3251 m Botzer Peak) sits what was one of the Fuggers' most important mining operations in the region.

Valley, in Sterzing and Brixen and throughout the valleys and villages of the Tyrolean hinterlands. Interested in far more than just silver, they bought up the farmers' crops at harvest time, for the lowest prices. Then, during the winter they sold flour, clothing, and everything else in Tyrolean towns for as much as they liked. Hardest hit were the miners themselves whose families shivered in threadbare clothing in cottages with little to eat.

Michael saw it happen and told Madl about it, shaking his head. In 1512, still working at Schwaz, he wrote a letter about it to the Habsburg rulers of Tyrol. Eleven miners signed it with him. But did anyone read the letter? No good came of it and nothing changed.

Money and Land

Michael's parents and grandparents, all his uncles and cousins farmed. He grew up farming. And nowhere did Michael watch

with greater dismay the roughness, the injustice of Europe's new "cash economy," than in the tidy farming villages and Alpine meadows of South Tyrol.

From time immemorial farm families had pastured their cows and goats on the hills, boys from the village taking turns to tend the flocks and bringing them home at milking time. Nobody worried about what was whose. The land was just "ours" and stayed that way from generation to generation.

Fields of wheat and vegetables on the valley floor passed from parents to children. Sometimes the right to use them got traded off or given from one person to another. But the king—or God—owned everything, the people believed, and for this they paid annual rents to the church, to their regional lords and protectors, for the use of it.

Now, with people setting more value on money than on how and where they lived, everything began to change. Merchants and rulers, old feudal families that had long lived in the fortress castles of Tyrol, even the prince-bishop of Brixen, began to think of their territories not as leases from God, but as personal assets, *private property* on which they could do as they pleased.

Claiming *Bodenbesitz* (property rights), something the common people of Tyrol had never heard of before, these men began to mark out their territories, fence mountain pastures and valley fields, claim the forests, wells, and rivers for their own. This way, if they did not have enough money, they could sell off a piece of land, a forest, or their fishing rights for cash. And if they, like the Fuggers, had extra cash on hand, they could "invest in real estate" if they liked.

For the first time in the history of Europe, anything from royal privileges and positions in the church, to farmlands, business properties, town houses, or even castles and entire mountains came up for sale—for money. While those that had no money lost the game.

The only impediment Europe's new "money people" had to claiming, buying or selling their properties was the large amount of common people, the *Bauernvolk* (farmers/peasants) that lived on them. Certainly one needed a few farmers to work the land. But no one needed dozens and dozens, whole villages full of farmers, their wives, their in-laws and their little ones. So, as the process continued, the money people invented more and more ways to get rid of them.

Some forged documents "proving" exclusive land ownership, farming, or forestry rights. On the basis of these documents they held court in which the farmers always lost and the rich people always won. Of course. Only the rich could hire lawyers that read Latin and knew all the laws. Then church authorities got involved, upholding "law and order" and threatening the farmers with God's punishment should they fail to co-operate with those in charge.

Hundreds, then thousands upon thousands of families, not only in Tyrol but throughout Europe lost the right to farm, to hunt, to fish, or cut firewood in what they had always considered *unser Land* (our land). Wealthy land-owners, many of them new people from the city, hired soldiers to force the farmers to keep their rules. If they did not, they got evicted, even in the dead of winter.

Those that escaped eviction faced the payment of steep new taxes. Money for this. Money for that. The law *demanded* money. Money, or else . . . ! But the people did not have money, and no place to get it other than from the bankers, that more and more frequently owned the land as well.

That made it really easy.

The bankers extended credit. The farmers put themselves up for security. If they did not get their debts (with interest) paid on time, they, and their children, had to work them off on the new landholders' estates.

At the same time, prices kept rising sharply—so sharply that many faced starvation and more and more angry young men, left without fields to work or livestock to tend, took to the woods and took up arms.

Prösels

Working for governor Leonhard von Völs, Michael never lacked things to do. Only, he came to dislike more and more of what he did and of what others did around him.

Old Leonhard, thick friends of the prince-bishop in Brixen, of the Habsburgs and of the Fuggers, kept more projects on the go than anyone could shake a stick at. Here a house, there a farm, canals here, fishponds there, a new road, another bridge, and every spring a fresh war, it seemed, with the Venetians, just out of sight beyond the *Alpi Dolomiti* (Dolomite Alps) to the southeast. Nothing, however, excited Old Leonhard more, or kept him busier, than the monument he built to himself—like the Pharaohs built their pyramids in Egypt—on a hilltop outside of Völs am Schlern, his hometown.

Prösels, he called it. And even though some whispered its ugliness behind his back, Prösels Castle, his headquarters, became his showpiece, the nerve centre of the Eisack Valley.

When Michael Gaismair and his young family moved to Prösels, Old Leonhard's castle and his latest building project, a chapel for the Heilige Anna (St. Anne), still stood far from finished. But Leonhard prayed much, and paid his chaplain well to keep the saints happy and watching out for the welfare of all at Völs am Schlern.

Not without reason.

Coming down from Sterzing, through Brixen and Klausen, one catches only rare glimpses of the Dolomites, the “real Alps” behind long lower ridges that hem in the Eisack valley on the east. One of them, the Schlernrücken, stands tall and bare above



The Castello di Presule (Prösels Castle) near Fié alto Sciliar (Völs am Schlern). Across the deep Eisack Valley canyon sits the Ritten plateau, visible in the distance.

Prösels Castle and the huddle of houses that is the village of Völs. And Little Michael soon learned why his parents glanced fearfully in its direction when thunder echoed through the valley, or when darkness fell and they tucked him to bed.

The Schlernrücken, people said, was a *Hexenberg* (witches' mountain). When lightning lit its jagged peaks at night, they whispered one to another, some had caught glimpses of witches dancing. Others saw Kachler-Hans, the *Hexenmeister* (witch master) striding swiftly by on lonely roads, dressed like a farm hand, with his hat pulled low over his eyes so none could see his devil-face.

Little Michael had trouble going to sleep. His mother feared and prayed. But Michael, in his mid-twenties by now, had second thoughts, as well as fears, about what took place on the Schlernrücken at night.

No one seemed to know more about the witches and their evil designs than Old Leonard himself. When his crops failed, when his men lost a battle with the Venetians they should have won, when his best cow turned sick—no matter what the misfortune, Leonhard suspected and quickly identified witchcraft. More



Jagged peaks of the Monte Sciliar (Schlernrücken) filled the villagers of Castelrotto (Kastelruth), Siusi (Seis) and Völs am Schlern with fear, especially on stormy nights.

than that, he became an expert at spotting the witches themselves. One after the next, village women, usually older women whose years of hard labour had bent their backs, whose aprons had dried many a grandchild's tears, and whose large headscarves almost hid their wrinkled faces, fell prey to Leonhard's suspicions. And the long arm of Leonhard's law.

Under torture the hapless grandmothers, and sometimes younger women, even unmarried girls, said "yes" to anything, and Michael, the court secretary, had to write it down. Yes, they had made pacts with the devil, promising to serve him in exchange for getting money, getting their children healed, whatever. Yes, they had cursed Mary and the saints. Yes, they had ridden on sticks, on brooms, or benches through the night. (In one dreadful thunderstorm a soldier of Völs, it was said, had sprinkled bullets with holy water and downed a witch. But what he saw was so dreadful he could not speak about it for years following.) Yes, they had killed and eaten children. Yes, they had danced with

the devil on the Schlernrücken and regularly had sexual relations with him. . . .

Yes. Yes. But no confession saved them, and witch after witch got burned at Prösels. *Die Schlernhexen* (the witches of the Schlern), wide-eyed villagers shuddered and refused to talk of how they had perished, anchored to stakes amid piles of brush, screaming and clawing at their chains as the smoke billowed up from the square. Thirty villagers, at the height of the madness, got burned for the sin of witchcraft in Prösels, during the space of four years. Only two of them were men.

Not only did Michael find his new boss superstitious. Madly in love with money—money and pleasure—he stopped at nothing, like King Ahab, to get what he wanted. When he dug a canal through a farmer’s field and the farmer complained, Old Leonhard slapped a huge fine on him. When the farmer could not pay, he threw him in gaol.

All around Prösels, Leonhard (whom the Emperor had appointed as “protector of the people”) had his men fence in common pastures that he claimed for his own. In fields that families had farmed for a thousand years, he made fish ponds. Besides the big tenth—a tenth of all their income—that people paid to the church Leonhard invented many “little tenths” to be paid directly to him: A tenth of all animals born, a tenth of all garden crops, a tenth of the eggs that chickens laid. He enforced special work levies and Leap Year taxes, special interest on old debts, and new taxes on taking out a lease.

As his building projects grew, he demanded more and more taxes. He snatched young men from their parents’ homes to fight his wars, and recruited girls to serve as his castle maids. Every year the farmers, whom he called his tenants, had to bring him more cattle, more sheep and loads of firewood, more barrels of wine, as his staff at Prösels grew. They also, through forced labour, weeded his grounds, planted his flower beds, cleaned the castle, and shovelled the snow from his roof.

For every farmer that died Old Leonhard took a steer as a “death tax.” For farmers’ wives he took a cow. Taxes and tithes came due, even in years when crops perished in river floods or drought. By the time it all got said and done, the government at Prösels often got half or more of what farmers made in a year. And if anyone failed to co-operate they faced dreadful means of torture or death—beheading, hanging, drowning, quartering, impaling, or breaking on the wheel. (Burning at the stake, under imperial law, could only be used for arsonists, witches, heretics, coin forgers, or homosexuals.)

Michael looked on in disgust, and dismay. With all court records at his disposal, he could not help but know how the old laws (*das alte Recht*) of Tyrol, used to be. But the new money-people, Leonhard von Völs and his friends, had changed them, and in cahoots with the government, who could stop them?

After a poor farmer came, bringing a few scrawny chickens as rent, only to get bumped off, told to go home and get fatter ones—after more and more court cases against the poor, Michael wrote in the margin of his record book: “*Ich leid und schweig und trag Geduld, mit aller Unschuld. Es bleibt kein Gutes unbelohnt, kein Übles ungerochen. Langsam geht man auch weit*” (Patiently, with all innocence, I suffer and keep quiet. But no good shall remain unrewarded, no evil unavenged. Little by little much progress gets made).²

Exactly what progress he had in mind, only those closest to Michael could have guessed. But before he got much further with it, his life began to change.

Money and the Church

Down the valley from Prösels where the Eisack makes a big bend around the Ritten Plateau to join the Etsch, lies the largest city of South Tyrol—Bolzano/Bozen. And to Bozen, on the road

² Beda Weber, *Die Stadt Bozen*, 1849, pg. 78



At **Bolzano** (Bozen) where the Isarco (Eisack) meets the Adige (the Etsch) and the valley widens out into the fertile lowlands of Italy, travellers from all over northern Europe met merchants from Venice and the Mediterranean world.

between Venice and Germany came *tutto il mondo* (everyone from all over), four times a year to one of the best and most colourful trade fairs of Europe in late mediaeval times.

Under the arcades of Bozen's cobbled streets, merchants sold everything, the cheap and the dear, the honest and the crooked, the good and the bad. Nothing that money could buy did not appear, sooner or later, at the Bozen fair. So it came about that Michael Gaismair, deeply troubled, searching for answers to the perplexities of life, came upon his first sections of the German Bible.

Translated by a renegade monk, Martin Luther, they said, the Bible portions sold in great secrecy at Bozen. And that, Michael soon discovered after he started reading it, was no wonder. Hardly anything the corrupt church of South Tyrol did, resembled what the Bible taught. Caught up in the "money craze" of the times, the church's leaders charged fees for everything they did, so much money to baptise a baby, so much

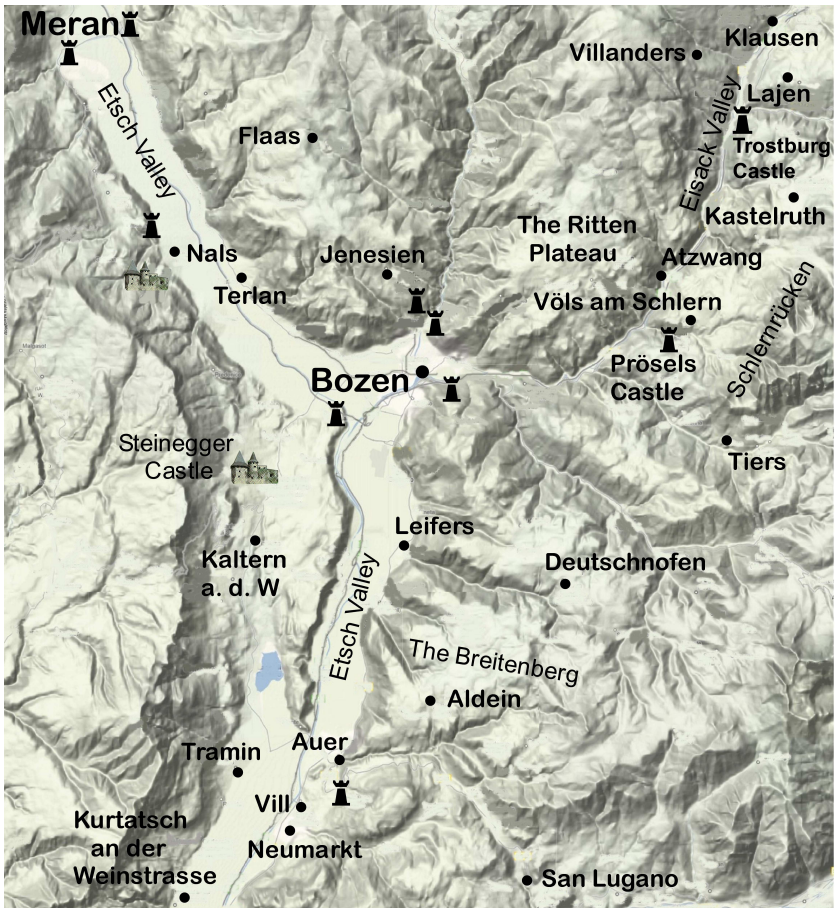
to forgive sins, so much for a funeral, so much to get the dead out of purgatory.

Virtually all priests that Michael knew had concubines, many of them more than one at a time. It had come to the place, in fact, that priests with concubines got preferred in South Tyrol because they were less dangerous than those that did not (usually gays or paedophiles). Nearly all farmers and small tradesmen made fun of the priests and hated them. “*Man schätzt die Priesterschaft gering, als ob sie wär ein leichtes Ding*” (people hold the priesthood for nothing), wrote one clever rhymester, “*Drum findet mann jetzt junge Pfaffen, die nicht mehr kennen als die Affen, und Seelsorg nehmen Leut auf sich, denen mann kaum vertraut ein Viech!*” (for that reason one finds young priests nowadays that don’t know anything more than monkeys, and men one could hardly trust with the cattle get trusted with our souls!).

Reading the Bible, Michael became steadily more obsessed with the screaming injustice and corruption of European society. Not only this, in his widening circle of likeminded friends he heard what unhappy farmers and tradesmen had taken upon themselves in other lands. In Zwickau in Thüringen, his friends told him, two weavers and a priest had read the Bible and begun to overthrow the tyranny of the wicked. Preaching Jesus’ Gospel, they went about telling all people to disregard the church and follow the light of God in their hearts. Only then, they said, only where people would live like Jesus with his disciples in loving equality, caring for the poor, would his Kingdom of Peace come to earth.

Michael listened carefully, and thought.

Then Hans, a tailor’s apprentice from Niedervintl in the Pustertal (a branch of the Eisack Valley), and a Dominican friar in Sterzing began to draw crowds with the same type of message. In pubs, in workshops and people’s houses at night eager listeners crowded in. “God will not bless us,” the run-a-



way Dominican told them, “until we throw out the rich tyrants and become masters of our own land!”

Michael thought and wondered even more. But Old Leonhard had a surprise for him. Because he had done a good job and got on well with his companions, Michael got promoted. Earlier, Old Leonhard had made him *Unterhauptmann* (lieutenant captain) of the local militia. Now, in 1524 he made him a captain—and shortly afterward, fired him!

It happened quickly, but not unexpectedly. Old Leonhard had entrusted him to pay the workers at Prösels. Lousy wages to be

sure. And Michael, fearing God more than man, had paid out what he thought fair.

The difference, 280 Gulden missing on the books, cost him his job. Another Michael—Michael Kürschner—took over the secretarial work while the Gaismairs moved to Brixen with their family. There he found work at the Prince-Bishop's palace, the Hofburg, for a lousy wage himself.

Peter Passler—Robin Hood of Antholz in Tyrol

Far back the narrow valley of Antholtz, east of Brixen and Bruneck, the Passler family lived from fishing. That is, Passler himself was the Prince-Bishop's head fisherman until he complained of unfair treatment and promptly lost his job.

The Prince-Bishop wasted no time in hiring someone else, while the Passlers, out of favour with the authorities, could find no other income or place to live. As the summer days of 1524 began to grow shorter, their situation grew serious. Where would they spend the winter? What would they eat? How would they keep warm? The Prince-Bishop's police watched everything and everyone: No hunting! No fishing! No cutting fire-wood! But the Passler boys, under the leadership of Peter, the most daring one, knew of many zig-zag Alpine trails and hidden canyons in the forests of South Tyrol that the bishop's police had never seen.

Taking to the mountains in late summer, Peter and his comrades lived like David's band in Bible times, hiding in caves during the day, sneaking out at night to find food and supplies. Peter had a musket and was a good shot. He was also an outgoing, friendly chap and many people liked him. When his friends—nearly all of them from families that had suffered outrage at the Prince-Bishop's hands—heard of Peter's flight, they joined him, one after the next, in sweet-scented forests high above the valley floor.



Rasun Anterselva (Niederrasen-Antholz), looking up Peter Passler's home valley.

The boys' freedom might have lasted a long time, had they kept out of sight. But the more that joined the band, the more daring got their raids into the valley. Thinking of themselves as champions of *das alte Recht*, they took it upon themselves to relieve the rich of their excess and alleviate the humble poor. For a while they met with nothing but brilliant success. Almost everyone in the valley cheered their deeds behind the authorities' backs. But the Prince-Bishop was furious. He doubled his efforts, and before the snow fell Peter Passler sat in chains, his comrades scattered, awaiting trial in Brixen.

The mood of South Tyrol changed.

Only a year earlier it had seemed like the *Ehrbarkeit*, the rich, the respectable landowners, governors and bankers would sit in comfort and rule the land forever. Now the people, their hopes once aroused, dared to think differently. As more and more heard what God and the Bible said, as they learned of farmers in other lands rising up to defy corrupt rulers and establish justice, their spirits revived. They met here and there in the dark. They

made plans, and by April 1525, fresh raids shook the Eisack and Puster valleys, Leonhard von Völs and all landowners from Sterzing to Bozen, to the core.

This time more than just the Prince-Bishop's police got involved. Leonhard von Völs mustered his troops. More help came down from Sterzing. On horseback, with guns, they galloped through the villages, breaking into houses, rounding up terrified farmers and tearing them from their wives to take them into Brixen for interrogation. Those they suspected guilty they tortured, flogged, and questioned some more. In three weeks forty-seven farmers had met their deaths—all kicked in the groin, knocked over the head, beaten with clubs, some beheaded, others broken and pulled apart until they died on the wheel.

Once again, Michael Gaismair, secretary at the Hofburg wrote up the accounts in outrage and inner pain.

On Tuesday, 9 May 1529 the Prince-Bishop's court sentenced Peter Passler to burning at the stake. The farmer's revolt, with the way they used the Bible, was heresy, the Prince-Bishop declared. And Leonard von Völs knew the Schlern witches must have had plenty to do with it. But those that knew Peter, sensing his honest heroism, pleaded for his life (to no avail). The next day they led him out to the Domplatz (cathedral square) in a white "repentance shirt," many women following, shouting encouragements and weeping for the young life to be snuffed out in its prime.

On the Domplatz, a surprise awaited everyone. Suddenly, out from all corners rushed a mob of farmers with muskets and axes and hayforks. The women screamed. The soldiers, after a brief tussle, gave up and ran. From a shouting, wrestling ball of flying arms and legs, Peter in his white shirt emerged in triumph, carried along by his whooping triumphant friends.

"The farmers have taken Brixen!" Like wildfire the news shot up the valley to Sterzing, down to Bozen and through the Puster

Valley to Bruneck and beyond. Thousands dropped their spring seeding, turned their oxen loose, and came running to see. Within a day's time, five thousand farmers had converged upon Brixen, taken the Hofburg (that Michael Gaismair quickly surrendered in the Prince-Bishop's absence) and marched in a great noisy crowd up to the Neustift, the Augustinian cloister just north of town.

Fat monks fled, running faster than they had in years. Barrel after barrel of wine popped open while golden images crashed, ornaments of silver and rich brocades ripped down, doors flung open and the pieces flew. The party lasted all night. But a few, the more sensible of the farmers, like Hans Gasser and Ulrich Kobl from the Ritten, Kasper Mairhofer from Niedervintl and Fritz Brandenburger from Toblach (Peter Passler's home area), kept their heads and made further plans.

The next day a farmers' delegation met Michael Gaismair at the Hofburg and asked him to be their captain.

Michael could read and write. He knew the important people of South Tyrol and could deal with them. Everyone knew his heart—and his son, almost turning eighteen, who stood firmly on the farmers' side.

Madlen feared, but Michael said, "Yes," and called a big meeting in the main hall of the Kloster Neustift right away. His first act was take the money found in the monastery and divide it out, fairly, among everyone there. Then he called on the farmers to stop their violence and with their help, chose twenty men—ten farmers and ten tradesmen—to help govern the land in a fair and God-fearing way.

New Order in South Tyrol

Calling on God to help him, Michael wanted nothing more than to change South Tyrol peacefully. But the farmers, especially the farmers' sons, could not stop. Having tasted the wonders of

freedom and the glory of establishing justice in the land, they moved quickly in all directions. Sterzing fell. Then Schlanders in the Vinschgau (further west in the valley of the Etsch). Castle after castle fell, the homes of the rich going up in flames.

For the first time in years the farmers hunted deer and cut firewood on the hills. Laughing and feasting they tore gaps in the fences, emptied the monasteries' storehouses, and took the landowners' cattle for their own. Two days after Brixen they took Völs am Schlern, and Prösels castle, with no one to defend it, quickly fell. Old Leonhard nearly went beside himself with rage, but could not do a thing about it.

At a meeting in Meran, up the Etsch Valley, Michael Gaismair with his twenty helpers and a houseful of clear-thinking farmers drew up a statement to give to the king (the "king" of Tyrol being, in fact, only an archduke, the youngest brother of the emperor, Carlos V, who lived in Spain). In the statement they described in bold terms how they hoped to free the land of all abuses that "hinder the work of God."

The governors they had up to now, the farmers stated, did not love Christ and had forgotten about peace and goodwill to man. They had used the land selfishly, not for the good of all. For this reason, the farmers said, they had to take matters into their own hands. They still honoured the king and wished to serve him as the Bible said, but in fairness and equality. Along with that, they wanted nothing other than God's Truth preached to them. They wanted the Prince-Bishop of Brixen and Leonhard von Völs stripped of their power because they were tyrants, not fit to rule. They wanted the monasteries dissolved and turned into hospitals. The wealth of the church (that owned one third of the land in South Tyrol) they wanted to go for the care of the poor.

Michael took the statement up to Innsbruck himself, presenting it humbly but hopefully before the new archduke, Ferdinand of Habsburg, only twenty-two years old.

Ferdinand

Nothing in Ferdinand's young life, neither his upbringing in the royal palace of Alcalá (in Spain), nor his training in religion, in philosophy, in military duty and law, had prepared him to meet Michael Gaismair and the farmers of South Tyrol.

Social justice for a handful of peasants? What did they want—new boots perhaps? More cheese?

To begin with, Ferdinand could not yet understand German well.

Although a Habsburg, he was *Fernando*, a Spanish boy at heart. His grandparents, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had sent Columbus to America. His brother Carlos, coming to the throne as a sixteen-year-old had already sent Cortez to conquer México, Pizarro to take Peru, and Magellan around the world. All Fernando could see, all he could think, was that God and the Holy Roman Empire had the world pretty much under control—functioning beautifully.



Ferdinand, Archduke and later Emperor of Austria,
1503 – 1564.

On top of that, Fernando enjoyed his life as regent of Austria and German lands. No end of wine and women at his disposal. Fine music, great food. A castle for every season of the year. With a bevy of loyal priests to forgive his sins and powerful friends like the Fuggers to get him whatever he wanted, why complain? Why change the system?

What were these peasants talking about anyhow? The more he grasped of the situation the more it sounded to Fernando like religious fanaticism, some heresy perhaps. Imagine equal rights for peasants and nobility! The Church divested of its rights and

its property given to the poor—what disaster wouldn't that bring upon the land!

If Ferdinand felt totally sure in his heart about anything, it was that the Roman Catholic faith, the faith of his grandmother “Isabel la Católica,” the faith that ransomed Spain from the Moors must be preserved at all costs.

No Help From the Habsburgs

The big meeting at Innsbruck took place on 12 June 1525. All the lords of the Inn Valley and those who had fled in terror from South Tyrol came. Everyone stood waiting until Ferdinand in resplendent costume (economy had never affected his attire) walked in with his courtiers to a standing salute and the music of the Innsbruck royal band.

After a long round of speeches praising the emperor, lamenting the horror of what the farmers in South Tyrol had done, and calling on God to preserve the faith and the established order of Europe, Michael finally got his turn.

He knelt before the emperor and began by telling him that the people of South Tyrol had no wish to overthrow him, or to deny his authority over the land. All they wanted were fair and written laws that would apply to everyone—peasants and nobility alike. They wanted the abolition of special privileges, and the castles torn down. They wanted to elect their own judges and juries. They wanted fair wages and pastors chosen by the people that would teach nothing but God's Truth.

Ferdinand did not say anything right away. He looked at Michael Gaismair and heard the earnest tone of his speech. If so many angry lords had not sat watching him, he might have smiled.

Then the court attendants hurried Michael from the hall and the real meeting began. Whether to consider any of the farmers' requests was never considered. The lords and councillors only

had to decide on the quickest way to subdue them and get them back to work again. Some suggested absolute force, others victory by tact and persuasion.³

In the end, Ferdinand only placed Michael under house arrest at Innsbruck until all money and goods taken by the farmers in South Tyrol got returned. He also sent Michael a message saying that since he was only the archduke, not the emperor himself, he could not change any laws or do much about the rest of the farmers' demands.

For a while Michael waited at Innsbruck and hoped. "Little Michael"—almost a fully-grown man by now—brought letters across the Brenner Pass from home. Then Madlen came too, with Michael's brother Hans and his cousin Wolfgang. But the longer he waited the more clearly he realised what had happened.

The establishment had not listened to him. The ceasefire he had called for, the mercy he had shown, had not helped his cause. It only gave the nobles time to retrench and plan their counter-attack.

Before the Alpine passes closed with snow, in early October, 1525, Michael sneaked out of the house where they kept him and fled. To Switzerland.

Gaismair's Land

When he heard the news, Ferdinand lost his temper. "What are you doing anyway," he stormed at the city authorities, "can't you as much as keep one farmer under guard? Do you want all of Tyrol infected with this man's subversive ideas?" And from

³ For a description of this meeting see Josef Macek, *Der Tiroler Bauernkrieg und Michael Gaismair*, 1965, pp. 221-290 and Hans Benedikter, *Rebell im Land Tirol: Michael Gaismair*, 1970, pg. 40

that point onward he became not only interested in South Tyrol's troubles, he took charge.⁴

Ferdinand started by placing a 400 Gulden bounty on Michael's head and had Madlen, Little Michael and Hans Gaismair arrested at Sterzing. The local authorities let Madlen and the children go (they also fled to Switzerland) but kept and tortured Hans.

Meanwhile, in Switzerland, Michael and those of "the movement" that gathered with him there, thought and prayed and planned. If the king could not, or would not, help them, who said they needed him at all?

What about establishing a brand new country—"Gaismair's Land" some started calling it, half-way in fun—where the people would be their own government, they would all live by the Bible and serve God alone? Hadn't people a thousand years ago lived like that?

At first it was fun to talk about, nothing more. But the oftener the idea came up in the exiles' conversation the more seriously it appealed to them. Why not? South Tyrol had lovely farming valleys. Its forests provided it with more wood than the people could use. Its mountains held great treasures of ore and its lakes teemed with fish. Situated between the Venetian Republic and Switzerland (both of them countries without a king, not under control of the Habsburgs) who said they couldn't have a completely "Christian nation"? Might this be what God had in mind all along?

Working together, with much discussion around low-burning candles at night, the men wrote up a 29 point constitution for "Gaismair's Land." The *Landesordnung* they called it:

⁴ The story of Ferdinand's reaction, of more than a hundred assassination plans he invented for Michael Gaismair, is told in *Tiroler Empörung*, Codex 1974 of the *Tiroler Landesregierungsarchiv*, Innsbruck.

All of us commit ourselves, with all we have, one to another. We promise not to forsake one another, but to live and work together in an orderly way, subject to those we will put in charge.

In all situations we will seek the good of others, in the fear of God, before our own good. Doing this, our almighty God will help us and give us grace like he has often promised to give to all that follow his commands. We may trust him because he is altogether trustworthy. What he says is true, and he deceives no one.

We will drive out from amongst us all godless people that oppose the eternal Word of God, that load the poor with heavy burdens, that hinder the common good.

We will uphold and live by the rule of Christ alone, grounded on the holy Word of God.

There will be no special rank or privilege for anyone, because that is against the Word of God. It corrupts justice, and no one should be honoured above anyone else.

Every city wall, every castle and every fortress in the land shall be torn down. There will be no more cities, but only villages in which there is no difference between people. No one shall be considered higher or better than the other, because that causes division, haughtiness and turmoil. Instead of that, everyone in the land shall live in total equality.

There will be no more images, wayside crosses, chapels or church buildings. No more masses shall be held in the land, because they are an abomination before God, a totally anti-Christian rite.

The Word of God shall be preached faithfully and in all truth throughout Gaismair's Land. All complicated doctrines and religious arguments about nothing shall be thrown out, and the books that describe them burnt.

Every *Gmaind* (*Gmaa* in the dialect of South Tyrol) shall maintain its own order, electing its own administrators and judges. No administrator shall get paid for his work.

None of our young men shall serve in the empire's army any more. Neither shall they report when mustered. But we will keep

one band of young men, most likely in Brixen, for our self defence.

We will educate our children and young people, building a school of higher education in which nothing but the Word of God is taught. Three learned men of this school, men that know the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures (the only source from which the righteousness of God may be learned) shall help to govern the land according to God's commands, as is fitting for Christian people.

People shall continue to bring their tithes and perhaps pay rents for a time. But what they bring shall be used honourably and only according to need. What is left over shall be given to the poor. Nobody shall be allowed to go from house to house, begging, a practice that will eliminate many idle people, and those that are healthy enough to work but only refuse to do so.

The cloisters and monasteries among us shall be turned into hospitals, some where the sick may be healed through medical care, others where the aged may be cared for, and still others where one may teach and raise up needy children in an honourable way. The needs of the poor and the homeless shall be met from the tithes that come in.

Where people cannot give a tenth, everyone shall faithfully give according to his ability. If more gets collected than what is needed, a full account shall be given of how it is spent. Specially appointed men shall see that the needs of the poor and homeless are met—not only giving them food and drink, but also clothes and whatever else they need to live.

Four men shall take charge of all that pertains to defence, to the care of the people, and to the management of the land. They shall call the people to serve as needed, to repair the mountain passes, the roads, bridges, water sources, highways and all that needs attention in the land.

Swamps, grasslands, and other unused places shall be put to use for the common good, not letting the claims of a few selfish people stand in the way. All the marshes from Meran to Trent could be dried up to support many more fat cattle, milk cows, and



The village of Ora (Auer) in the Val di Adige (Etsch Valley) where the marshes have been drained and the land put to use as Michael Gaismair and his friends proposed.

sheep. One could raise much more grain there, and provide the land with meat.

Nobody shall buy and sell for profit among us, so the sin of usury (paying interest on money) will not tarnish anyone. But to avoid a lack of basic items, and to keep good order among us—nothing getting overpriced and nobody cheated—we shall pick one spot where we will establish all handcrafts and present their products for sale: cloth, headgear, brassware, blanket material, shoes, and whatever else is needed. A responsible person shall be put in charge of all this, and whatever cannot be obtained in our country, such as spices and other imported goods, he should order from abroad.

Here and there, throughout the land, we need to have stores where all goods are made available, not for profit, but at their real value. Great care shall be taken that all is done fairly, and that all goods are presented for what they are. In this way the money we use will stay within our land and be of value to the common people.

All chalices and treasures shall be taken out of the churches, melted down, coined, and used for the common good. The goods

of the noblemen we drive out of the land shall be sold, the money saved, and used to pay our expenses.

Regarding the mines, we as a country shall take control of all property and assets that have belonged to wealthy families like the Fuggers, the Hochstetters, the Baumgartners, the Pumbels, and others like them. This includes all smelters and tunnels, all inventory of ore, both silver and copper and everything else that belongs to the operations of these families in this country.

We take it because they have gained everything through unjust means, through wicked usury, through the shedding of blood, and the exploitation of the common people—the workers and the poor. They used underweight coins to pay their men. They charged unfair prices on company goods, taking large amounts out of the wages of their workmen, and if customers complained about underweight orders, the workmen had to stand good for the difference.

They marked up all merchandise they had for sale, burdening the whole world with their un-Christlike usury, building up princely financial empires for themselves. For this they must not go unpunished, and of what they have taken unfairly they must be relieved.

After this a responsible person, chosen by all, must be put in charge of the mines—one that will handle all things fairly and give a yearly account.⁵

Wherever it got read among the farmers, the mine workers, the young men and women of South Tyrol, the *Landesordnung* brought excitement and debate. So simple! So true! Instinctively the people knew it had to be of God.

But Ferdinand upped the bounty on Michael Gaismair to 1000 Gulden, dead or alive, and schemed on how to get him assassinated. In Sterzing they beheaded his brother Hans. Imperial troops flooded into South Tyrol where after a few compromises and agreements (Ferdinand taking direct control of

⁵ Abridged from *Landsordnung so Michel Gaismair gmacht hat im 1526. Jahr*

the Prince-Bishop's lands) the farmers capitulated. Leonhard von Völs resumed his building projects. The monks returned to the Neustift. The Fuggers charged higher prices than ever for what they sold, and the miners trudged back to work.

Was it all over? Would Gaismair's Land ever become reality?

Nobody in the Antholz Valley and the rest of South Tyrol's villages and mountain farms knew for sure.

The Klausner Nest

With the return of imperial troops to South Tyrol came orders to "stab and kill without mercy" all supporters of Michael Gaismair. "Burn their houses," the mandate said. "Those that have fled, chase their wives and children after them."⁶

But the dream of peace and justice under the rule of God did not so easily die. It went underground. Like a smouldering fire it grew and spread. It warmed the hearts of the common people, who for the hope and joy it brought them, just had to meet and talk about it in low voices, in back bedrooms, at night.

One place they met was Matthias's house in Klausen, halfway between Brixen and Völs am Schlern in the Eisack valley.

For years Matthias had been a canon priest at Innichen, east of Bruneck in the Puster Valley. Like most priests he had a mistress and children. But after he supported the Gaismairs and spent time in prison he lost his job. For some time he lived in Bavaria where he learned how to grind knives. Now he had come back, married his mistress and lived with his children on a back street in Klausen—many visitors slipping in and out of his door after dark.

In Matthias's house, the people of Klausen and its surrounding villages heard strange wonderful things—just as exciting as the

⁶ From a decree of Ferdinand to the Tirolean government at Innsbruck, 18 October, 1525.

Landesordnung, or even more so. From Bavaria, Matthias had brought a hand-written book. His wife, who knew letters well, read it to their back room full of people, night after night. Gilg, the man who kept the bath house came with his wife and family. So did Ulrich the miller, a weaver named Hans, Peter the barrel-binder (at whose house by the Klausen bridge they also met from time to time), and a good number of others, farmers, shepherds, vine dressers, even one who had been a policeman for the Prince-Bishop at Latzfons.

During the day, Mathias spoke to his customers about the things he had heard in Bavaria, while Hänsel, his half grown son took the book from family to family that wanted to see and read it too.⁷

No, the “Klausner Nest,” as the authorities came to call it, was far from exterminated or dead. What is more, it was far from the only one of its kind.

The Nest on the Ritten

Right under Leonhard von Völs’s nose, right in Völs am Schlern and in his castle at Prösels, lived many who had hoped and dreamed of Gaismair’s Land. He suspected as much and kept a sharp eye open for signs of this “new Hexerei (witchcraft).” But much went on in Prösels, and across the river on the Ritten plateau, that Old Leonhard never found out.

Long after Ferdinand and the Habsburg army had subdued South Tyrol, bringing the farmers back into their well-accustomed bondage, Hans and Anna Gasser, Ulrich and Margarethe Kobl and others on the Ritten continued to get together to talk and pray.

⁷ This book, no doubt, was of the underground prophetic writings popular at the time in Germany but ruthlessly suppressed by the authorities that saw in them the seeds of social upheaval.



The Renon (Ritten), looking across the Eisack Valley to Völs am Schlern and the tall Schlernrücken on the right. The chapel on the picture is that of Maria Saal, close to the house rented in 1913 by Eberhard and Emmy Arnold, founders of the Bruderhof Community, while he recovered from tuberculosis.

All of the Ritten belonged to wealthy families that lived in Bozen and in castles along the river road. These landowners needed many farmers to handle their cattle, to plant their wheat, to tend their vineyards and keep their apple trees trimmed. And it was these barefooted farmers in linen shirts, these women that knew how to stuff sausages and cook soap, that gathered in the Gasser home after long days of work. From here and there around the Ritten came old Gall Püchler's wife with her married children, the Hans Langegger and Hans Portz families (Hans Portz, like Hans Gasser, having fought with the Gaismairs after Brixen fell). Benedikt Kamperer—an ex-priest whom some accidentally kept calling “Pater”—came with his wife Agathe. He could read Latin and knew what the Bible said. Others came with picture books from Germany that told about God in a way

that even the children and those that didn't read could understand.

The spirit of hope for better times kept the meetings alive on the Ritten, but the "Gaismair people" that gathered there also swapped news that came across the Alps from Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, and it did not sound good.

Right after the lovely *Landesordnung* started to make its rounds, came the news that all along the Rhine, through the Low Countries, in Salzburg and Bavaria—wherever the farmers had risen up to establish God's justice and peace, they had miserably failed. The Roman Catholic rulers of Austria and the Low Countries, but above all Martin Luther and the Protestants of Germany (who now believed it was right to be rich and God would bless them for it) had ruthlessly vanquished the farmers and swept their cause out the door.

Across the German lands of Europe 130,000 farmers, small tradesmen and their families had lost their lives in the struggle—many through the fighting, many more through the starvation and disease that followed. Entire villages stood empty and the land grew up in brush. This, while interest rates shot up and inflation reached unprecedented heights. Governments borrowed hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of Florins to subdue the poor and keep them under control, while the money-people, Jakob der Reiche and the Fugger family in particular, grew wealthier than ever before.

Would unrighteousness, would "enlightened capitalism" take over and rule the whole world? The farmers on the Ritten cried out to God and hoped otherwise. So did Michael Kürschner who had taken Michael Gaismair's job as court secretary to old Leonhard von Völs.

The "Other Michael"

While the new secretary, the "other Michael" at Prösels, listened

to Old Leonhard and wrote down what he said—orders here, a reprimand there, more requests for materials for the ever-evolving chapel of the Heilige Anna—he thought, and wondered. Where was God in all this? What did it mean to be a Christian? Was it a matter of belief, something one did in church with music, artwork and ritual, or was it how one lived?

From the Inn valley came more disturbing news. That is, they disturbed Old Leonard one way and his secretary the other way.

Some people, even some priests and a mining engineer among them, they said, had rejected “Christendom” altogether. They had lumped the state church, the government, the landowners and bankers, the religious orders—everything and everyone—together and rejected it all as from the devil. They had disowned the pope and religious ceremony, even the veneration of Mary and the saints. Then they had baptised one another, grown men and women, and founded a new religion.

Old Leonard did not need to ask more questions. This new religion, he concluded at once, is rank Hexerei. Did not the Schlern witches renounce Mary and the saints to make their pact with the devil? Well, here we have it again! Didn’t Kachler Hans and his crew gather on the hills at night? Just watch—that is the way of these new *Wiedertäufer* (rebaptisers/Anabaptists)! Mark my word they eat babies and dance with the devil too.

Michael doubted it. In fact, the more he heard of what was happening in the Inn valley the more he suspected the “new religion” was really the old one, the real one, whose peace and justice Michael Gaismair had longed so earnestly to restore, but couldn’t.

When the report came of large numbers of miners at Schwaz turning to the new religion, a new revolt in the making, perhaps, Michael wondered if Hans Gasser and the rest of the “Gaismair people” up on the Ritten might know something about it. Was this “new religion” for real? Was it true?

If only Michael would have known about the . . .

Transformation on the Ritten

It all began to happen when Bärbl, one of Gall Püchler's daughters, visited Chur, just across the Engadiner Alps in Switzerland. There she met some of the "dangerous" new believers herself and heard what they said. On her way back in early spring, just after the passes opened and the apple trees began to bloom, Bärbl brought an ex-priest, Georg, and his wife down through the Vintschgau (the valley of the Etsch) with her.

Everyone on the Ritten liked "Blue sleeve Georg" (Blauärmel, Blaurock) as people called him. A tall man with black hair he spoke with conviction, and what he said about God and the world made sense. For the first time, listening to Georg, the farmers on the Ritten began to understand who Jesus—the "real Jesus"—really was, what he taught and what he did. It rang true and they loved it. But there was more.

Both the ex-priest Georg from Switzerland and another Jörg, a tradesman named Jörg Zaunring from the Inn Valley, told in Hans Gasser's house what Jesus said about a completely new and different life. First comes repentance, they said. Laying off the old life. Then one gets baptised and a completely different life—eternal Life—begins. Not in some hazy future, but right here, right now. On the Ritten!⁸

It took time to sink in. But one after the next, faces crowded around the light on late evenings, lit up with sudden understanding. Some with tears, some with expressions of shock or delight. So simple! Really? So that's what its all about! Once

⁸ To know what the first Anabaptists taught about conversion and a new life, see the letter from Hans Hut at the end of this chapter. Georg Blaurock testified to the same before the Zürich Council, 6-8 November, 1525, and Jörg Zaunring in his *Kurze Anzeigung des Abendmahls Christi*, published in *Hutterischen Episteln*, V3 510-515.

it clicked, they all spoke excitedly one with another and hurried to tell their friends.

The farmers were right! The Habsburgs, the Fuggers, the landowners with their castles, the bishop with his churches will all come down! God hates their works and will destroy them utterly. But what will take their place is something unspeakably more glorious than “Gaismair’s Land.” It is the Kingdom of God on earth. And the man that brings it to pass is someone infinitely greater than Peter Passler or Michael Gaismair. It is Jesus, the Son of God himself!

Not Gaismair’s Land, but *Jesus’ Land*. Of course! “Why didn’t anyone tell us about it before?” the farmers on the Ritten wondered. “The first Christians already lived in it a over a thousand years ago!”

Would Jesus help the farmers in South Tyrol? Would Jesus take the miners’ side? At first it seemed almost too wild to be true. But the more they heard about the real Jesus and his real kingdom on earth the more clearly the Ritten farmers saw it: Jesus’ Land does not come through violence, but through conviction and the Truth, through hearts and lives transformed. The weapons of Jesus’ Land are not the weapons of this world. Neither do his followers take the seat of worldly power, for in Jesus’ Land good overcomes evil.

For the time being, Jesus’ Land co-exists and overlaps with the governments of this world. But “this world in its present form is passing away.” All its seats of power and finance will be overthrown, and only Jesus’ Land will remain.

No geographical boundary marks the limits of Jesus’ Land. It is universal. Infinitely greater than Michael Gaismair and his noblest plans for South Tyrol. Wherever Jesus rules his kingdom comes.

Jesus Land, unlike Gaismair’s Land needs no recognition or royal approval. It already has its charter from God. Its present is

secure, its future guaranteed—in new heavens and on a new earth where *Gerechtigkeit* (justice/righteousness) dwells.

Once they knew Jesus, and understood what he had in mind, the Ritten farmers could place their hope, their future in none other. The real Jesus would help them! And they knew the Jesus they had heard of before, the one hanging on wayside crosses and the walls of their village churches, was a fake—a make-believe Saviour with a false gospel, the “doctrine of devils” the Bible said was accursed!

So, while Michael Kürschner worked and wondered at Prösels, the whole atmosphere of the Ritten changed. Inner peace, all threats notwithstanding, took the place of discouragement and fear. Hope, like the Alpine meadows in May, flowered again. Bärbl Gasser with her parents, Hans and Anna, and their hired maid Lucia, asked to get baptised. Then Ulrich and Margarethe Kobl did the same, with Anton and Christoph Meier, Benedikt Sackmann, and Matthias and Margarethe Kirschbaumer.

Hans and Barbara Portz from Tiers, a mountain village southeast of Völs on the cliff hanging trail to the Santner Pass, got baptised, as did the widow Christina Töllingerin from the Penon, the weaver Hans Langegger with his wife, Matthias Waldner and Leonhard Fundnatscher.

Is it True?

All it took was a report from across the river that a new “Anabaptist synagogue” had formed on the Ritten, for Old Leonard to mobilise Prösels, Völs am Schlern, and the whole Eisack Valley from Bozen to Brixen to stamp it out at once.

The police caught Hans Gasser at home. As a “Gaismair man” he had long been under suspicion. On the same raid they caught Hans Schneider, Matthias Kirschbaumer, Margarethe Kobl and a woman from the Landsberg named Appolonia Nidermayr. Just before the police got there Margarethe’s husband, Ulrich, with

Mang Karger and Gall Püchler's son-in-law had escaped into the forest. Hans Portz fled with Anton Mair, his wife, his sister and their hired man. But where could the fugitives go?

The police soon caught Ulrich, who escaped when a castle servant (a young girl) brought him a file and he cut his window bars. All the rest faced torture and the court at Prösels. Many pleaded for the prisoners' release. Even the village priest said they were good people and it would be wrong to kill them. But Old Leonhard, with Innsbruck's support, could not wait to see the matter concluded. On the third of June, 1528 the smoke rolled up from Prösels again. Not witches this time but Anabaptists, all except Hans Gasser, kept for further interrogation, and the women who only got tied into a bag and drowned.⁹

One month afterward Jörg Zaunring baptised Michael Kürschner, court secretary to Leonard von Völs. He had no more questions. He lost his job and the believers on the Ritten promptly chose him to be their "servant of the Word."

New Birth—New Body of Believers

Immediately following the first baptisms on the Ritten, the believers began breaking bread and drinking wine one with another in Hans Gasser's house. The real Jesus was with them and they loved him. They loved one another too—even more after the scattering and the burnings. Explaining to others what took place among them, Jörg Zaunring wrote:

The world says the sacrament on the altar is the body of Christ. They believe it because Christ said, "This is my body." But real Christians do not worship a piece of bread. They see the body of Christ in three dimensions, of which the bread is only a picture. . .

⁹ Margarethe Kobl's drowning was postponed until she had given birth to her baby. Contrary to our time, the unborn still enjoyed a "right to life" in the 1500s.

The Scriptures speak of the church community as Christ's body—the body of which all true believers are members and of which he is the head. . . . This is Christ's body that still lives and suffers on earth. It is the body in the bread, for just like the bread gets broken, this body gets tortured, hanged, drowned, beheaded and persecuted wherever it goes. This body, this bread we all eat together, is the body in which Jesus lives. He lives in this body, his holy temple, and not in your heaps of stone.¹⁰

As in the first jubilant days after the fall of Brixen, the believers on the Ritten gathered in great meetings in the woods, whenever they had the chance (usually on feast days when everyone else went to town). They even used the old Michael Gaismair word—*Gmaind/Gmaa*, in plural *Gmaani*—to describe their coming together.

The Gmaani in the woods, held during the summer, could last from three or four days to a week or longer. Everyone gave what they could to the *Säckler* (the treasurer and planner) who decided how much food they might need, how and where to prepare it, and who should help. From forty to one hundred and fifty might come. At one Gmaa the gathered believers consumed fifty loaves of bread, half a bushel of nuts, two oxen (butchered and roasted on the spot) and a jug of wine. Besides this they drove a cow up to the meeting place to provide the little ones with milk.

Valentin Lukhner, a captured brother told the court in Brixen a little about the believers' Gmaani, carefully telling them only what they already knew:

At Peggelhauber's place we held Gmaa in the stable. Around seventy people were there. Peggelhauber did not know about it, but his wife did. I often went down to Peggelhauber's for supplies and paid for them. But after Peggelhauber got arrested and had to pay a fine of one hundred guilders he never wanted to give us anything again.

¹⁰ *Hutterischen Episteln*, V3 510-515



Farmers on the Ritten and surrounding heights lived clustered together, as at Glaning, near Jenesien, pictured here. In houses, like the one still standing to the left of the chapel, they shared space with their animals, under roofs of wooden shingles or straw. Women did their cooking on open fires, and meat hung in the hole through which smoke escaped from the roof. Children played on hard packed clay floors, and the warmth of the animals (cows, goats, chickens, several oxen and a pig) kept everyone snug on beds of hay during long winter nights.

On the Freiberg, we held Gmaa for about eight or nine weeks. We got our food and supplies at Flaas in the Sterntal, Jenesien district. There we had five households—at Epp’s place, Wegmann’s place, at old Piganer’s, with the stonemason’s wife, and at someone else’s house whose name I cannot tell you. We taught the people while we ate and lived under the open sky. We butchered two of Epp’s oxen and ate them. He drove them up through Dürnholz.¹¹

Sitting in circles on sunny Alpine heights the brothers and sisters sang in the Gmaani. Their children also learned the songs—new words sung to familiar folk tunes. Many of the songs told stories from the Bible. Others were songs of admonishment, praise, or even old legends brought to new life,

¹¹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V4 27

such as the flower of eternal youth (given here in prose translation):

Ein Blümlein auf der Haiden . . . Little flower on the heath¹²—
was it Jesus? No doubt for that I suffer anguish until I see it
again. I leave the world, I hate my own designs. I choose the
narrow trail back to the heath. But where are you? I cannot find
you on earth, but in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Little flower, your beautiful light shines on me. I will give my
life, I will die, in hopes of making you my own!

And if I give my life the Kingdom comes to me. How can that be
true! He died for us a sharp and bitter death. He fought for us,
chivalrously, to free us from distress.

Wake up young hearts! Watch you do not miss the lovely flower!
It cures sin. It drives trouble away. Unlike any other plant, it
dispels your sadness all at once.

Precious flower, gift of God to sinful souls! Flower of grace in
the Holy Ghost, may you be praised in the Kingdom of Heaven!
May we praise you eternally!

Do you want the Little Flower? Go out up on the heath. Tell the
world, “Goodbye, I’m leaving! May it go well with you.” Take
leave of your flesh and blood. Tell them, “I have given myself to
God to break my own will.”

No one finds the flower without denying self. But when that
happens I rise—no matter what I feel, love or sorrow—straight to
Jesus, my Lord! So world, goodbye! It cannot be otherwise.

I know that leaving the world for Christ will bring me its
rejection. The world will torture and try to kill me. But I will not
stay with the world! For that I cry to you, Lord: Free me from sin
and death and hell!

Christians, are you on the right way? Do not give up! Do not look
back! Pay no attention to the yelping and growling of those that
fight over misinterpretations of the Word. They led us out of

¹² The *Haiden*, Alpine heath lands, known for their lovely flowers in the
spring, above the tree line.

Egypt, but they led us wrong. As soon as they saw the turbulent sea they stayed behind, and now they call, “Come back! Don’t go so far in following God’s Truth. It won’t work!” But saying this they only please the pope and his horde. Little by little they go back, bowing and scraping, to him.

Christians, go ahead! Stay on the right way! God will protect you and shine through the darkness ahead with his Word. Then far out up on the heath, when the grass turns green, look, a stream flows from the rock! Pass through it with bare feet and the water of repentance will wash you from sin and heal your heart. Then you will come to a garden of spices on the other side. High walls surround it. None can enter but those that find their way in through the gate surrounded with thorns—but you see the beautiful flower on the far side! You must break your way through to it. The thorns will prick you and draw blood. The gate is narrow and very low. No one can squeeze through it except the one totally given to God in humility. Then you will come to the narrow way but look! The flower is before you! Pick it! It is yours!

The root of the flower is Jesse, its stem is David. On it the Spirit united with a pure virgin broke forth in full bloom, true God become man, dying so we might live: Jesus the Rose.

Praise God for Christ his Son, the Rose of our salvation! Promised by God through the mouth of his prophets, life comes through faith in him. Rose of three colours, white, green and red, that stand for faith, hope, and love, we burrow like pure doves through its scented depths to find our way into the Kingdom of Heaven!

Through Jesus Christ, true Son of God, eternal Bishop of souls, we come to life. Let us give our hearts to him! Let us stay with him and we will share with him eternal joy!¹³

Because they did not have songbooks, and many could not read, a brother with a good voice read two lines at a time (most songs

¹³ *Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, 321

even longer than this one—entire messages in their own right) after which the Gmaa would sing them.¹⁴

Families and young people, coming to the Gmaani spent their time between meetings preparing food, cutting firewood and butchering oxen while they visited one with another and got to know the strangers among them. Much news got exchanged. Letters from believers in prison got read for the instruction and encouragement of all. One of the first of these letters to circulate in South Tyrol came by way of the Inn Valley from Bavaria. A believer named Hans Hut wrote it, and it got read over and over in the Gmaani on the hills:

Letter from Hans Hut

In this last and most dangerous time, God has begun to build up his church, his bride again. Out of Christendom's devastation and ruins, out of land that has long lain idle, he is once more bearing children. In many places, here and there, he bears them again to true love and faith through the Holy Ghost. So it is most necessary for us to understand the example and life of Christ—the form in which all this takes place.

Most dearly beloved in the Lord, whatever you do, don't listen to the shouts of those that preach for money! If you want to know what God says and what the Scriptures really mean, go to the poor. Go to the ones the world rejects, those that men call revolutionaries, dangerous devils, like they called Jesus and the apostles—go listen to them!

No one learns the Truth unless he walks in the footprints of Christ, through tribulation. For in adversity and the cross one learns Christ—certainly not in such dens of mischief and murder as Wittenberg or Paris!

Do not expect to learn Truth from those with castles and large estates. God's Truth never dwells with Brother Easy-life! Our new Evangelicals, those clever Bible students, have knocked the

¹⁴ The practice of *Ansagen*, that continues in German-speaking Anabaptist communities today.

pope, the monks and priests out of their seats. But with that accomplished, they have fallen into the arms of the great whore of Babylon, into her pomp and pride, her envy and greed and violence, with a passion even greater than before. May God have mercy! They have set up an even more wicked papacy than Rome—a government directed against the poor.

Not wanting their ignorance, their hypocrisy revealed, they cannot tolerate common people confronting them with the Scriptures. So they rave and rant, calling everyone that doesn't believe like them the worst of names—shameless rogues, devils, false prophets and revolutionaries.

Very well, let them blow their tops for as long as it lasts! Let them buddy up to their worldly powerful friends (who scratch their itching ears) and be bold! But in a short time, in a very little while, their end will come and all shall see their shame.

Their great “wisdom” shall be revealed for the stupidity it really is. For it has pleased God to save the world through the preaching of the simple, the foolish, the so-called “rebellious masses.” And no matter how much they rave and rant against them, the time will come when all rich and greedy men must give way to the blessed poor.

Not Through Words of Wisdom

Christ revealed the secret of the Kingdom of God to common people through parables. He spoke of ordinary work-related things, familiar to them. What he never did was point them to books of theology like religious experts do in our time.

Christ taught people while working with them. To farmers he spoke about seeds and weeds. . . . To husbandmen he spoke about grapes and vines. To seamstresses he spoke about patching clothes. To merchants he spoke about buying pearls. To hired hands he spoke about reaping and threshing grain. To woodcutters he spoke about chopping down trees, and to shepherds he spoke about sheep. To household managers he spoke about buying and selling goods, to butchers he spoke about meat, to secretaries he spoke about keeping accounts, to mothers he spoke about having children. And Paul, in his turn, explains

the entire nature of the church by describing the human body. So, we see that the Gospel of the Kingdom gets preached, not through men's wisdom but through ordinary created things.

A Tree and its Branches

Carpenters do not build houses of trees, but of hewn timber. Neither does God. Before God can use us trees to build his house, he chops us down and trims off our branches. That is, he cuts us off from the world and trims our desires away. For our desires, like the branches of a tree, are many, reaching out here and there. One branch reaches toward God, another to wife and children, a third one to money, a fourth one to fields and farms, a fifth one to honour and prestige. God must cut all of them off in order to build his house with us.

The Book of Creation

Creation, with all its works, is the book from which we should study. Let us read it carefully! All of God's chosen people, from the beginning of the world to Moses, studied in creation's book alone. From it they learned by nature the law of God, written in their hearts, for God's entire law is described by the things he created. Even the heathen that have never seen anything written about God know his laws in nature and go by them. . . . A little light shines through God's law in our hearts and it shines in the hearts of the heathen too.

Who Should Get Baptised?

Whoever gets baptised must be willing to carry and suffer all things that God, through Christ, will lay upon him. He must be willing to forsake the world and stick with the Lord. What is more, he needs to take baptism as the seal of a covenant between himself, God, and the church community (Gmaind) through which he received it. The Lord says what is bound on earth is bound in heaven. But no one may get bound into the church community unless he has heard and learned the Gospel and is willing to obey it. . . .

Such a person may be assured, through baptism, that God has accepted him as a child, that he is a brother or sister to Christ, and a member of Christ's body. With a true heart he seeks this unity

and the will of God. For God wants to gather all that honour his covenant more than sacrifice.

Real Baptism

The sign and the essence of baptism must always be kept clearly separate. The sign is given through the Church, through a servant of the Word, like John the Baptist gave it to Christ. But the essence of baptism—true baptism—comes afterward. That is the water of tribulation, followed by the comfort of the Holy Ghost. God lets no one sink or drown in this baptism. He leads a person into hell, but pulls him back out of it again. First he kills, then he makes alive. That is how God baptises, and it is through this phase of baptism that true believers get cleansed, bound together in peace, and brought into one body. Through this baptism they are saved.

The essence of true baptism does not lie in words or outward ritual, but in the power of God. True believers get transformed, their attitudes, their mouths and hearts, their entire life and bearing changes. It all becomes new—a brand new life—through the power of God, at work in the Gospel of Christ.

The world and the educated preachers of our time go around with a bad gospel that changes nobody. No lives are transformed. They use their gospel, not to help others but to plague them with it. Just look at how it goes! But blessed are those that hear the Word and do it. Christ's sheep hear his voice and follow him.

Whoever wants to rule with Christ in the end must get ruled by him now. Whoever seeks God's will for his life must abandon his own. Whoever wants to find God and hold onto him must let go and lose what he now has.

The whole world speaks of freedom nowadays, but its people continue in bondage, slaves of their own flesh. They won't let go of anything earthly but always want more. Oh how artfully they cover up greed with fine Christian words! They say, "Let everyone stay in the profession in which he was called." But if that is so, why didn't Peter keep on in the fishing business? Why didn't Matthew keep on collecting taxes? Why did Jesus tell the rich young man to sell what he had and follow him?

If it is good and right for our preachers to have great private wealth, that young man could have nicely kept his fortune and been a Christian anyway. Oh Zachaeus, why did you part with your riches so easily? According to what our preachers say, you could have served Christ very nicely without letting go of them at all!

Faith Purified

In the beginning our faith is like silver, still mixed in with the ore—with lots of rubbish and dirt. We think it is good silver until we get it tested. Then all that rubbish has to go. That is why the apostles said, “We believe, Lord, but help our unbelief!”

A new believer, in the beginning, often wavers between faith and unbelief. He goes through such anxiety, doubts and inner turmoil that he often imagines himself cast out and rejected by God. Nothing can comfort him. He feels himself locked into hell. This is what Christ called the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Nothing can cheer or help a person in this condition. That is, nothing except the one who led him into it. All he can do is wait until the comforter, the Holy Spirit comes. Then he breaks out in unspeakably great joy! He forgets everything worldly. All the world offers he counts as mud. He leaps from the depths of hell into courage and joy with the Holy Ghost!

The New Birth

Now let us speak of the new birth. To get born again is not the act of water baptism, the outer witness of which Jesus spoke. Rather, it is the bathing of the soul. It is that inner washing through which our evil desires get scrubbed from our hearts and float away. It is what happens when lust gets killed and the spirit of rebellion gets driven out.

In Noah’s time God baptised the whole world, washing away its sins through the flood. In Moses’ time God baptised the hosts of Egypt that sank like lead to the bottom of the sea. All of these perished in their baptism because they had not let go of the world with its ungodly desires. But the chosen of God—Noah’s family and the Israelites in this picture—survive God’s baptism to stand in safety on the shore again.

This is saving baptism—not the kind in which we go under and drown, but through which we let go of everything, the final battle between us and God, in which he saves us from the wind and waves of evil desire to live in triumph with him. . . . Then the sea grows calm at his command. The sun of God shines on the waters. He reaches out, we take his hand—we can see now in the glorious light of Truth—and walk with him into eternal life.

True baptism is nothing other but the war we fight with sin, as long as we live.

Sweet Christ—Bitter Christ

Christ says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple and learn about God must let the Father punish him for his disobedience. He must take my cross on his neck and follow me.” No one can become a brother of Christ, or get accepted as a child of God, any other way. Christ has many members in his body. But no one can be a member unless he is willing to carry the work and suffering of Christ the Head—unless he gets baptised with Christ in earthly tribulation.

Many get upset by this fact. They cannot stand such “weakness” in Christ. But no one can have the sweet Christ of the future unless he tastes the bitter Christ of his purification today. Truthfully, the life of Christ is so bitter, his teachings so high, his manner so unusual and severe that one may say it is a rare and blessed man that does not take offence in him!

Baptism by Water and Fire

Mark and Luke describe a baptism of fire and spirit. John writes about water and spirit. Mark mentions neither fire nor water. But what Matthew calls the Holy Spirit and Luke calls fire is just what John is writing about, and they all fit together. They all mean the same thing. Water and fire, in the Scriptures, picture the onslaught of the world. Through water and fire all things get purified. Flammable things get cleansed with water, but hard things like gold, silver, copper, iron and tin get melted and purified in the flames.

Through the flood and fire of God we get cleansed of our impurities and learn the obedience of Christ. . . . Whoever refuses



Nova Ponente (Deutschnofen), gathering place of believers, on the heights above Leifers.

to hear God's voice in the water must hear it in consuming fire.

God's Purpose in Tribulation

We learn about God the Father through the things he made. In nature, in all living creatures, we see the indisputable evidence of his power. . . . But we must learn more about God to be saved. We must learn God's righteousness through Christ, and experience his mercy through the work of the Holy Ghost.

If these last two dimensions of God stay hidden from us, the first one helps us nothing. God needs to produce his righteousness in us through Christ—that is, by letting us learn obedience, through suffering, with him. And only when that gets accomplished do we see in our trials the boundless mercy of God that brings us to salvation. That, for us, is the comfort of his Holy Ghost.

Through tribulation and the cross our desire for worldly things gets taken from us. And once—in the midst of that tribulation—we begin to see and understand God's mercy, the light of Christ arises to shine in our hearts. It reveals the Truth, previously hidden beneath the rubbish of worldly thoughts and desires. And what do we see then?

We see God almighty, who created us. We see Jesus, in whom we are tried, purified, circumcised, made righteous, and fit to be children of God. When the Truth sets us free we have free access to God. We become one with Christ and all the members of his body.

One church community, one body of Christ—all that hate sin and renounce the world finds their way together within it. All subject themselves to Christ. Goodness and mercy abound. Everyone holds all things in common and no one claims stuff for himself anymore!

From the world's beginning we have waited on this. The prophets have long described it, but it has never come into perfect fulfilment. The Spirit has not yet gotten poured out on all flesh, and not all men have learned God's ways. The human race has yet to acknowledge and live by the will of God. But all this will not happen, his goodness will not fill us, until the world gets humbled through great tribulation, through terror, distress and pain.¹⁵

In wonderful contrast to continual danger at home, the believers on the Ritten and down the Eisack Valley came to love their time together in the Gmaani. From one secret gathering to another Michael Kürschner travelled as Jesus' Land took shape in the lower Eisack Valley. All its citizens lived by the rules of its glorious suffering Saviour King. Just like Michael Gaismair had hoped and dreamed, they lived in Gmaani here and there, in total equality, where everyone cared for the other. A land freed from the tyranny of wealth, the bondage of poverty, the curse of rank and special privileges for the noble-born.

Every child (new believer) got born into the *Ehrbarkeit*, a child of the King, in Jesus' Land. Yet everyone was poor, claiming nothing as his own, just like their King was poor. Giving it all up, letting it all go, for the good of the rest.

¹⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 72-102

Reading their newly discovered Scriptures in this light, the stories Jesus told and the life he lived—as described in the Gospels—made perfect sense to the believers of the Eisack Valley. And why shouldn't it? Was this not the Gospel of the Kingdom (the “good news of Jesus' Land”)! As if scales had fallen from their eyes, they saw the account of the first Christians in Acts, not as the story of a new religion getting established on earth (the “church religion” they had come to despise), but the wonderful story of a new nation. The Kingdom of God whose insignia is the “mark of Christ” on their foreheads, whose weapons are not the weapons of this world, but mightier ones—the judgement and fire of God—through which the Habsburgs, the money-people, all Prince-Bishops and tyrants would fall.

Down the valley at Philip Koffler's place in Vill by Neumarkt, in Leifers and Kaltern and Kurtatsch an der Weinstrasse—town after town along the ancient Roman road—Michael Kürschner baptised believers out of the Habsburg's kingdom into the Kingdom of God. Of this, Valentin Lukhner testified: “On the Breitenberg, at Leifers below Bozen, we also held a Gmaa. Maier from the Ritten, and Christl Alseider from Villnöss, brought the food. Ul and his wife got baptised, but later recanted.¹⁶ We butchered and ate two of Maier's oxen after he left.”¹⁷

On the first Sunday after the Assumption of Mary, in 1528, the believers held an unusually large Gmaa at Deutschnofen. Michael baptised Strölen and Wölffl from the Deutschnofen pasture lands, Martin from Nockh, and during the next few months “over a hundred” more.

¹⁶ In his statement to the authorities, Valentin Lukhner carefully spoke the truth without revealing anything significant. The only names he mentioned were of people who had already fled the country, gotten killed, or who had recanted.

¹⁷ *Hutterischen Episteln* V4 26-27

But Old Leonard and his crew stayed just as busy. Before Christmas he caught Hans Mair's wife Magdalena, Wölffl's sister Elisabeth, Leonhard Fundnatscher and his wife, Christoph Messner, Melchior Schneider and Hans Völ. Standard procedure (the one he perfected during the witch trials) followed. First the "thumbscrew," to find out if any would talk, revealing the whereabouts of other believers while their thumbs were put in a vise and slowly turned flat. If that did not succeed, the "kluege Schnur" (smart ropes) followed. Leonhard's men bound the prisoners hand and foot, from top to bottom, the men through the groin, and pulled them tighter and tighter, with a loop like an Australian "truckie knot" until the ropes cut in to the bone. If that still did not produce the desired confessions, he strung them up by the rope and hung weights to the prisoners' feet—heavier and heavier weights, until at the last stage their feet were tied to a ring in the floor while the men pulled up on their wrists (through a pulley hanging from a beam) until their ligaments tore and their insides came apart. "Stretched until the sun could shine through them," in popular expression.¹⁸

Leonard Fundnatscher's wife, Christoph and Melchior did not make it all the way through and recanted. But Magdalena and Elisabeth, Leonhard himself and Hans Völ endured it all and got chained to anchors pounded into the ground, with dry grass and bunches of reeds piled up with firewood around them, and burned alive. Four others followed soon afterward at Kaltern, eleven at Bozen, nine at Neumarkt, five more at Völs am Schlern, three at Terlen, two at Schlanders in the Vinschgau, nineteen at Gufidaun, seven at Klausen. . . .

On the ninth of March 1529 they led Hans Gasser from the Ritten out to be burned. Not many years earlier he had fought for "Gaismair's Land" and escaped. Now he fought for Jesus' Land and died. But the believers did not die clawing and

¹⁸ One believer, Hans Pürchner, got stretched until all his joints were pulled apart and they had to tie him to a log to set him up for his beheading.



The Domplatz at Brixen, where Peter Passler was to have met his death, and where many believers were burned alive in the years following.

screaming like the terrified “witches.” They had found a life for this world and the next that flames could not destroy. They died calmly, knowing that the work in South Tyrol was under way. The war had begun.

3

The War

Thousands of people crowded into the old brick and stone meetinghouses of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during the summer of 1933 to hear the missionaries speak before they left for Africa. Groffdale, Weaverland, Ephrata, Landis Valley, every church wanted to get in on the excitement. To have a part in this venture of faith—the first of its kind in the history of Pennsylvania Mennonites.

Even though most of them still spoke German in their homes, the schools and worship meetings of the Lancaster County churches had turned almost totally English. Their old *Unpartheyische Gesangbücher* (German hymnals) with their long martyr songs lay stacked in meetinghouse attics while, after the big revivals, new invitation and experience songs, fitting the Gospel preaching that came back with the “Bible School boys”¹ took their place. So it came that during the missions conferences of the 1930s great audiences, overflowing even the basements of the meetinghouses and standing outside under open windows in the summertime, sang Julia Haskell’s famous missionary hymn in mighty four-part harmony, evening after evening:

Over the ocean wave, far, far away,
There the poor heathen live, waiting for day.
Groping in ignorance, dark as the night,

¹ Young men the American Mennonites began sending to Bible Schools, notably the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, in the late 1800s. Out of this contact and revivals following, grew a generation of Mennonite people sensing the urgent call of God to mission work overseas.

No blessed Bible to give them the light,
Pity them, pity them, Christians at home!
Haste with the bread of life, hasten and come!

Here in this happy land we have the light,
Shining from God's own Word, free, pure and bright!
Shall we not send to them Bibles to read,
Teachers and preachers and all that they need?

Then while the mission ships glad tidings bring,
List' as that heathen band, joyfully sing:
"Over the ocean wave, oh see them come!
Bringing the bread of life, guiding us home!"

Before leaving America Phebe Yoder, the Stauffers and the Mosemans found themselves in a dizzying round of activities that blurred the lines between the church's exuberant "missionary vision" and the sober reality of settling in Tanganyika Territory during the Great Depression. But as soon as they stepped onto the docks at Dar es Salaam (where no joyful "heathen band" stood to welcome them) their focus began to clear.

Like Merle Eshleman, a Mennonite doctor that joined them later, put it, "Arrival on the foreign field is like being placed into a new world. . . . The missionary may have read books on foreign mission work and have had some rather definite ideas of how mission work is to be done. But the new situation in which he now finds himself is so different from anything he has experienced that trying to follow precluded or prescribed rules will not be possible."²

It did not take the Mennonites from Pennsylvania long to realise their "Christian culture" stood in absolute contrast—open conflict, more often than not—with everything they found in

² *Africa Answers*

Tanganyika Territory. The Africans that came to Katuru Hill lived in polygamy, buying and selling their daughters like cattle. Witch doctors wearing leopard skins, feathers and bones shook their spears at the clouds to make it rain—and it rained! Adolescents passed through rites of passage the missionaries could not watch, or even talk about, for horror and shame.

Most frightening of all came the attacks of unknown spiritual forces. After some of the missionaries climbed a “sacred hill,” paying no attention to the villagers’ warnings, a sheet of lightning struck the thatched roof of their chapel, setting it on fire. When a local believer spoke out against the wearing of amulets a giant cobra attacked him on his bicycle on the way to meeting. During an early baptism in Lake Victoria, a poisonous serpent, about as thick as a man’s arm, swam slowly between Elam Stauffer and the convert kneeling before him.

No one missed the point. The missionaries from Pennsylvania had entered full-scale spiritual warfare. But they fought it boldly, with much prayer, and the full support of the “happy enlightened land”—America—from which they came.

The American government, in the 1930s, still saw Christian mission work as a prime national objective. Missionaries got special visas and reduced fares on ships and trains. Both American and European businessmen, private individuals, and church workers of many other organisations in Tanganyika stood with the Mennonites in their beginning struggles—as did the British government that gave them land on which to build, and assistance with medical work and schools.

Even though it seemed a bit strange at first, the Mennonites soon discovered the ideals they all stood for (all Europeans and North Americans in Africa—government officials and mission workers alike) were basically the same. To be civilised and happy was to break from superstitious tribal ways. It was to worship God on Sunday, read the Bible, live in your own house if at all possible, and make enough money to educate your

children so they could live comfortably while improving society as a whole.

With this degree of support the spiritual war the missionaries fought did not seem overwhelming. Africa, with the help of its enlightened colonial governments, seemed fixable and under control—until most of the Mennonites’ new friends and co-workers on the field rushed home in 1939, some to fight against Hitler and others with him.

The American government granted the Mennonites conscientious objector status (thanks to their historic position), but all their converts in Tanganyika eagerly fought for what they had been told was the “Christian king of Great Britain” when their call to service came.

The Life

Michael Kürschner and South Tyrol’s hard-pressed believers also knew they fought a full-fledged spiritual war. But they did not fight it along any political or cultural front. Theirs was no mere conflict of civilisations or world religions. Even in their low-ceilinged, straw-thatched houses by night, or gathered on slopes near the tree-line to pray, they knew their warfare involved the heavens as well as the earth, God as much as the devil, and the hosts of good and evil, both in this world and the next—for theirs was the cosmic struggle for the Kingdom of God itself.

When the farmers of South Tyrol “found the Lord” they found much more than just “salvation” or a reason to go to church. Through Jesus they found their Way out of the world and into the Kingdom of God. They found the Truth that sets men free. But most of all, they found *the Life* that involved infinitely more than standing up at a revival meeting to “get saved.”

The Life, discovered by the “Gaismaier people” on the Ritten and throughout South Tyrol, involved justice and equality on earth.

A radical switch of values. Nothing short of absolute *Bekehrung* (turning end-for-end/conversion). And wherever it was conceived, by the Holy Ghost, believers subjected themselves automatically, voluntary, with all they had, to the rule of Christ. The Life involved where and how they built their houses and raised their food, how they kept their animals and how they got on with one another. It involved their bodies as well as their souls, the present as well as the future. It involved God, the blood of Christ, the Scriptures, and everything from the clothes they washed and the bread they baked to the shoes they made, the trips they took, the friends they visited, the letters they wrote, and the flames in which they died.

To know the Life, as the believers on the Ritten understood it, was to know Christ—and vice versa.

The Life, although it was an experience the whole way through, was infinitely more than just an experience. After their conversion, it was the believers' new and constant reality, day after day. No more "business as usual" after Life in Jesus—eternal Life—begins! Pervasive, far-reaching, irreversible, the Life not only transformed the mountain farmers of South Tyrol, it completely restructured the society that took shape around them.

Life and Mission

Transported from death into the new Life of Jesus' Land, the believers of South Tyrol understood their mission at once.

No one can live the Life alone. The Life engenders more life. The Life calls others. It sets a clear distinction—as big as Life—between the living and the dead, cutting through all family, social and cultural ties, taking away every vestige of neutral ground.

Even though it bore a few outward resemblances to the village society in which it began (the believers kept on wearing simple

peasant clothing and pursuing peasant trades) the Life looked just as strange in South Tyrol, and later in Moravia, as it looks in Australia today. Entire groups of men, women and children living in purity and harmony together, the strong caring for the weak, grown-ups caring for children, young people caring for the aged, everyone learning, teaching, farming, cooking meals, making shoes or hats, grinding knives, baking ceramics, weaving cloth, sewing shirts and dresses, buying, selling, coming or going, not for one's personal interest or advancement, but for the love of Christ and the good of others—how could it work for long? Surely there had to be something mysterious about it! Did they drink some magic potion perhaps? Were they planning a rebellion? A *cult*, the Habsburg government would have loved to call it, had they known the word. “But by this,” Jesus said, “all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The new believers in South Tyrol made it their mission to let all the world know the Gospel by seeing it lived out before them. They knew this knowledge would bring salvation to a few (those who accepted their witness and acted upon it) and condemnation to the rest (those who rejected the Truth). But they had no other option. To follow Christ is to live the Life for all the world to see. And for that one must be . . .

Armed to the Teeth

“The weapons we fight with,” Paul said, “are not natural weapons” And the sword of the Spirit, he wrote, is the Word of God.

When the farmers of South Tyrol moved on from Michael Gaismair to Christ they traded their guns for Bibles. For their new lives, they quickly understood, depended on knowing what God said.

At the Bozen fair they bought whatever German Scriptures they

could “under the table,” and treasured them. What a delight to hear Jesus’ words! But no-one at Bozen could sell them complete German Bibles, for they did not exist. Martin Luther, after his war with the peasants, had second thoughts about translating Bible prophecy. Certainly, the last thing he wanted the farmers to have was John’s book of Revelation!³

Fortunately, not everyone thought like Martin Luther. Two Anabaptist scholars, Hans Denck and Ludwig Hätzer, translated the prophets into German. Christoph Froschauer who owned a small paper factory and press in Switzerland printed them. And by the late 1520s (seven years before Luther finished his Bible in Germany) all the prophets, including John’s Revelation, appeared at the Bozen fair.

They also appeared in secret meetings at night throughout the German cantons of Switzerland, up the Rhein Valley, and wherever seekers gathered in the Allgäu, the Salzburger lands and Austria.

The Froschauer Bible, as people called it, quickly became “the Book” of the Anabaptist movement. Its homemade type was big and clear. Its speech like that of the common people. Earnest seekers read it and rejoiced, arming themselves with its God-given Truth. Even children, and those that could not read, learned its words by memory. But the Froschauer Bible, with its translation of the prophets and John’s Revelation opened up a whole new front in the war for the souls of men.

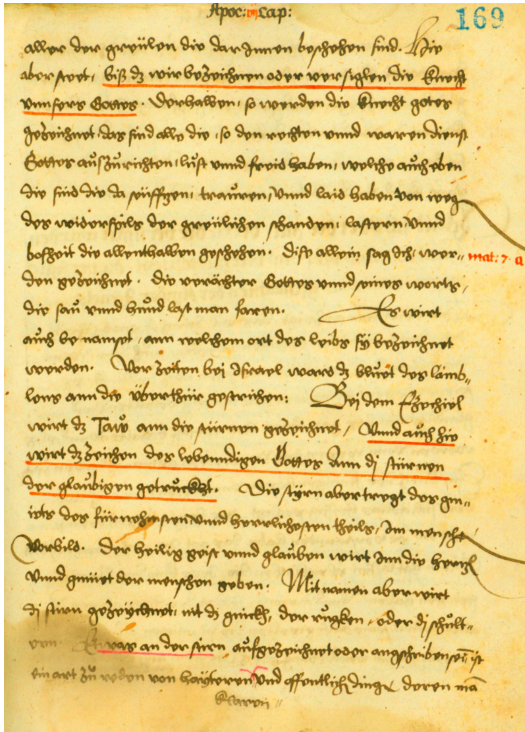
For the first time in centuries common people could once more use . . .

The Other Edge of The Sword

Evenings, particularly Sunday evenings in the Hutterite

³ Actually, Martin Luther wanted to delete Revelations (and the epistle of James) from the Bible altogether, and refused, for years, to translate them or prepare them for publishing.

community my wife and I joined are cheerful friendly times. Families show up, often several at a time, and the range of topics is endless. But the night Michael and Elma Decker visited us with their children and he began talking of his uncle Hans, stayed with me. Hans Decker, a servant of the Word that died at Wolf Creek Colony in South Dakota sounded like a fascinating person to have known.



A carefully handwritten page of one of the surviving *Clarification* manuscripts.

Michael told me of his uncle Hans’ books—one in particular, hundreds of years old, handwritten in German, that “laid out the whole Revelation of the Apostle John.”

A number of years later I read a fragment of a Hutterite book, an explanation of Bible prophecy, that fascinated me. Then I found several more fragments. Some matched one another in part. Others barely resembled each other, but they all

followed the same general theme and they all turned out, in the end, to be versions of the book old Hans Vetter had at Wolf Creek Colony: *Erklärung der Offenbarung Johanni des Theologen* (Clarification of John the Theologian’s Revelation).

Does that sound like a Hutterite title? Hardly.

My attempts at identifying the old book, where it came from, who wrote it, and why the Hutterites should have rewritten and recopied it, time after time, became an adventure of its own. But the longer I pursued the *Clarification's* trail, the more fascinated I became with its message—the message of Bible prophesy applied as I had never seen it before—and how it became the “other edge of the sword,” the sword of the Word of God, in the hands of those that fought for Jesus’ Land in the 1500s. Only because of their clear understanding of Bible prophesy, I came to realise, could the believers of South Tyrol possibly have carried out their mission as they did.

Only with a complete set of Scriptures, the books of prophesy and John’s Revelation included, could they tackle the great red dragon (the devil) and his hosts in war.

But is it safe to use Bible prophesy this freely? Many, in their first attempts at handling this edge of the sword have cut themselves with it or gotten killed. How did the believers of South Tyrol use it? And what can we learn from them for the battles we fight today?

Hang on, and I will take you through the next stretch of the journey. Beginning with. . . .

A Remarkable Fur Trader

Not long after they got the Froschauer Bible, the believers from South Tyrol got their hands on Old Hans Vetter’s book. They found it easy to read because all the Scriptures in it (and there are many of them) come straight from the Froschauer Bible itself.

But where did they get the book? And what does it say?

The original copy of the *Clarification* came from an unusual man in Germany that traded in furs and wrote. Melchior

Hofman, they called him, and many held him for an eccentric. Or dangerous. His prophetic writings, in the hands of fanatics that twisted them to their own designs, brought about a revolution in northern Germany (Münster in Westfalen) that ended in terrible bloodshed and civil war.

Among the South Tyrol believers the *Clarification* did not get twisted, and the revolution it brought about was of a totally different kind. Before they used it at all, these believers compared it with the Scriptures. Then they kept rewriting it, clarifying it further, and sharpening it with the Scriptures all the time. Just like Melchior Hofman, the fur trader, had rewritten and improved it from a yet much older work, written in Latin during the 1200s.

Who wrote that, and what did it say?

The South Tyrol believers said the man behind the *Clarification* was Petrus Johannes, and they were right. Petrus Johannes used the “other side of the sword,” Bible prophecy, well and passed it on. But many things had happened between his time and the 1500s.

Petrus Johannes

During the 1540s Kasper Braitmichel, a brother who joined those from South Tyrol and wrote their *Geschichtbuch* (book of stories), told what happened in Italy and France three hundred years earlier:

The Fraticelli, also called “poor brothers,” gathered in Italian Sicily and elsewhere. They held to voluntary poverty. They owned nothing but had all things in common, and testified against the Roman Catholics. . . . Pope Boniface VIII brutally suppressed the Fraticelli with fire and sword.

During the time of pope Clemens VI a man called Petrus Johannes appeared. He laid out the Revelation of the Apostle John. He identified Rome as the true Babylon, a carnal bestial

synagogue of devils, and the pope as the true Antichrist. People could not tolerate the followers of Petrus Johannes, and on Clemens' orders he also got dug up and burned to powder.⁴

Not only Melchior Hofman but many other Anabaptist believers, including those from South Tyrol, looked to Petrus Johannes—born Pierre de Jean Olivi in the French village of Sérignan in 1248—as a hero in the war they were fighting. They saw Truth in his words, hope in his prophetic interpretation, and light for the way through dark times ahead.

In many ways, Petrus Johannes' time resembled their own. Sent as a twelve-year-old to study in a Franciscan brother-house, he saw greed, worldliness, selfishness, and ungodly living everywhere—all in the name of Christ. Already at that age Petrus Johannes loved Christ and wanted to serve him with all his heart. The condition of worldly Christianity distressed him, and as soon as he grew old enough for anyone to listen to him, he began speaking and writing against what he saw.

More than anything Petrus Johannes warned against the greed and materialism of Christian believers. Many people in France—some Franciscan brothers included—opposed him for what he said. For a while they sent Petrus Johannes to Italy, where, staying in a brother-house in Florence, he learned about yet another earnest believer who had lived a hundred years earlier. . . .

Gioacchino da Fiore

It did not take Petrus Johannes long, after he stumbled upon the writings of Gioacchino (Joachim) da Fiore to realise he could use them as a key to opening Bible prophecy. The way Gioacchino thought was simple. It made sense, and fitted the Scriptures perfectly. Had God commissioned him, perhaps, a

⁴ *Geschichtbuch* 39

thousand years after Christ and the early Christians, to help people use Bible prophecy in modern times?

Nobody took much notice of Gioacchino da Fiore during his childhood in the hilltop village of Celico, far down in the dry brush wastelands of Calabria—in the pointed toe of Italy’s boot. Born at Celico in 1135, Gioacchino learned how to read from his father, a government officer. He became a clerk and worked his way up to the court of the Norman (Viking) king of Sicily, William II, in the sunny Mediterranean port of Palermo.

King William⁵ treated Gioacchino well, and sent him on business here and there. On one trip he stopped in at Joppa in Palestine and went up to see the city of Jerusalem, freshly rebuilt and held by French crusaders. A tourist. But something happened to Gioacchino in Bethlehem where shepherds still grazed their flocks on the hills of Judaea. And when he walked through the garden on the Mount of Olives he had no idea it would move him the way it did. His own wickedness came up before him. He felt dreadfully sorry and responsible, and suddenly nothing made sense anymore but to know, to love, and to serve Jesus, the man who had died for him and risen again.

Gioacchino went back to Italy converted and transformed. Born again. No more life at the court for him! For a while he lived out on the hills alone. Day and night he wrestled with the Scriptures, trying to understand them, fasting and praying, but nothing happened until all alone on the day of the Lord’s Resurrection, it suddenly fell into place. His mind flooded with clarity and light as the inner sense of prophetic Scriptures, not just dead letters and words, opened up to him.

Gioacchino hurried out to tell others what he had found, and discovered a community of brothers at Corazzo. For a while he stayed with them, but they distracted him and kept him from

⁵ A grand-nephew of William the Conqueror, he married Joan, daughter of King Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

knowing Jesus and the Scriptures better. With only a few of his most serious-minded friends he went up to a place called Fiore (flowers) in the desert hills of Calabria. There King William gave them a piece of land—only good for grazing a few goats—and they founded a Christian community.

The “poor brothers” or “little brothers” (Fratricelli) people called them.

While many rich and powerful people hated Gioacchino and what he said (denouncing their worldly ways and calling them to follow Christ), seekers from all over the Kingdom of Sicily, and from further away—even from Rome—came to hear him.

Gioacchino, unlike the rest of Europe a thousand years after Christ, did not see “Bible Times” as some remote, fantastic age, far back on the horizon. Neither did he see the “End Times” as another age of fantasy and miracles in the far distant, hazy future—the two of them totally separate one from another with a vast plain of normalcy, “our time,” in between.

Gioacchino saw Bible Times and the End Times as one package, one unit, totally connected, intertwined and overlapping, with us and “our time” right in the middle of it all.

With this in mind, Gioacchino did not see Bible prophecy as so important for understanding the future. No one, not even Jesus, knew the time of his return. Neither are we to take thought for the morrow. Bible prophecy is to help us understand today, “our time,” no matter when or where we live.

Looking at it this way, Gioacchino’s eyes opened to the *eternal Gospel* of Jesus Christ: “And I saw another angel flying through the midst of heaven, having the *eternal gospel*, to preach unto them that sit upon the earth and over every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Revelation 14:6).⁶

⁶ Some English translations use “everlasting” but the Greek word *aionios* does mean “eternal”—without beginning and without end.

If the Gospel is eternal, Gioacchino realised, it is like God, without beginning and without end. A circle, in other words—or a circular pattern, because it keeps repeating itself.

What is true today is true tomorrow and was true yesterday. That is also true of Bible prophecy. It does not get done fulfilling itself because it keeps going around and around. Yet things do not stay the same. Every time round it gets bigger and better. More and more things get fulfilled all the time, until the end comes. But even “the end,” and the “end times,” have come again and again. And the eternal Gospel keeps right on going. Its pattern continues, just getting bigger and bigger, involving more and more people every time.

Opening the Scriptures in the light of Jesus’ eternal Gospel, Gioacchino began to see an infinite number of shapes and patterns throughout history, in the present, and for the future. In fact he saw an “eternal present” as well. It made no difference whether one lived a thousand years after Christ, or two thousand or a hundred thousand years later—or earlier—the eternal Gospel would still be true and have just as much to say.

Gioacchino did not see a long line of independent historical happenings through the ages, like the marks on a ruler. Rather he saw reoccurring prophetic “states” that often overlapped one another. Many smaller patterns in history—smaller circles—he saw fitting into larger ones (like Ezekiel’s wheels) that all fit into the great circle of the everlasting Gospel itself.

Kings came and went, empires rose and fell, this one up, the other one down, patterns of revival, prosperity and decline. But every time round brought more things into fulfilment, closer to the great marriage feast of the Lamb, to splendour and peace in the Kingdom of God.

Gioacchino saw the eternal Gospel moving through three general states—the state of the Father, the state of the Son, and

the state of the Holy Ghost. The state of the Father was the time of Israel when people lived under laws and rules. The state of the Son was the time of the Church when people were no longer students but sons of God. But Gioacchino saw great corruption coming into the institutional Church. Powerful Christian leaders, he believed, would exalt the structure of the Church over and against God, making war on the Truth (both physical and spiritual persecution) and keep people from the eternal Gospel of Christ.

This, Gioacchino believed, was the time of Antichrist, but out of its great tribulation a new state would be born—the state of the Holy Ghost. During this state the people of God, Christ’s followers, would reach maturity. They would no longer need the old structures. They would abandon and reject the fallen Church. All would be free and equal, taught by the Holy Ghost. They would cast the old order of things aside, for a new “order of the just” a “reign of freedom” to begin, where all would share their possessions, live in peace one with another, and work under Christ alone for the common good.

Gioacchino wrote what he believed in a book he called *Exposito in Apocalypsium* (John’s Revelation Explained).

The Sword Passed On

After Gioacchino died among the Poor Brothers in Fiore, in 1202, many kept on reading his book and treasuring the pictures he drew to explain it. But wealthy men in positions of power, feared and hated his teachings. In 1263 Pope Alexander IV condemned Gioacchino’s books and pronounced him a heretic.

Little groups of believers, called Dulcinians in some places and “Brothers of the Free Spirit” in others, kept Gioacchino’s memory alive and his writings in circulation. But it took Petrus Johannes, a hundred years later to make them known to the rest of the world.

Like Gioacchino, Petrus Johannes also saw patterns and recurring themes in Bible prophecy. More than that he saw events and characters representing others of the same type—like the king of Babylon represented Satan, in Isaiah’s prophecy, or like Ezekiel saw Satan in the king of Tyre. When the prophets spoke of Israel or Jerusalem, Petrus Johannes believed, they spoke about the church as well. And when they spoke of Babylon they meant the whole sinful world.

Petrus Johannes saw the beasts of John’s Revelation, not as actual animals, but as “bestial groups of men,” entire nations or societies living in greed, vanity, pleasure and selfishness, like beasts caring for nothing but themselves. The beast with seven heads, he believed, was the political and social monster that attacked the people of God in the “seven battles of the church.” The first head was that of the Jews, the second of the Romans, the third the Arian Greeks, followed by the Goths, the Vandals, the Lombards, and the Muslims.

The Muslims, Petrus Johannes believed, were the toes of iron mixed with clay in the statue of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream—the iron of the Roman Empire mixed with the clay of Arabic values. He also saw Muslims in the head that was slain (during the Crusades) but that would come to life again and speak bold, blasphemous things.

Like Gioacchino, Petrus Johannes believed the dark time of the institutional church (the state of the Son) was nearly over and that a time of great tribulation, under the Antichrist, was about to come. During this time, true believers would turn to living in justice and holiness. Everyone would teach one another and they would know God’s Truth again. The baptism of infants would end, and believers would turn, in this new “order of the Holy Ghost,” to living in equality in communities of peace. But those that held power in the old institutional order, would oppose them. The true believers’ worst enemies would be the leaders of

the institutional church, who would persecute them and drive them from the land.

Popes, cardinals and bishops, Petrus Johannes believed, would behave like the High Priests, scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. Beyond that, he saw the pope in Rome representing or perhaps even becoming the Antichrist himself.

In the prophesies of John's Revelation, Petrus Johannes saw two powers of Antichrist—the Antichrist of apostate religion along with the beast of the governments that support it. Between the two of them, he prophesied, they would make it so dreadful in Europe that Spirit-led believers would have to flee to heathen lands across the sea. There the heathen would treat them better than European "Christians"!

But this age of the Spirit-led Church, Petrus Johannes predicted, will also end in apostasy and spiritual deception. False prophets, claiming to be led by the Holy Ghost, will speak lies and do wonders in Jesus' name. Much turmoil and spiritual persecution will result. The two lamblike horns of this last beast to arise, wrote Petrus Johannes, will be the horn of false Christianity (Christians living like the world), and the horn of false prophesy (Christians telling lies in the name of God). Many will adore this beast with its deceptive gospel while immorality and selfishness take over the world. Then the Lord Jesus himself will reappear. He will judge the earth—everyone that worshipped the beast (the system) and bore its mark will get destroyed. But everyone that carries the mark, the seal of the Lamb, will be saved.

Petrus Johannes wrote what he believed in a book he called *Lectura super Apocalypsium* (Lessons from John's Revelation).⁷

⁷ The story of Petrus Johannes, and much of what he (and Gioacchino) taught, has survived in the Gmaani thanks to it being preserved in the *Lehren*, the written messages still used as a means of instruction in North American communities.

The Sword Back in Use

Petrus Johannes died in the Languedoc region of France in 1298. A growing number of earnest believers—some of them called Beguins—trusted him and kept his books in circulation. But wealthy and powerful men hated what he wrote. One year after he died, the authorities at Lyon in France ordered his writings collected and burned. In 1318 the Franciscan brothers (to whose order he had belonged) raided his tomb and destroyed it. In 1326 Pope John XXII condemned him as a heretic.

The “power of Antichrist,” however, could not erase what Petrus Johannes had written. His words reappeared time after time, often adapted or suited to new situations that arose, until Melchior Hofman picked them up and passed them on as the *Clarification* to Anabaptist believers in Bavaria, the Inn Valley, South Tyrol and Moravia.

When Roman Catholic authorities plundered the Anabaptist communities of Moravia in the mid-1700s many copies and versions of the *Clarification* no doubt got destroyed. But they saved one that found its way to the Prince-Bishop’s library at Esztergom (Gran) in Hungary. Other fragments, partial copies, and one abridged version found its way out with the Hutterites through Romania and Ukraine to America in the 1870s. In 1953 Johannes Wipf, from a Hutterite community in Canada, made another copy. That one got copied and passed around, and the book survives in Hutterite communities throughout Canada, America, and Australia today.

Does it still have something to tell us?

The deeper I got myself involved with the strange story of the *Clarification* and its effect on the believers from South Tyrol, the more thoroughly it convinced me that we must sharpen and use this “other edge of the sword” (Bible prophesy), to tackle the beast and the Antichrist taking over the world today.

Marked Swordsmen

Armed as they were with the Spirit's doubled-edged sword, seeing themselves in the thick of prophecies getting revealed, the believers of South Tyrol quickly and easily applied the Bible's prophetic imagery to their lives. The first evidence I found of it—and yes, it startled me—was in their manner of baptising.

Jörg Zaunring, the first Anabaptist messenger to find his way across the Brenner Pass into South Tyrol, came from Rattenberg in the Inn Valley. The believers of the Inn Valley (and there were many of them) took their wet fingers and made a mark on the foreheads of the people they baptised. They called it the *Thau*.

When I learned of this, my thoughts went to the Franciscan order at once. Didn't Francis of Assisi's followers wear *Thau* crosses dangling from ropes at their waists? But the *Thau* the early Anabaptists painted on their converts' foreheads was neither a "lucky charm" nor an exorcism. Nor did the idea come from the Franciscan order. They got it directly from the Froschauer Bibles they read:

*. . . und rufft dem mann der das leinin kleid an hatt, und den schreibzeug an der seyten und sprach der Herr zu im; Gang durch die statt Jerusalem und bezeichne mit dem **Thau** die stirnen, deren die seuffzend und traurend umb aller gruewlen willen die darinnen geschehend. Zu den anderen aber redt er das ichs hort: Gond dem nach durch die statt, und würgend, übersehend nit, schonend nit . . . alle die aber so **das zeichen Thau** an inen habend, sollend ir nit anrüren.⁸*

This, for the Anabaptist minority that read Latin, got confirmed in the Vulgate's version of the prophet Ezekiel:

⁸ The Anabaptist translators of this passage handled it like Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin, more than a thousand years earlier. Martin Luther and the English Bible translators obliterated "the mark of the *Thau*" in their versions, although it appears in all Hebrew manuscripts.

And the glory of the Lord of Israel went up from the cherub, upon which he was, to the threshold of the house: and he called to the man that was clothed with linen, and had a writer's inkhorn at his loins. And the Lord said to him: Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem: and mark Thau upon the foreheads (*et signa thau super frontes*) of the men that sigh, and mourn for all the abominations that are committed in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in my hearing: Go ye after him through the city, and strike: let not your eyes spare, nor be ye moved with pity. Utterly destroy the old and the young, children and women: but upon whomsoever you shall see Thau, kill him not, and begin ye at my sanctuary. So they began at the ancient men who were before the house.⁹

The early Anabaptists, taking this Scripture and applying its prophetic pattern to themselves, understood that all of God's people, the followers of Christ wear an identifying mark. They saw this pattern again in the seventh chapter of Revelation where an angel "appeared from the rising of the sun with the mark (*wortzeichen*) of the living God. He cried with a loud voice to the four angels who were given the task of destroying the earth and the sea. And he said to them, "Do not hurt the earth or the sea, or any trees, until we have marked the servants of God on their foreheads."¹⁰

With this pattern established, the early Anabaptists easily understood what they read in the *Clarification* concerning "our time":

Just like God's holy ones needed faith to follow his orders, they could not wear his mark without faith in their hearts. And just like God saved the Israelites from destruction, long ago, he now saves the faithful from the wreckage of Antichristianity (*vonn dem verderben des Antichristenthumbs*).

God has always saved his own.

⁹ Ezekiel 9:3-6 as it appears in the Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims translations of the Bible.

¹⁰ Revelation 7:2-3 from the Froschauer Bible

Ezekiel saw a writer, dressed like a priest, painting a mark onto the foreheads of God's chosen ones. With his brush he wrote the letter *Thau* that also stands for *Thora*—the law. This points to God's laws, his instructions or rules that help his chosen ones find their way. Everyone that has these rules, these laws of God written into his heart by the Holy Ghost, is safe from all evil.

Now we must look at who gets the mark. Ezekiel saw the man in linen coming through Jerusalem, marking with the Thau everyone that sighed and wept about the dreadful things taking place in the city. Later, the angel told John, "Stand here until we have marked or sealed all the servants of our God."

Only those that want to work for God, those that delight in pleasing him, are his servants. They follow his true and perfect will. They sigh, they weep, they look with dismay on the apostasy, the terrible disgrace, the corruption and mischief happening all around them. Only these people, these true servants of God, get the mark.

On the other hand, all that ignore God and despise his Word, get passed over. They are nothing but pigs and dogs.

Let us look now at where the mark gets placed. In times past the Israelites painted the blood of the Lamb on the beams above their doors. Ezekiel saw the faithful getting the Thau painted onto their foreheads, and John likewise tells of the "mark of the living God" pressed onto the foreheads of those that believe.

The forehead is the place of thought and understanding—*das Gemüth*—the most important, the most glorious part of the human constitution. Faith and the Holy Ghost live in the heart and *Gemüth* of those that serve God.

To speak of the forehead—not the neck, the back, or the shoulders—is to speak of something completely open and on display before all. One doesn't write things on the forehead of which one is ashamed. This shows the free and open way in which the chosen ones, those whom God's Spirit and Word have enlightened, testify for him. They have nothing to hide. They are

not ashamed of anything. To the contrary, they are honoured to let their faith be known to all.¹¹

Das Zeichen der Erwählten, the “mark of the chosen ones,” many early Anabaptists called it. And although not all of them marked the Thau on people’s foreheads with water (and the practice eventually got discontinued), the theme of the mark on God’s elect, the plainly visible sign of the new covenant they made with him, worked its way through everything they said and did. *Das Zeichen und Siegel aller frommen Kinder Gottes* (the mark and seal of God’s obedient children), *das Zeichen Christi* (the mark of Christ), in the words of Jakob Hutter. And the more I came to understand its significance among the “Gaismair people” that turned to following Jesus in South Tyrol, the more sense that made.

The mark was a military symbol. Their insignia. The proof that they belonged not to the Habsburgs, not to the Venetians or the Swiss or any other side in Europe’s never-ending wars. It was the evidence that they belonged to a completely different country, to Jesus’ Land, without which they could not have fought and overcome.

So what, exactly, was the mark? Before the picture became clear to me I had to spend more time with those . . .

Marked for Battle

in the sixteenth century.

Once the believers in South Tyrol identified the beast, the Antichrist, and the mark of God in their time, they had only one direction left to go. From that point onward it was do or die, stand or fall, life or death—it was war—the whole way.

¹¹ From an incomplete handwritten copy of the *Erclaerung* held at the Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen, Indiana.

Unlike the missionaries to Africa centuries later, the South Tyrol believers found no allies in their war with the evil one. No “Christian nation” came to their aid. No help arrived from “happy lands in the light” across the sea. All was darkness, all was death, except where the light of Jesus shone. And they did not expect it to shine from worldly governments or fallen Christianity around them. In fact, they looked at worldly governments and the idea of “Christian nations” as but one more cloak of Antichrist himself.

Jerusalem or Babylon, God or Satan—from the beginning the sides in South Tyrol’s spiritual war were clearly defined. And they wasted no time thinking about who the beast and the Antichrist might be in the future. That did not concern them. All they knew was that in their time, in the 16th Century, the beast and the Antichrist were the “money people” (the new capitalists of Europe) with their Habsburg rulers and the pope in Rome.

Even though they did so at immediate risk to their lives, the believers in South Tyrol did not shrink back from identifying themselves, and God’s enemies of the sixteenth century, in the clearest of clear speech. No diplomacy. No talk of “common ground.” No ecumenical grace. Jesus was their King. Everything and everyone that opposed him was the false prophet, the beast and the whore, “that old dragon” in the language of Bible prophesy.

Leonhard Lanzenstiel, a rope maker that spoke in many Gmaani on the mountains of South Tyrol, wrote from prison:

Protect your children, Lord, from that terrible Jezebel, from the gaping jaws of the tyrants, those bloodthirsty dragons from the sea! They always have their big mouths open to swallow us, and roar like she-lions robbed of their cubs. Do not let them swallow your holy people, the witnesses you chose before the foundations of the world were laid!¹²

¹² *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 249-251

Hans Amon, a cloth weaver, that spoke in large Gmaani on the Ritten, throughout the Eisack Valley and the Pustertal, wrote:

Where is Pharaoh? Where is that haughty and furious Antiochius, or that boastful Goliath and others of his kind, now? With the rich man they lie in the torments of hell. Where are the princes, the kings that stood for idolatry and trifled with the laws of God? They all got overthrown, booted out, and damned. What happened with Ahab and his cursed wife, Jezebel, with all her false prophets? They got killed. Their punishment was horrible beyond words, and they languish yet in the fires of hell.

What will happen to those that call themselves Israel today? Even though his false prophets deny it, nothing awaits the pope, his bishops and cardinals but utterly disastrous punishment. Be that through the Turks, or by some other means, it will surely come—even though he hates, persecutes and kills all that would warn him—just like the Jews hated Jeremiah for predicting their captivity in Babylon, or like Ahab hated Micah for predicting his defeat.¹³

War on the Saints

With the Bible's prophecies lying open before them, with the urgency that came from recognising their perilous place in the "end times," newly converted men and women from South Tyrol hurried out to warn everyone they could of God's impending wrath and to lead those that repented and believed to Christ.

As soon as the passes opened in the spring of 1529 Hans Langegger made his way up the Etsch, across the Alps, and into Switzerland. Michael Kürschner travelled up the Eisack, across the Brenner pass and down the Inn Valley. Everywhere he visited seekers, told about Christ and his Kingdom in secret meetings and baptised those that got convinced. But the police

¹³ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 85-86

trailed him. They caught him (and seven other believers) in a meeting on the back streets of Kitzbühel in April 1529.

They took him to Innsbruck. There, while twittering swallows made their nests high above him in the Kräuterturm and housewives planted their gardens outside, he lay for five weeks. They did the screws, the ropes and the pulley. They questioned and talked roughly to him day and night. But he never wavered and they burned him alive on the square—Wednesday morning, 2 June 1529.

Hans Langegger had better going in Switzerland. He met Georg and Elisabeth again—Blue Coat Georg—and they returned with him to the Ritten. For days, and sometimes for weeks, the believers lived in joyful Gmaani on the hills, eating in circles seated on the grass, singing around a fire until late at night, sleeping under the stars.

At the Püchlers place in Tramin (below Bozen in the Etsch Valley) they held a Gmaa and Georg baptised new believers, right after his arrival. On the Saturday before St. Ulrich's day, they held a big Gmaa at Simon Kob's place on the Breitenberg, above Leifers. Thomas from the forest at Aldein, and others got baptised there. But the police came and everyone fled. They caught Simon Kob with his wife and a few more. After three weeks they drowned the women and burned the men.

During June, Hans also took Georg up the Eisack, past Brixen, to Ulrich Peggelhaube's place. (He ran a hotel along the road from Brixen to Sterzing.¹⁴) Seventy people—more, no doubt, with the boys that watched from the shadows—met in his stable after dark.

A month later, on the feast of St. Jakob's, the believers held a large Gmaa at Jörg Kärntner's place at Penon on the Ritten. Others got together along the base of the Schlernrücken behind

¹⁴ At the site of Franzensfeste, the great fort built by the Habsburgs in the 1830s to protect the Brenner Pass into Austria.

Kastelruth and Völs—new believers fearing Kachler-Hans and his witches no more than they did Old Leonard with his police—while the ones at Tiers, high above Welschnofen, and those further down the Roman road at Kurtatsch, Kaltern, and the village of Vil by Neumarkt held Gmaani of their own.

There, on 16 November 1529, the police did their best-planned raid of the year. Those that failed to escape were the widow Christina Töllingerin from the Ritten, Hans Portz's wife Bärbl from Tiers, the ex-priest Benedikt Kamperer's wife Agathe and her sister Elisabeth, Wölffl from Deutschnofen, Thomas from Albein, Jörg Fryck the tailor, and Mang Karger, the shoemaker's apprentice. The police caught Martin from Nockh and Benedikt Kamperer not long afterward.

Put to trial at Vil, the captured believers witnessed boldly for Jesus. When the judge asked Mang Karger why he did not keep the Lord's Day and go to church as good Christians (good Catholics) should, he replied, "Working on Sunday is not wrong, and why should I go to church? Your priests do nothing but revel in *Abgötterei* (idolatry) before dinner, and *Hurerei* (whoredom) after dinner. Why should I listen to them?"

Mang Karger with the rest of the brothers got burned alive, the sisters drowned.

War in Klausen

Nowhere in the Eisack Valley did Hans Langegger introduce Georg Blaurock to a more eager circle of listeners than in Klausen—the "Klausner nest" of Michael Gaismair's friends that still met in Matthias the knife-grinder's house. Not only did the Gaismair people at Klausen become converted and baptised. They had numberless connections with seekers throughout the surrounding villages: Gufidaun, Feldthurns, Latzfons, Villanders, and Lajen, through the valley of Villnöss, across the canyon to Afers, and up to the Würtzerjoch (Würtz Pass) from



where one crossed into valleys where people spoke neither German nor Italian but Ladin, the ancient language of Rome.

One Gmaa, that started around a cave near Gufidaun lasted for days and days. More and more seekers came—over a hundred people, then a hundred and fifty or more. Young married couples, teenagers, old men and women got baptised in twos and threes, then by the dozens. Hans and Georg led in the breaking of bread and meetings continued in the village of Albeins, fifty or sixty attending, night after night. Weiss's guest house in Gufidaun became a popular meeting spot for the believers, while ever more seekers appeared from Afers and Lüssen, from across the Getzenberg in the Pustertal, even miners from the camps at Pfunders, hard up against the Zillertaler Alps.

Instinctively the people of South Tyrol knew that this—*das Reich Christi*, Jesus' Land—was what they had hoped and yearned for all along. But because it was another county, a real country, the war they fought to gain it was just as painfully real. On 14 August 1529 the police caught Hans Langegger and Georg Blaurock. They got the ropes and pulley and the fire. But Georg



The Val di Funes (Villnöss Valley) with the farming village of Tiso (Teis) in the foreground and the Geissler Spitzen. Large Gmaani took place here and in the woods behind Gufidaun, to the right.

spoke loudly, joyfully, to the great crowd that gathered on the day of their execution. Many of the people—an eight-year old boy named Peter Walpot among them—remembered his words.

The miller Ulrich and his wife, Hans Weber, Hans Schiesser (the baker) and Hans Feichtner from Klausen fell into the authorities' hands soon afterward. When the authorities beheaded Ulrich they let his wife go and she fled. Their two small children had already been placed into other homes.

New Soldiers in the Puster Valley

For seven years, from the time he was old enough to handle goats, Wölffl, a boy from the Sarntaler Alps, spent every day on the highland pastures. Sitting with his arms around his knees, listening to the birds, thinking about God and what people did in the valleys far below, he learned much. Then, when his opportunity came, he went out to see the world.



Making his way through the Vinschgau, and from there into the Oberland (the upper Inn valley) he heard much and said little. But after a friend taught him to read, and he held the first portions of Scripture in his hands, he could no longer stay silent. Back in the Eisack Valley he visited the Gaismair people in Klausen and on the Ritten (before they got converted and baptised) and attended the Bozen fair. Everywhere he wandered he spoke about God and what Jesus taught. This got him into trouble. At Klausen the police locked him up for a while. In Bozen they gave him more grief. But a kind judge loaned him a hat (he had none) and sent him on his way.

When Wölffl left the Eisack and entered the Puster Valley, just after Michael Gaismair and his men had fled the region for the last time,¹ he found many sad people eager for a word from God. Would justice get lost forever? Wölffl assured them that God was not done with South Tyrol and that change would surely come. But, he told them, it would not come from without.

¹ From Switzerland, Michael had returned, with several thousand men, to retake South Tyrol and put his plans for “Gaismair’s Land” into action. But a much larger imperial army met him between Sterzing and Brixen, and Michael, with all his men fled across the mountains into the Venetian Republic. There, several years later, he was betrayed and stabbed to death for the bounty on his head.

Neither would it come with guns and swords and thousands of men on horseback. The change would only come when God changed the people inside—when they got *bekehrt* (converted) in their hearts.

In the Puster Valley, Wölffl stayed at a weaver's house in Pflauren. The weaver's name was Gregor. All of Gregor's family and their neighbours listened eagerly to what Wölffl told them of Jesus' teachings and of the need for conversion, but the parish priest got angry and chased him out of the village. Then Wölffl and his friends got together at Kaspar the hatmaker's house in Stegen, by Bruneck.

Kasper did not take the Gospel seriously. But his hired man, a black-haired fellow named Jakob, asked many questions. He had gone to school and could read so Wölffl told him, "Go to Bozen and buy yourself a New Testament at the fair. It will tell you everything you should do."

Jakob listened to what Wölffl said. He made his way down to Bozen on foot (about 120 km round-trip across the Getzenberg), stopping often to read on the way back. As he read, his eyes opened. He understood what Jesus said, and his life changed. Before this Jakob and Kasper had spent their time gambling and telling foolish stories at the workshop. One time, after Jakob lost in a game of deuce, they had fought. But when he returned from Bozen, Kaspar could hardly recognise him.

Everything had changed. His words, his interests, his values—even his face had changed. All Jakob wanted now was to read in his new book and talk about it. Kaspar did not like it and fired him. So, after the police caught Wölffl and the meetings broke up, Jakob crossed over into the Drau Valley and found his way down into the Habsburg province of Kärnten, looking for work.

For several years Jakob lived and worked at Spittal an der Drau, making hats. He had learned his trade well and made money

with it.² But the more he read his New Testament, the more clearly he knew that Jesus had higher things in store for him than just making hats.



The Proshof on the Moos (communal pasture) of the village of San Martino (St. Martin), within a short walk of the Michaelsburg. Jakob Hutter was born and spent his childhood in this farmhouse, with its barn attached on the upper side.

When he returned to the Puster Valley Jakob met Benedikt Kamperer the ex-priest and got baptised as a believer.

Everything moved quickly from there. Jakob attended Gmaani on the Härscher (a mountain between Brixen and Sterzing) and at Rudolf Huber's place on the Getzenberg. So firmly did the Life take a hold on him that he could not help but speak and soon the brothers wanted him to baptise new believers as well.

Jakob held his first meetings in the Puster Valley, around Bruneck and St. Lorenzen where he had grown up in a huddle of farm buildings on St. Martin's pasture. But continually greater

² Having learned as an apprentice at Stegen by Bruneck and Prags, a village just out of Welsberg at the upper end of the Puster Valley (not at Prague in Bohemia, as some have supposed).

numbers of seekers begged him to come to the Ahrn Valley, to Welspurg and Toblach, and further afield. After he baptised ten new believers at the Andreas Planer home in May, 1529 the police made a raid and captured fifteen. They promptly burned Katherina Rader, Kaspar Mairpaul, and Gregor the weaver from Pflaurenz (for having been caught with Anabaptists more than once). Wilhelm Samsfeur they beheaded. But the prison on the Michaelsberg filled quickly and even after burning, drowning or beheading twenty-four more (including Jakob's sister Agnes) they still had more than they could interrogate or process as the law demanded, and started sending captive believers to Bruneck in chains.

The police put a bounty on Jakob's head. But he did not turn back or slow down. "Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," he read in the book that kept changing his life, more and more.

A Break for the Believers

While the devil fought with ever greater fury against the rule of God in South Tyrol, the believers on the Ritten and those of the Puster Valley began to hear strange wonderful news from abroad. At Austerlitz in Moravia, some said, followers of Jesus had gathered in a permanent Gmaa, in broad daylight, tolerated by the authorities month after month, living and working in peace. Could Moravia, could this visible fellowship of believers be the dawn of a new beginning perhaps, the long-awaited "state of the Holy Ghost"?

Jakob the hat maker—Jakob Hutter as they knew him in the Puster Valley—and Simon Schützing set out in secret, across the Alps and down through Austria on foot, to find out.

Filled with praise to God, and to Jesus their Lord who had made it possible, they found it true. At Austerlitz the brothers met a



The Monte San Miguel (St. Michaelsberg) with its castle fortress, the Michaelsburg, just out of St. Martin in the Puster Valley. Many believers suffered torture and lost their lives here, at the hands of Christoph Ochs and his family who lived in the castle. The Ochs family was closely related to the Troyers of Schöneck, the von Wolkensteins of Neuhaus, and the Grembs family of Afers, all of whom had children in the Gmaani.

large and rapidly growing community of believers, led by one-eyed Jakob Widemann, Franz Inzinger, Jakob Mändel and a cheerful crew of brothers and sisters seeing to the needs of all. Indeed, the Kingdom had come! Jesus' Land—Jakob recognised it at once and hurried back to tell the rest.

Gathering on the Getzenberg (between the Ritten and the Puster Valley), the believers chose Jörg Zaunring to lead the first group of refugees from South Tyrol down to Moravia in the summer of 1530. Quickly, silently they hurried along mountain trails in the summer night. Always on the lookout. Always praying—they made it! Then in little groups, dozens, and eventually hundreds upon hundreds followed.

But the work and the war in South Tyrol went on. Even though many fled, many more came to the light. In the Ehrenburg forest, on the Lierschwang, up behind Schöneck in Kiens, everywhere more Gmaani gathered and seekers came, at imminent risk to their lives.

God's War

For those that had fought with the farmers, plundering castles and establishing justice in South Tyrol after Brixen fell, the switch from fighting under Michael Gaismair to fighting under Jesus, the son of God, was easy but drastic. The cause remained the same, only the vision became infinitely greater, and once converted they saw everything in a totally new and wonderful light.

Friedrich Brandenburger, the man that had taken the Puster Valley under orders from Michael Gaismair, became converted and now helped in taking that same valley for the Kingdom of God. A struggle that cost him his life at Toblach on the Drau, three years later.

All through the Puster and Eisack Valleys bold “heretics” worried noble families and the state church like nothing had worried them before. When a solemn procession with images, candles, and many flowers moved through the villages, a young man, Valentin Schneider, shouted to the spectators, “Do not listen to the priest! Everything he says is false and it stinks!” Hans Huber, when the police took him, said, “We should rip those bells from your church towers, smash your images, and turn your baptismal fonts upside down!”³

War of Ideals

Everywhere, in every town and village of South Tyrol, the fact

³ *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich III*, pp. 237-38, 258, 288, 314, and 332.

that citizens of the Kingdom would run into conflict with the Habsburg Empire became immediately and painfully apparent.

In a letter to the archduke Ferdinand, Tyrolean government officials complained that “for two years hardly a day has passed in which Anabaptist matters have not come up in council. More than seven hundred people have been executed, expelled, or have fled into misery, leaving their property as well as their children behind. . . . Yet nothing has helped. These people not only have no horror of punishment, they even report themselves! Rarely is one converted. Nearly all wish to die for their faith.”⁴

Ferdinand, deeply appalled, wrote back:

I got your report and read it with great concern. It appears that this new baptism will spread through all my inherited lands, yet it is nothing but a big commotion, a revolt against the government and all honourable institutions. If it is true, as many people report, that some are choosing to die for this belief, we face the greatest emergency. We must spare no effort in putting out this fire as quickly as possible, before it spreads further, takes overhand, and gets completely out of control.

Catch the leaders first (like you did Leonhard Schiemer in Rattenberg) and execute them according to the royal mandate in a way that will be an example and warning to the rest. Let all the priests read the mandate. Let it be printed and distributed everywhere. With all effort and diligence possible, stop this shocking affair as soon as you can, so it may be stamped out and torn up before many common and uneducated people lose their souls, their bodies and goods over it.⁵

The governors and judges wasted no time. They wrote up a seventeen point mandate condemning everyone to death “through fire, water, or the sword” for ignoring the rites of the church (praying to Mary and the saints, going to confession,

⁴ From court records cited by Johann Loserth, in *Memnonite Encyclopedia II*, pg. 751.

⁵ From a letter by Ferdinand, sent from Esztergom in Hungary, 1 January 1528

baptising babies). But the mandates' main purpose was to stop people from holding Gmaani on the hills, from refusing to fight in the Habsburg army, and for distributing dangerous literature and ideas. "We have suffered great insurrection and frightening bloodshed in the past," the mandate said. "This happened when uneducated and ignorant people listened to false teachings concerning freedom in Christ. Thinking they could dispose of rightful authority and ownership, they got the idea of holding all their possessions in common. Now the poor and the simple-minded are getting such notions again. Therefore we decree that whoever holds to or teaches any such thing shall promptly be put to death."⁶

The believers did not get excited. Neither did the mandate surprise them. Jakob Hutter, in a public statement wrote:

Our life in community, the fact that we share our homes and resources, annoys and alarms the King and his government very much. That may stem from his fear that we will band together and revolt like the people at Münster. But we have never had such intentions and never will.

The way we live is simply how we understand the teaching of Christ. It is how we walk in Truth. The world, however, refuses to accept that Truth. The world always loves darkness more than the light. So it is not surprising to us that our way of life annoys the world, and that we get arrested for deeds of love, truth and unity. Jesus said, "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you. But you do not belong to the world. I have chosen you out of the world and the world hates you."

We know our communal arrangement, our life together, is of God because we did not invent it ourselves. He planted it within us and uses us to show himself to the world, to allow the world to know his work and perfect will.

The world in its darkened understanding cannot know the way and manner of God. The world simply cannot comprehend how

⁶ *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich III*, 8-9

we were led, contrary to human nature, against the goals and the flow of society, to live for others, not for ourselves, to give up our own ideas for common unity, to all become one in Christ. But it is through God's children, living in a unity against nature, that the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit becomes visible to all the world.⁷

All mandates notwithstanding, the Kingdom of God came to South Tyrol in the 1500s. But it did not come with guns and swords and blowing up castle walls. It came like Jesus came to Bethlehem, unarmed (all wolves and tyrants notwithstanding) among the humble poor. Peter Walpot, the boy that had stood and watched when they burned Hans Langeegger and Georg Blaurock at Gufidaun, wrote:

How difficult it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to slip through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Truly, if Christ had not established *Gelassenheit* and community of goods as requirements for entering his Church, if he had not placed these conditions on all that would seek eternal life, it would have been much easier for them. Rich men could have found their way in, just as easily as the poor, to inherit heavenly treasures together!

Isaiah and Micah enlighten us with their description of Christ's household, his church community: "The law will go out from Zion and the Word of God from Jerusalem, establishing justice among the heathen. All people will come and beat their swords into hoes, their spears into pruning hooks, sickles, and saws. They will no longer fight, one with another, nor learn the ways of war. See how clear! Such a peaceful people will the followers of Jesus be!

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid. Cattle and lions and domestic animals will get along nicely, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the she-bear will eat together and lay their children side by side. The lion shall graze with the cattle and none shall harm each other any longer, in the

⁷ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 79-81

mountain of the Lord's holiness. So, as you can see, all striking, punching, stabbing, shooting, hurting and harming one another, all hatred, discord, fighting, killing and bloodshed comes from the devil's unholy godless hill, from the place where Lucifer dwells.⁸

Caught in War

Certainly, Anna Troyer of Schöneck Castle in the Pustertal, did not want “fighting, killing and bloodshed.” She did not want to hurt anyone—least of all her noble parents. But when she heard the good news of the Kingdom and saw what a change it worked on her parents' hired men and servant girls, she had to go and find out. With Trindl, a seventeen-year-old maid, she visited a Gmaa at Hörschwang on the Getzenberg and found it even more wonderful than she had hoped.

Anabaptists were no frightful characters with hair on the back of their hands and goat's feet, like some were saying. Far from it, Anna found them cheerful and exceptionally friendly villagers, making her feel right at home with the Unterrainer, Mair, and Ebner families and crowds of other visitors, at once. Everyone ate together, about seventy grown people with many children besides, three times a day. Every day servants of the Word spoke to the group and read Jesus' wonderful stories from the New Testament in German. So easy to understand! So delightfully true. All the women helped cook the meals. The men and boys cleaned up and cared for the animals. Anna loved the singing and when Trindl got baptised she knew, with many tears, that she should get baptised too.

But—Anna had a young husband, Nickl Niederhofer, and her father, Peter Troyer was the *Richter* (judge/police chief) of Schöneck. How could this ever work? How could one follow

⁸ *Geschichtbuch* 289-299

Jesus, obey one's parents and live as a respectable citizen of Tyrol at the same time?

One couldn't.

And when, after repeated visits to the Gmaani, Anna did get baptised, and Nickl, instead of putting a stop to this dreadful foolishness at once like his father-in-law insisted, got convinced and baptised too, no castle in South Tyrol could have been any unhappier. The Troyers, related by marriage to the Richter of the Michaelsburg, whose castle lay full of Anabaptist prisoners, and to many others of the *Ehrbarkeit* (nobility) throughout the valley, went beside themselves with grief and shame. And anger. While Anna got hustled down to Kärnten (another Austrian province), Nickl sat in his father-in-law's gaol and the believers wondered what would become of it.

Sigl, a young hired hand from Kiens, also took the trail up to Hörschwang on the Getzenberg to visit the Gmaa. He found everything full of people and full of joy. Every day, more repented of their sins and became citizens, through baptism, of Jesus' Land. So many had come that the Maier himself (the estate manager) had to sleep in the barn with the grown boys while his house filled up with guests. What a surprise to see another *ehrbar* lady, Georg Ebner's wife, Apolina, in with the believers! Helping to cook soup at that, and serving it to the crowd at mealtimes. The Ebners had a boy, Sigl's age, and they knew each other. His name was Michl, and they became friends—even though Michl was *ehrbar* and Sigl only a hired hand. Somehow, here at the Gmaa it made no difference, and the two boys got baptised together.

After the people had to go home, and Peter Troyer's police caught Sigl he gave a clear testimony before the court. Everyone wondered how he had learned so much in a short time, seeing he could not even read. They tried to find out whether the believers planned to take Brixen again but Sigl told them: "They taught me not to carry any weapon for self-defence, nothing but a staff,

and if anyone should arrest me, not to resist. . . . They taught me that whoever has money or anything else should turn it over to the *Secklmeister* (the communal treasurer) and we all have everything together.”⁹

The judges shook their heads. This didn’t sound like Gaismair—and yet it did. What on earth had come to South Tyrol now?

They beheaded Sigl because he was young—and Georg Ebner. But Apolina, who had also gotten baptised, fled (with Michl?) to Moravia.

Back at Schöneck, the police caught Anna Troyer’s maid, Trindl. She was seventeen. But she left the judges under no illusions before they sentenced her to die. “Your cursed idol-temples,” she told them, “are nothing but heaps of stone, whore houses, and murderers’ dens in which your priests murder peoples’ souls!”¹⁰

So many got baptised and so many caught, after the Gmaani took shape in South Tyrol, that they began a network of operations to care for believers in prison as well as they could. Young Hänsel Mairpaul, brother of Kasper whom they burned at the Michaelsburg, served as chief messenger of this network that came to include castle servants, cooks, trades-people, merchants and even sympathisers among the police force and imperial troops. A more dangerous mission one could hardly imagine. But Hänsel had friends everywhere, and he knew his way around—sneaking up to fortifications at night, scaling walls, dropping from trees, with the expertise of a thief.

Because he knew mountain trails everywhere, even secret trails, Hänsel became the scout and guide of Anabaptist servants needing to get from one Gmaa to another in the dark. He smuggled many letters, and sometimes tools, in and out of castle prisons. Were it not for the food he got to brothers in chains,

⁹ *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich, III Teil*, pg. 21

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 288-89

some would have starved, even before their executions. Praying, never knowing the outcome for sure, Hänsl sidled up to armed guards at night, offering them money to deliver packages, and sometimes he was able—with communal funds—to buy a believer's way out of bonds.

All the believers liked Hänsl and hoped for the chance to travel with him to Moravia when they fled. He made many trips there and back, his excellent judgement saving his life, with the lives of others, far more frequently than anyone could count. But Hänsl also faced challenges of his own. He got married and when his wife was about to give birth to their first child she needed a place to stay.

Hänsl spoke with the Wolkensteins, a famous ehrbar family that lived in a castle of the Ahrn Valley, near Sand in Taufers. Some of the family were friends of the believers and promised to keep his wife hidden and safe. But she was not safe. The news leaked and the police caught her, as well as Sigmund von Wolkenstein, a believing son of the family, and took them to Brixen.

Hänsl's wife cried much, wanting to see her baby, and ended up telling the authorities whatever they needed to hear, just so she could get out. But she must have found her way back to Christ and to her husband again. For a long time following Hänsl kept up his dangerous work. No court record reports his death. Does that mean he eventually took his little family to Moravia and stayed there?

Caught in the cosmic struggle between good and evil, in the great war of the beast against the Lamb, untold numbers of farmers and housewives, hired hands, and girls baking bread or with a mop in their hands, became soldiers of Christ in South Tyrol and the rest of central Europe during the 16'th century. Hundreds and thousands of unlikely heroes whose names we do not remember, or that only survive on criminal records of lands that no longer exist. But the struggle goes on, while their souls wait under the altar of God and others rise up to fight in a

War Without Neutral Ground

Under incredible pressure, giving way to a natural desire to save their lives, not everyone decided for the Kingdom and stuck with it. Neither did everyone find life with other believers exactly like they had expected. Some that came to the Gmaani for what they could get—not for what they could give—became embittered and turned back. These people with their “inside knowledge” became the government’s most valuable allies, able to sell what they knew for large sums of money. Others, like Judas, claimed a bounty for betraying believers on the “most wanted” list of Tyrol’s police. Jakob Hutter wrote about them to the believers in Moravia:

Brothers and Sisters, I must tell you about the Martin Niger and Christl Phüller families, backslidden and expelled from God’s people as you know. Now they have returned to Sterzing. They are frightful godless devils and horrible enemies of God. Both in Innsbruck and here they approached the military authorities to tell everything they knew and to betray everyone they could. On top of that they told many dreadful lies, and keep on inventing more and more as they go. They are blasphemers and enemies of God, children of the devil that trample his Word underfoot.

I could tell you a great deal more about them, but do not have the time. Just that I have heard they are about to go back to Moravia, as spies of the government. They have nothing but evil in mind. Do not listen to them for a moment and believe nothing they say. Stay away from them because they are thieves and murderers, coming only to deceive, to rob and destroy. Watch out!¹¹

In Moravia, as well as in South Tyrol, ex-members of the Gmaa stirred up much trouble for the believers. Some told the police the Gmaa had robbed them of everything they had and refused to give it back—a story the ungodly were quick to believe. To the Moravian government Jakob Hutter wrote:

¹¹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 62

Because so many are getting inspired by the Truth to give themselves up to her, because so many get added to the church every day, it is inevitable that a few insincere and light-hearted people slip in unawares. Like Judas among the apostles who ended up betraying Jesus for money, these people turn about and end up cursing and slandering what they at first professed to uphold. They say monstrous lies about the church, all sorts of rubbish, like adulterous women trying to make their husbands look guilty to relieve themselves of the blame.

After they have left the Truth, those that leave us no longer fear to say all amounts of lies about us, telling the world how we robbed them of what they had. In reality, most of these people left us with more than they had when they came. In many cases we paid their way to come to us here in Moravia. We gave them all they needed. Even though we might have had second thoughts about them, we gave in to their pleading and crying to get baptised and accepted them among us. Whatever little money they might have brought, we used to support the widows, the sick, and the poor we constantly receive. They said they gave it gladly. So now, why should we, or how could we give it back? It got used up for the common good and is neither theirs nor ours anymore.¹²

To those that faithfully kept to Christ, on the other hand, Jakob had nothing but comforting words and friendly admonition:

Dear children of the living God, brothers and sisters loved from the heart, we were greatly comforted through the letter you sent. What a joy to hear of your determination to serve God, your steadfastness, your obedience, and your great patience! How good to learn of your Christ-like way of life, your sensible approach to life's problems, your striving as knights for the witness of God and the martyrs already missing from your ranks. In all torture and pain they stood fast. They witnessed fearlessly to God and the truth. How could we thank God enough, or praise him sufficiently for that? . . .

¹² *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 81

Yet we also carry with you the great pain, the regret, the godly sorrow of seeing what is wicked and unfair take overhand in so many cases. How so many that had given themselves to God, becoming brothers and sisters to us, have turned away, broken their covenant with God and his holy people and become part of the world again. Yes, it happens because of this great persecution, the power of unrighteousness and deception, but woe to those that look back, that unite themselves with the devil, and become enemies of God again! What a wretched and horrible end, what dreadful judgement, awaits them at the hands of God! It would have been far better for them never to have known the truth at all.

At the same time, that falling away of some of those you mentioned, is really no disaster for us. Such lightly grounded people must, sooner or later, get separated from us through trouble and persecution, through false prophets, and deception of the evil one—just like chaff gets blown out from among the wheat, or dirt gets burned out of precious metals through fire.

The prophets, the apostles, and Jesus the Son of God, all warned us that some would turn from the cross of Christ and be led away by false prophets. They told us time and again how such apostates would hate God and the truth, hate his holy people and turn against them. That is how it went in the prophets,' in Jesus' and in the holy apostles' time. So, let it not dishearten or weaken us. Let us rather look to the God-fearing, those that do what is right, the obedient and holy children of God that stand firm to the end. Even though they are only a tiny minority, and even though their opponents are legion, let us keep our eyes in the right place.

The one that stands with God in truth, the one that fights valiantly for the truth and speaks out for God no matter how great the tribulation it brings upon him, is worth more to God than many hundreds of thousands of backsliders. We should also look up to such people and follow their example. We need to stick to those that carry the living Word and eternal life in their hearts. Even though great multitudes fall away from God and go the wrong way, let us stay with those that belong to him.¹³

¹³ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 56-58

Ongoing War

Even though they welcomed peace in Moravia while it lasted, and the freedom to live in open communities as followers of Christ, the believers from South Tyrol had no illusions about Satan's war on God and its final outcome. Leonhard Lanzenstiel wrote:

Brothers and sisters, chosen ones of God, let none of you think that God has forgotten justice or that he has become slow in meting out his wrath. At just the right time the fair judge will come! Soon he will come with thousands upon thousands of angels in the clouds of his majesty, to overthrow the king and the Kaiser, and the root of their abomination, the pope and all that belong to him. He will tear out horrible Babylon by the roots—that old city in which all the blood of the innocent was shed. He will hurl her into the bottomless pit, banishing her from the presence of God. Just like Babylon forces us to drink from the cup of suffering today, our judge will force her to drink the damnation of God forever. The time of her devilish glee will soon be up.¹⁴

Their faces alight with hope, their eyes set on cosmic events about to take place, the believers of South Tyrol could not have felt good about living in peace with the world, or collaborating with the world in “doing good.” Jakob Hutter wrote:

Because you have abandoned the world, loved God, and begun to follow Christ, God loves you too. But because he loves you, the world hates you, and all worldly people persecute you and speak evil of you. Rejoice in this and be glad because that is how they have treated all prophets from the beginning of time, even the Lord Jesus himself. This is a good and proper sign, the mark of God's favour on your lives.¹⁵

Jeronime Käls, caught on his way between Moravia and South Tyrol, saw the “easy way out” that many Catholic and Protestant

¹⁴ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 281

¹⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 24

people had taken. Compromising the truth, they believed what they wished in their hearts while conforming with “the system,” just enough to keep out of trouble and continue with business as usual. About such spineless compromisers Jeronime wrote:

Many in our time think the opposition has ended. They look back and think the war is over. But they are deceived, if they would live the Life they would get persecuted again.

As long as the lion has its cubs with him he might act friendly and playful enough. But when he loses his little ones, or his prey, he cannot keep himself back. He rages and roars. He rants and he raves, as only lions can, until fire shoots from his eyes!

Certainly Peter does not warn us in vain that Satan comes upon us like a roaring lion or a wolf at nightfall. But, may God be praised, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is bigger and stronger than the lion of the Philistines. He has already split the other lion’s head and wounded his body. Therefore he knows that his time is short, and he will soon be overcome. Therefore he is so desperate, so angry. He sees the lake of fire into which he will be thrown.

Watch yourselves, therefore, heroes of Israel! Take courage, strong men of Zion! Rejoice, oh city of Jerusalem! The time of your triumph is near. All tears will be washed from your eyes. The reward of your labours stands ready. Just hold on a little while longer! The fat cattle have already been butchered, the fowls have all been plucked. The tables stand ready and the guests have begun to arrive!¹⁶

Very soon, after he wrote this letter, Jeronime arrived, as an early guest, as well. They burned him at Vienna in Austria on St. Felix’s day, 31 March, 1536. The war on earth was not nearly over, but throughout central Europe people were hearing—and seeing—the Gospel of the Kingdom again!

¹⁶ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 109

4

The Gospel

Elizabeth Stauffer and Ruth Moseman tried to get flowers and a few garden vegetables to grow around the Mennonite mission station on Katuru Hill. The brothers, overseeing a large crew of African workmen, built a chapel of mud bricks with a thatched roof and plastered it white. Then, once the missionaries moved from makeshift huts into nicer homes, once more workers came from Pennsylvania and a full-fledged African village had sprung up on Katuru Hill, the rest of the mission board's projects got off the ground.

A school for Africans, and another one for missionary children. Workshops, a clinic, a girls' home. A garden for the missionaries on better soil down by the lake. . . . But Elam Stauffer, praying much for the new work and carefully studying his books on "indigenous mission work" began to grow nervous. Surely their job as missionaries would not revolve around building mission houses and fixing mission trucks! Surely it should focus on Jesus' Gospel—telling Africans the plan of salvation, bringing them to meetings and getting them born again!

For a number of years Mennonite workers on the Tanganyika field struggled with the mission board and their churches at home, deciding on the right course of action. But a "healthy compromise" was reached and the work progressed with just enough "social work" (schools, a clinic, taking in orphaned children) to make it attractive to Africans, while pursuing the missionaries' prime purpose of bringing the Gospel to the unsaved.

As the missionaries established their balance between the two they gradually sorted out their priorities and learned how to live for Jesus in their new surroundings. The Mission Board, in a 1950s told new workers what adjustments they would need to make on arrival in Africa:

Such things as having Africans do many routine duties that one is used to doing in America are difficult for some to learn. And yet the missionary who has been sent out by the board at considerable expense should not be doing a lot of trivial things which can be cared for by cheap African labour. There are more important things as language study, Bible study, visitation . . . and other types of mission duty which should occupy the time.¹

Among those “other types of duty,” new to the missionary, the board mentioned writing articles for mission reports and keeping up a wide correspondence. “The missionary needs to be a leader among his people,” the instructions continued. “His usefulness will be multiplied as he is able to have a corps of natives around him who can carry on the many daily duties. He could often do a job quicker and better than a native and may find it a trial of patience to train natives. But, if he insists on doing the many things that come to hand, his daily life will soon be busy with a multitude of tasks which keep him from his commission of giving the Gospel.”

Without a doubt, the “work of the Gospel” kept all missionaries busy, every day of the week in Tanganyika. But the church at Katuru Hill grew slowly. More than half of those that got converted, fell away. Even those that didn’t could hardly be trusted and one never knew on Sunday mornings who would appear in church and who would not. “Many who were in the church,” wrote the missionary doctor, Merle Eshleman. “showed little evidence of spiritual life. There were difficulties arising with the church council on matters of school, money

¹ All citations by Merle Eshleman from *Africa Answers*, published by Herald Press for the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in 1951.

from America, and wages. There were evidences of hidden sin.” Worst of all were tensions and unresolved conflicts among the missionaries themselves—each of them wondering what the rest had written about them to the people back home.

But a miracle, a spiritual breakthrough that utterly transformed the work in Africa (and had far-reaching effects on the home church), occurred during the lonely dangerous years of World War II.

The miracle began in the tiny British colony of Rwanda, on the other side of Lake Victoria.

A Protestant doctor from England, a government clerk, and a few others affected by the Keswick revival, began to meet several times a week for prayer. In their prayer meetings, they vowed to confess all their sins one to another, and to make restitution quickly.

Things happened.

Starting in Rwanda, then all around the lake into Tanganyika Territory and the Mennonite mission on Katuru Hill, the revival spread like a fire. Everywhere people fell on their knees, crying out to God, repenting of their sins. Men and women who had long lived at odds one with another (including some of the missionaries) came running up to throw their arms around each other, to forgive and love and forget.

Through every rank and denomination it spread—through government offices, through Anglican, Baptist and Brethren missions, through trading towns and stick villages on the acacia-studded plains, more and more “balokole” (awakened ones) came to the light and helped to bring others.

From the beginning of the revival Mennonite missionaries welcomed the balokole into their midst. Phebe Yoder, with Ray and Miriam Wenger in particular, did not doubt the revival was the direct answer to their prayers. For sure not after Phebe invited an awakened sister to Mugango, the mission station a

Protestant board had transferred to the Mennonites for geographical convenience.

Rebeka Makura, the balokole visitor, was able to detect sin in the camp at once. She stood up in the meeting and boldly pointed to one of the leaders that was hiding sin in his life. He broke down and confessed. So did a great many more and what a time of weeping, of rejoicing, of new life and power, broke out in Mugango!

Not all denominations welcomed the balokole as warmly as the Mennonites. Some excommunicated them, for their “new doctrine” but the awakened ones refused to leave. They just stood outside those churches during meetings, handing their offering money in through the windows when the plate went by, until the leaders broke down and reaccepted them.

“Jesus is everything,” became the rallying cry of the balokole. “It makes no difference to what denomination you belong. Being Mennonite, being Anglican won’t save you. Jesus is all we need!” And with a Jesus they could nicely share with everyone else (even those that didn’t hold to the “Anabaptist distinctives” of non-resistance and non-conformity to the world), the Mennonites came to feel at home, socially accepted among the civilised population and the “powers that be” in British Tanganyika.

Fish Bowl, or Fish Pond?

At the beginning of the Mennonite work in Tanganyika Elam Stauffer and John Moseman had tried earnestly to keep sin and worldliness out of the church. They kept the guidelines of the brotherhood at home as best they could, carefully selecting every fish they put into their bowl, “making sure it was just the right colour and just the right kind” in the words of a later missionary.

But the revival changed all that.

The rise of the balokole (“born-again” believers in every denomination, inside the church or without) convinced the missionaries that “fishing with a hook and line,” was ineffective and far too slow. One had to fish with a net, like in Jesus’ parable, pulling in both the good and the bad—like at Jerusalem, adding three thousand in one day—then trust in the Holy Spirit to sort it all out.

Why work so long and so hard to keep the church pure? Just look at what the revival brought to light: Even the “pure ones” had plenty of hidden sin in their lives! So, with renewed vigour and a zeal like they had never experienced before, the Mennonites sent out revival teams to “bring them in.”

“Bring them in, bring them in, bring them in from the fields of sin,” became the song of the mission workers, as membership on Katuru Hill and its outstations doubled, tripled, quadrupled and shot into the thousands upon thousands in years following the revival.

When World War II ended and Israel became a nation in 1948 the Pennsylvania Mennonites (who had turned fervently premillennial during the Moody revival in America) watched anxiously and prayed much. Might this mark the beginning of the “end times”? Might the church get raptured soon so Jesus could return and establish his kingdom on earth when “all Israel” gets saved?

Excited discussions took place among the missionaries. African converts, of course, could not follow world events and prophetic fulfilment. (They were far too busy, after the war, thinking about “social justice” and “civil rights.”) But with other Protestant workers in Tanganyika Territory, even with a few “born-again” government officials, the Mennonites eagerly read the news and looked forward to what would happen in Israel next.

The Gospel in South Tyrol

The Gmaani in South Tyrol never became socially acceptable. No bridges ever got built between them and other Christians that lived like the world. And no common cause—certainly no end-times prophecy!—ever had them mingle in circles of inter-denominational fellowship.

Everything the Gmaani taught, the entire Gospel they preached, ran counter to what the world wanted and stood for. But the *Landesordnung* of Jesus' Land, the "Gospel of the Kingdom" as Jesus himself called it,² kept its other-worldly appeal and the Lord added daily to the church such as should be saved.

In September 1531 the believers held another big Gmaa at Villnöss behind Gufidaun. Then another one at Hörschwang, followed by more on the Getzenberg, up the Eisack Valley and beyond. In all of them *die Göttliche Wahrheit* (God's Truth), nothing more and nothing less, held centre place, as Jakob Hutter wrote:

I have told you over and over that you should pay the utmost attention to God's Word, writing it into your hearts, for you know we may not always be with you, to speak with you face to face. God may take us at any time through imprisonment, affliction or death. Therefore gather in the summer, so when winter comes you may have enough and to spare.

You have heard the Word of Truth and have seen many beautiful powerful examples. Blessings upon you if you have guarded them in your hearts! You have also seen how the Lord has gone before you in the cloud—that is in his servants and preachers. But the

² The "Gospel" (*evangelium* in Latin, *euaggelion* in Greek) meant only one thing in Jesus' and the first Christians' time. It was the announcement made when a new emperor took the throne. Everywhere, in all Roman territories, military bands with trumpets raced from town to town shouting it for all to hear, leaving great rejoicing and festivities in their wake. Only after Jesus' followers began to use the term did it acquire its distinctly Christian connotation.



Gudón (Gufidaun), looking up the Val di Funes (Villnöss Valley). The castle tower at the rear is where Anabaptist prisoners were kept.

night will come when you can no longer see them. Then God will go before you in a pillar of fire, that is in the light and splendour of his Holy Spirit, the Word that lives in all true God-fearing Christ-like hearts. Blessings on the one that can see and follow this pillar of fire in his heart! He will not stumble nor come to shame.³

Anabaptist believers came to know Christ's teachings, through putting them to immediate practice. Anthoni Erdforter, a believer that fled from Klagenfurt in Kärnten with nothing but the clothes on his back (his wife and family opposed him and thought him a fool) wrote:

Shoemakers and tinsmiths, coal miners, farmers, and simple peasant women have come to know more about God these days than the priests and all their company. The youngest novice knows more than the abbot. Why is it, you may ask, that the

³ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 68-69

simple now-a-days know so much more than the learned? The answer lies in the fact that knowing but not doing is the same as not knowing at all. To have a treasure but not to make use of it, is of no greater value than unknown, hidden treasure. Why should a sow wear a gold ring in its snout? For this reason Christ reveals his wisdom to the humble but hides it from the learned.⁴

The Gospel of the Kingdom, as taught in the Gmaani on the mountains, either made converts or enemies of those that came to hear. Two believers, Anna the painter's wife, and Urschl the ox-driver's wife, wrote a song about how it went:

On the day of Our Lady we gathered in the green woods above the village of Mils. We came together as the little flock of Christ. A shepherd was among us and taught us in clear speech from the Word of God. He explained the Gospel to us like Christ explained it to his disciples on another mountain. May God reward him. But then the wolf came among us! Everyone ran away, crying loudly to God for help.

Now this is our complaint: The Word of God is no longer tolerated in the world. Because we are no longer willing to buy the Word for money, because we no longer give money to the priests, they drive us away from our partners and our children. The Gospel is now among us, clearly revealed. But the monks and priests do not want to hear it. It threatens their great material assets, their worldly lordship, that God will not tolerate anymore. Therefore they try to stamp out the Truth that has gone out into all the world. They fleece the sheep and catch their blood. If they can do it no other way, they resort to lies. They say Christian baptism is false and insist on baptising for money. For that reason they shed much innocent blood.⁵

Even though it cost them much, Jesus' followers in South Tyrol valued the Gospel of the Kingdom above all else and demonstrated it with their lives. When the authorities captured

⁴ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 45

⁵ *Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, 46



Entrance to the cave above Gufidaun where stores for the Gmaani were kept and around which they gathered in the 1530s.

Ändl, a sixteen-year-old believer near Brixen, they only flogged her, hoping she would grow up and change her mind. But she persisted in what she had chosen. She married the young servant Hans Amon—described in court records as a “tall man with a red beard”—and fled with him to Moravia, braving countless risks and narrow escapes with him.

Hans Mändl, a boy from Gufidaun also got caught before he was old enough to get sentenced to death. Flogged severely he took off, but persisted in the Kingdom of God—as we shall see later on.

Eighteen others got put to death at Gufidaun, and larger groups than ever—including one with twenty-five small children, many of them orphans—prepared for flight to Moravia. The strongest of the brothers, including Hans a stonemason from Flaas and Ruprecht Huber from the Getzenberg, travelled with the groups to carry the little ones over the mountains and through the forest on summer nights in the dark.

The Gospel in Afers

Across from Gufidaun a little road zigzags up the steep flank of the Ploser Alm through St. Andrä and around the corner into St. Georgen in Afers,⁶ hundreds of metres above the valley floor. Here, in the 1520s and 30s Hans and Elisabeth (Högerlin) Grembs owned a house and farm.

The Grembs family not only had money, they had many wealthy and powerful relatives—the von Wolkensteins of the Ahrn Valley, the Troyers of Schöneck, and Christoph Ochs, Richter on the Michaelsburg, to name a few. The Grembs' daughter, Frondl (Veronika), stayed at the von Wolkensteins with young Hänsl Mairpaul's wife when she had her baby. Another daughter, Gretl, married Walser (Balthasar), the Mairhofer (castle food supplier) at Niedervintl on the other side of the Ploser Alm.

If everything would have gone like they hoped, Hans and Elisabeth Grembs should have lived “happily forever after” in their beautiful home on the mountain. But things did not go like they hoped.

First their daughter Gretl and the Mairhofers she married into, had gotten deeply involved with Michael Gaismair and the fall of Brixen. As if that were not bad enough, Frondl got herself rebaptised and joined those *wilde Leut* (wild people) on the hills. As a last stroke of misfortune for old Hans Grembs, his only remaining son at home, his heir, and the pride of the family, Johannes Grembs Jr. (Hänsl everyone called him) not only joined the Anabaptists, but fell into the hands of the Brixen police!

While the tears and shame of his parents knew no bounds, they

⁶ This entire valley with its northern flank on which people live (because the sun hits it during the daytime) is called Afers. But in this book, whenever the name is used, it refers particularly to the parish of St. Georgen.



Sant' Andrea in Monte (St. Andrä) on the road between Brixen and Afers.

watched with strange fascination as their son, their Hänsl, stood in court and answered all questions put to him, like a man.

“When were you baptised?” barked the judge. “And who did it? Have you taken part in Anabaptist communions?”

“Jakob Hutter baptised me about two years ago, at Villnöss. I took part in the evening meal twice. Once in Moravia, once in Villnöss.”

“What did the Anabaptists teach you about their communion, and about the mass?”

“We call our communion the evening meal of Christ. Jakob Hutter taught me to eat the bread in a worthy way, that is through examining myself before I eat it. We do it to remember Christ, and not as if the bread and wine turned into his actual human body. We hold nothing of the mass, but believe the evening meal as we hold it, is right. . . .”

Writing furiously, the court secretary finished recording Hänsl’s testimony while they led him from the dock and brought in the other boy the police had caught with him: Vizenz Puchl. With

their testimony the two boys earned for themselves a death sentence—along with an eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of God—while old Hans Grembs, wringing his hands, lost his heir to the family estate at Afers.

With the Hans Steiner family at Afers, things did not go much differently. Their girls, Bärbl and Nändl (cousins to the Grembs, Troyer and Ochs children), got exposed to Anabaptist ideas at an early age, and to their parents' dismay, "ran off into the hills" and had themselves baptised at a Gmaa. Knowing it was too dangerous to return, the girls stayed in hiding, while their parents (even though they opposed them with all their hearts) could not sleep for worrying about them. "What if they starve up there?" "It must be cold. Did they take enough clothes?"

Hans Steiner, through people he knew that smuggled food to the Gmaani up on the hills, did the best he could. He gave them two steers to butcher with the message to make sure that his girls had enough of everything they needed.

Hans also got Jörg Rumer, the village doctor's boys, to go up on the mountain, search for the girls and see if they could not persuade them to come back. Then things started to happen with the boys—and with their sister Stindl (Justina) who had married Paul Gall from Trens, up by Sterzing.

It began when the doctor's son Paul went down to see Gretl and Walser's daughter (old Hans Grembs' granddaughter) at Mühlbach, near Niedervintl. The girl—Frondl was her name—had just turned old enough for the boys to start coming around to see her, and Paul Rumer would not stay behind any self-respecting Tyrolean youth when it came to dressing for the occasion. Black knee breeches and white stockings. An embroidered shirt and jacket. A tuft of feathers in his Alpine hat. Paul was a good-looking boy and knew it. But a flicker of doubt crossed his pleasant self-confidence when Frondl's mother looked him over and said, "When will you stop feeding your pride and turn to God?"

In the following days, Paul thought much about himself and about God. Earlier, when his sister Stindl and her husband had gotten mixed up with the Anabaptists he had scolded her for it. But now he was no longer sure, and decided to go up to Trens and visit her.

Stindl was delighted to see Paul thinking seriously about God. She invited him to go with her and her husband to a Gmaa up past Sterzing, where the Gaismairs lived. Paul, although he still had a few misgivings, agreed to go.

Some of the Gaismairs, Erhard and Wolfgang (Michael's cousins) and a few women in the family that lived at Tschöfs, past Sterzing, had become involved with the new Gmaani. Nändl Steiner, the run-a-way from Afers, lived with them in fact, and Paul was happy to see her again—not to take her home, but to hear what she had to say.

At the Gmaa, around thirty people met around an abandoned shepherd's hut up on the Alm. Jakob Hutter, Hans Amon, Christoph Gschäll, and others read the words of Christ. They were easy to understand. The stories in the Gospel sounded like true stories and made sense to Paul. Deeply convicted in his heart, he had no choice in the end but to get baptised with Nändl Steiner and two other girls that had repented and come to know Christ—a hired maid from Trens named Trindl Purst, and Steger's daughter from Sterzing.

Paul, singing much of the way, returned to Afers a “new man.”

Two years later the Michaelsburg police made a raid on St. Georgen in Afers (coming across the mountain when no one expected them). Among those they caught were Paul Rumer and his brother Leonhard. The doctor, Jörg Rumer of Afers, lost his two sons, beheaded at the Michaelsburg, 19 September, 1533, but the Kingdom of God rejoiced for two knights safely home.

The Gospel in Niedervintl

Every castle, every feudal lord of sixteenth-century Europe, like the Prince-Bishop of Brixen in this case, had its Maierhof. The Maier¹ was the man that kept the Hof (farm) for the castle kitchen's benefit. On the Mairhof he grew all the vegetables the castle needed, and kept its geese, its chickens and its pigs. The Maierhofer took care of the castle's orchards and kept its bees. His wife and children, and usually a number of hired hands, worked with him. In exchange for his services, the Maier could then use the rest of the land on the Hof for his own profit.

Old Peter Maierhofer, at Niedervintl in the Puster Valley (across the mountain from Afers) did good work for the Prince-Bishop of Brixen. But the two did not get along well. Peter believed in doing things fairly and when he saw the Prince-Bishop paying miserable wages, cheating his subjects and taking advantage of the poor, he told him so. When the trouble started with Peter Passler and the farmers in 1524, the Mairhofer boys, Kaspar and Walser eagerly took part in the overthrow of Brixen.

Besides all this, Niedervintl with its Maierhof sits where a road branches off from the Brixen to Bruneck highway and heads up the valley (past the Untersteinerhof) to Mount Pfunderer and its silver mines. Miners as well as farmers, soldiers, labourers and wandering tradesmen of all types stopped there for something to eat or a place to spend the night. The keepers of the Mairhof, Old Peter's family, were friendly people and after Kaspar and Walser with their wives (Walser married Hans Grembs' daughter Gretl from Afers) became involved with Anabaptists, lively conversations took place there until late at night.

During one of them, Christl, a shoemaker's apprentice, understood the Gospel of the Kingdom for the first time. Son of Andreas, a carpenter from Afers, he had come to make a pair of

¹ Mayr or Mair in archaic spelling.



The village of Luson (Lüsen), between San Giacomo di Eores (St. Georgen in Afers) and Vandoies di Sotto (Niedervintl) in the Puster Valley.

shoes for Gretl Maierhofer. While measuring her feet he asked her, “Do you think the Anabaptist’s teachings are God’s truth?”²

“Only if you carry them out!” she told him.

Christl could not read, but when he showed interest in hearing the words of Christ, someone brought a New Testament and began reading from it, out loud. Right then the door opened and Valentin Lukhner from the Ahrn Valley walked in. “The Peace of God be with you,” he greeted them all.

Christl, the shoemaker’s apprentice, was curious. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“It is a Christian greeting,” Gretl told him. “But you are not a Christian. You do not even look like one!”

“I would like to be one though,” Christl answered. “I want to live by God’s Truth,”

² This conversation taken from *Hutterischen Episteln V*

Valentin Lukhner, noticing the seriousness with which the boy spoke, invited him to come with him to a Gmaa on the hills. Christl went, gave his life to Christ, and Jakob Hutter baptised him.

After this, Christl kept on making shoes, but no longer with a personal career in mind. With leather donated by the Gaismairs, he began making shoes for anyone that needed them. In his spare time he even managed to make ten pairs for the keeper of the Guest House on the Härtscher—the Peggelhaube—for him to dispose of as he saw best. But the police caught Christl and he boldly testified in court of the Gospel and the Life.

The court secretary, jotting down what Christl said, added in his own words: “These people hold all things in common, whatever God sends them, heavenly or earthly goods, and everyone has as much as the rest. But among us, in what we call our ‘Gemeinschaft,’ one is rich while the other has to go and beg. One takes advantage of the other, cutting off the next one’s hands and feet.”³

In spite of what the secretary thought, orders were orders, and the court sentenced Christl to death. Because he could not write he asked another man to send a note to his unconverted brother, urging him to leave off from the world and come to Christ. His father also became a believer, got arrested, and put to death for what he believed.

Walser Meierhofer, in the meanwhile, tried to live for Christ as best he could on an estate valued at ten thousand Gulden (a large amount in the 1530s). Hauled to court several times, even before he got baptised, he paid high fines—800 Gulden on one occasion—for engaging in “questionable activities.” When he sent a large sum of money to the believers gathering in Moravia, the police caught Konrad Fichter, the brother carrying it, and burned him at Sterzing. But after a hired hand from the

³ *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich III*, pg. 174

Maierhof, a baptised boy, got caught and beheaded, and Walser's younger brother Hans narrowly escaped the same fate (they let him go because of his young age) he took to the woods and fled. Kaspar took care of the estate with Peter Lanntz, a young man who had once shown interest in the Gospel, but who, for money's sake, had become an informer helping the police. Soon afterward, the police caught Gretl Maierhofer and drowned her in Brixen.

Valentin Lukhner, after years of eventful service among the Gmani in South Tyrol also fell into the authorities' hands on the Maierhof at Niedervintl. He told the court:

While Walser Maierhofer and his wife were still with the Catholic church I stayed with them for the night. A tailor from Kärnten was with me. Later he got caught and put to death at Gufidaun. We stayed at Walser's parents' house on the estate. Later they were exiled.

A young girl, Thaler's daughter from Tulfers, worked for the Maierhofer's family at the time, also a young hired hand. Both of them were believers. They both got caught and put to death.

Now, when Hans Amon and I came to Niedervintl around midnight, Hans went to the new house. I stayed for a while at the idol's house [the Catholic chapel]. Then Hans came back and fetched me. We crawled over the woodpile, through the window into the back side of the house, to the old Mairhofer's wife and daughter.

The Mairhofer himself came and told us it was dangerous, but Peter Lanntz did not know we were there. While we were together in the room, the old Mairhofer's wife looked from the window and exclaimed, "The police are running about in the garden. They must be looking for you!" We wanted to flee, but I ran into a policeman right outside the door and he caught me.⁴

They burned Valentin Lukhner on the Michaelsburg but Walser made his way safely to Moravia, where he served as *Haushalter*

⁴ *Hutterischen Episteln*, V4 29-30



Mezzaselva (Mittewald) on the Eisack Valley road between Brixen and Sterzing.

(householder/treasurer) of the Altenmarkt Gmaa until he “fell asleep in the Lord” in 1552. He had lost his wife, his estate, and all he had, but lived out the truth of what Jim Elliott said, centuries later: “He is no fool who loses what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose!”

The Gospel at Mittewald and Trens

Long after the fall of Brixen, talk flowed freely at the Peggelhaube, a guest house on the road between Brixen and Sterzing, on winter evenings. Not only did old Ulrich the keeper of the guest house tolerate much, everyone knew where his heart was—with the farmers. And when the Gospel of the Kingdom followed hard on the heels of the revolution, old Ulrich’s barn became a much-used and relatively safe meeting place for the believers.

Further up the Eisack Valley, above the village of Freienfeld where many years earlier the monks had built a chapel at Maria



Looking across the Eisack Valley below Sterzing (not quite visible around the bend in the rear of the photo). Maria Trens is the village at the foot of the mountain on the right. Freienfeld lies below and Stilfes (with the steeple) across the river.

Trens, Hans Grembs' daughter Stindl lived with her husband Paul Gall.

Stindl and Paul, with their neighbours, the Hans Mann family, took part in Gmaani at Mittewald and in the Jaufental above Sterzing. By the time Stindl's brother Paul Rumer from Afers came to see them, a little Gmaa had taken shape at Maria Trens. On zigzag trails up into the forest, Stindl and the girl working for the Mann family, Trindl Purst (Lorenz Purst's daughter from the Ahrn Valley—the one that had gotten baptised with Paul Rumer in the shepherd's hut), carried food to brothers hiding among the trees. Then, after darkness fell, the believers showed up, one after another, at Paul and Stindl's house. Twenty-five to thirty people, as a rule, gathered night after night.

But the police were busy. Specially hired *Täuferjäger* (Anabaptist hunters) got wind of the believers at Maria Trens



The Castello di Rodengo (Rodeneck Castle) high above the spot where the Val Pusteria (Puster Valley) joins that of the Isarco (Eisack).

and in a bold raid captured Paul and Stindl, with Trindl Purst and others, taking them all up to the Rodeneck Castle gaol.

Interrogations and torture went on and on. Every day the believers grew more tired and it hurt worse. Finally, hardly knowing what he said, Paul agreed to everything the Richter was saying. He agreed to go back to church and say what they wanted just to get out of this terrible place and think.

When they heard of what happened to Paul, the two women gave up as well. The torture stopped. First at Rodeneck, then at the village church they would have to read a vow, renouncing all connection with Anabaptists and promising to stay true to the Roman Catholic church forever. Then they could go free.

As if this were not bad enough, for three Fridays following the “penitents” had to walk around the village church three times,



The chapel of Unsere Liebe Frau im Walde (Our Lady of the Forest) at Campo di Trens (Maria Trens) where the Gall family lived.

dressed in black and carrying lighted candles, the women with bare heads, and testify again to their vow before all. After three weeks they were to kneel before the altar during high mass and ask God and the Roman Catholic Church for forgiveness. Then they were to confess to a priest and take of the “holy sacrament” again.

It never happened.

Deeply smitten with remorse, Paul took to the woods where he cried out to God and sought the believers again. The police captured him and burned him at Rodeneck on 25 June, 1533. This time he did not waver.

Trindl Purst also hated what she had done and found her way to a Gmaa in Villnöss. Walking back toward Brixen with three other girls, Klara Schneider, Elsbet Lipp and Anna Gerber, she got stopped by the police and arrested again. The Richter at Brixen ordered them flogged but the hangman refused to do it.



The Val di Mezzo (Jaufen Valley), on the pass between the Vinschgau and Sterzing. The believers held large Gmaani here during the 1530s and many took this route to refuge in Moravia.

Instead, someone helped them escape and Trindl, with Paul's widow Stindl, fled to Moravia.

The strange, difficult, war-time Gospel had done its work. It cost the believers of South Tyrol everything they had, but it was the joyful beginning of a new reign. It transformed those that heard it, and got them ready for trouble ahead.

5

Trouble

The fresh wind of revival blowing in from Rwanda in the early 1940s seemed at first to blow away all the troubles that had gathered like storm clouds around the Mennonite mission on Katuru Hill. Old enemies suddenly became friends. Black and white balokole (awakened ones) reached out to cross lines of racial difference, cultural and economic barriers—even national and denominational boundaries—to establish a new fellowship of love and grace in Tanganyika Territory.

A small but significant number of African believers came up to their white missionary brothers and confessed the sin of envy in their lives. They confessed that they had secretly wanted to live on the same level as the missionaries and were sorry for having begged for money and material assistance that wouldn't have been good for them.

The missionaries forgave them and rejoiced in what they hoped would be a breakthrough in missionary-convert relationships. But their rejoicing was short-lived.

With a host of new people in the church, now that exact standards and discipline no longer mattered so much, came a host of new issues. Many of them difficult issues to solve, and many—if not most of them—related somehow or another to money.

At one staff meeting, shortly after the revival, all the African brothers present said they would refuse to discuss anything at all until the “real question” got answered. That was the question why foreign workers got an allowance and lived from church

money, driving church vehicles, while “native workers” had no such privileges.

The mission board, describing the situation to its supporting churches, stated:

There are some difficult questions concerning the use of money from home in the African church work. . . . The question has been raised many times as to why money cannot come from the rich brethren in America to provide all the needs of the mission work. But we who have the spiritual oversight and need to be as parents to the young church and to the spiritual children God has given, see that there are principles of giving and helpfulness that need to be developed in the African church. To allow money to flow freely from the home church to the young church would make it almost impossible later on to establish indigenous principles. We want a church that will be able to stand and go on if the time should come in the future when the missionaries for some reason may need to leave the field, and leave the church in African hands.¹

Even though such logic made no sense at all to African villagers, it made perfect sense to Mennonites from Pennsylvania. One could really hurt “the natives” by sharing too freely with them, was the general conclusion. And by doing so, the spread of the Gospel might well be hindered instead of helped.

To avoid this, the mission board gave further guidelines to new workers:

The African’s standard of living is such that if his life is explained to the average American, he is considered very poor. But such comparisons can be misleading. . . . To make more money readily available, as by direct gifts to individuals or by turning money over to the African church, would in many cases be undesirable. It has been an established principle to discourage direct gifts to individuals. . . . If direct contact is established between Africans and the sources of income in America, there

¹ *Africa Answers* 87

could readily be temptations to abuse privileges, especially as more Africans learn English and could write directly to America.²

Africans, with village life in their blood, expected nothing other than that the Christian family, into which they had been adopted and baptised with new Christian names, would function like a new village around them. For this reason they moved by the droves into steadily expanding circles of mud houses, stick fences, cattle pens and open yards where black children played and white chickens scratched around the mission station on Katuru Hill.

While the Pennsylvania missionaries welcomed their presence—for Gospel purposes—the thought of being held economically responsible for their converts seemed not only preposterous to the mission board, but even highly suspect. Something of which the Africans definitely needed to get cured:

There is the temptation for those who want work at the mission station, to pose as believers although they lack a real salvation experience. In the early days of one of our stations when the invitation to accept Christ was given in a Sunday morning service, a number of men indicated their willingness. The next morning they came and wanted to be written up for work!³

No African could have understood what was strange or wrong about that.

Trouble Grows and Spreads

After the second World War, when Pennsylvania bishops could once more travel to Africa and missionaries could finally return on furlough, new problems quickly arose. Elam Stauffer, who had just re-married after Elizabeth died, returned to America with his new wife to tell of the revival, the rapid growth of the work, and how mightily that Lord had blessed their labours with

² *Africa Answers* 88

³ *Africa Answers* 79

the power of his Holy Ghost—“just like in the book of Acts.” His brothers and sisters at home listened in amazement.

Gone was Elam’s cautious Mennonite conservatism. In its place, he radiated a new joy in the Spirit. His preaching revolved around grace and deliverance in Christ—the “revival message”—rather than around obedience and a regulated non-conformed lifestyle. “I would rather see a church as variegated as a flower garden,” Elam announced to a shocked audience in Lancaster County, “than a church that is uniform but spiritually dead!”

Unless new workers showed evidence of Holy Spirit baptism, the missionaries in Africa decided, they should not bother coming over.

Unless new workers stood with Mennonite doctrine and practice, the home church decided, they would not bother sending them.

The relationship of the Tanganyika church to the church in Pennsylvania was a strictly *fraternal* one, the missionaries insisted. The home church, on the other hand, insisted on their *paternal* relationship to the new church.⁴

For twenty years the Tanganyika mission and the home church in Pennsylvania wrestled with what often seemed like an impasse—while the number of African members kept expanding so rapidly it threatened to surpass the membership at home, and while money continued to make more trouble on Katuru Hill than all other issues combined. Where should the money come

⁴ One Pennsylvania bishop, wrote about mission work years later: “Those who are qualified to be ordained [on the foreign field] must have an appreciation for the paternal relationship with the sending church. Confidence must be placed in the Mission Board and the bishops of the parent church. . . . Even though some of the believers in the foreign churches do not have the benefit of a physical link to the Mennonite heritage, they do have a spiritual link that must be recognized and preserved” (Eastern Mennonite Testimony, August 1985).

from for the church's projects? Who owned what—the mission or the African believers? Or perhaps the government, after state funds got used to build mission schools on government land.

So many staff meetings, bishop delegations, trips to and from America, changes of personnel and tensions on the field took their toll, not only in mission funds, but in spiritual well-being. In 1950, eight years after the great revival, the mission board reported:

Unfortunately, nervous breakdowns are too common among mission workers. The reasons may not always be easy to find, and the answer to the problem is not entirely to be found in the spiritual life and experience of the individual. The foreign missionary's life can become restricted and narrow. He should maintain a wide interest in church news, world events, and should maintain contact with his friends back home. . . . He should be able at times to leave his station and forget about his regular work. . . . More rest and sleep is required than at home, and the annual leave of from two to four weeks recommended by the mission should not be despised.⁵

It took the African members of the church many years to fully understand why white people needed vacations when they already lived in so much greater convenience and luxury than they. For the African sister, cooking over an open fire, milking goats, tending crops in drought conditions, one day in the missionaries' houses would have seemed like vacation enough. To travel overseas, to see "Buckingham Palace, the pyramids in Egypt, or the heathen temples of the Far East along the way" (a suggested the mission board made to its new workers), was to African believers like going to see the moon.

Nevertheless, the Pennsylvania missionaries soon learned the benefits of dutifully taking their vacations as planned. "The mission has wisely recommended that each missionary spend some time away from his regular work each year," wrote Dr.

⁵ *Africa Answers* 120

Merle Eshleman. “This has proved to be a good investment of time and money. . . This annual leave often provides the opportunity to meet with other missionaries, to visit other missions, to see other parts of Africa and to get to a different climate. . . . He comes back from his leave refreshed in body and spirit and ready to go on in the work.”⁶

Blessed with Trouble

The believers in South Tyrol and Moravia knew nothing of “going on vacation.” But of trouble they knew a great deal, and they expected it. “I will not hide from you how it goes with us,” wrote Jakob Hutter to the believers in Moravia, “In our hearts we are doing very well, may God be praised! But the troubles that have always afflicted everyone that fears God, have afflicted us too, and that is good for us. We stand in great danger, but that is the way it ought to be. If it weren’t for that, everyone and his brother would want to join up with Christ’s community. As it is, however, these troubles and dangers purify the church. Many that hear the Word of God with gladness, become faint and turn back quickly when they must suffer tribulation because of the Word.”⁷

Jeronime Käls, before they burned him at Vienna, wrote from prison:

I thank God for taking us into his discipline, for in this we know we are his children and that he loves us. I am only now getting to understand how good, how full of grace, his fatherly discipline really is. And I am often reminded of our dear brother, Bärtil the tailor, who once prayed, “Oh God, father whom I love the best, I ask you from the bottom of my heart, please keep on disciplining us! I love and trust you. Keep punishing us when we need it, so

⁶ *Africa Answers* 132

⁷ *Hutterische Episteln* V2 10

we do not get careless and lazy. Do not take your discipline from us, but make it sweet to us like sugar or honey!”⁸

Hans Hass, a believer caught on his way to Moravia wrote from prison in Hall, shortly before his execution in the first week of Advent, 1527:

Once a true believer realises that trouble will not hurt him—that it actually does him good and results in the glory of God—no amount of trouble will bother him anymore. The godless think they hinder him through their display of power, but the more they rage against the believer the more joyful he becomes! He has discovered that every stroke of “bad luck” as the world sees it, results in his advancement. So he becomes bold and happy, like a brave soldier, gladly tackling opposition on every side.⁹

Jakob Hutter saw trouble as a very real part of every believer’s life. The idea of a believer evading trouble, or leading a life without perpetual confrontation with the world, seemed like heresy to him. To a group of prisoners at Hohenwarth in Austria, caught on the way between South Tyrol and Moravia, he wrote:

Look my dear fellow-members of the body of Christ, how beautifully the Holy Spirit comforts us in all things! The one that loves God feels the urge to leap for joy and laugh when he sees it and takes it all to heart. Even though he may be troubled and sorrowful to the point of death, he comes back to life, on beholding the work of the Spirit again. . . . Be comforted and let him steady your hearts in peace. God leads into hell but always back out of it again. He brings sorrow but follows it up with joy. He gives death and he gives life, and after the big thundershower it always clears up again. Be patient and wait for your redemption draws near! Look forwards, not backwards! Never let the love in your heart grow cold. Do not be ashamed of the body of the Christ but rejoice in it with all your hearts!

⁸ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 120

⁹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 57-61

We have nothing else promised to us on earth but that we must go through trouble and need, persecution, pain, torture, shame, the ridicule of ungodly men, suffering and death. This is the sign and seal of all true children of God, the mark of Christ, placed upon the Son of Man and to all belong to him in these last times, according to the Word of God. The cross is the glory of the children of God, the badge of God's honour upon their lives. The cross is their highest praise, the crowning evidence of the peace of the Most High.

Jesus himself carried the cross. So will his disciples. So have all God's chosen ones from the foundation of the earth.

We should not think, when trouble comes upon us, that we must be enemies of God. To the contrary, it is proof of the fact that we are his friends—his beloved children, to be sure. For whom the Lord loves he chastens, and those he receives he disciplines with the rod. All that refuse God's discipline are not his children, but sons and daughters of the great Babylonian whore.¹⁰

Troubles Thick and Fast

If the believers from South Tyrol expected trouble as part of their walk with Christ, they surely faced no disappointment on reaching Moravia—the “promised land.” For the church community they joined, the one founded by one-eyed Jakob Widemann, Franz Inzinger, Kilian Volkhammer, and others at Austerlitz, had trouble enough and to spare.

Not long after Jörg Zaunring and the first refugees from South Tyrol came to live at Austerlitz, another group of around 85 people arrived from Böhmisches Krumau. So did a rapidly growing number of seekers from Schlesien, Schwaben, the Kurpfalz and places throughout Germany and Austria. Even Wilhelm Räbel (Reublin), one of the very first Anabaptists in Switzerland and southern Germany came to live at Austerlitz.

¹⁰ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 39-40



Slavkov u Brna (Austerlitz) in the Czech province of Moravia. On 2 December 1805, after the last of its believers had fled, 68,000 French troops under Napoleon defeated 90,000 Russian and Austrian troops here (24,000 getting killed or wounded), in one of the greatest infantry battles of world history.

While one-eyed Jakob welcomed all the new people and many rejoiced in the Lord's work growing so rapidly, others—the sisters in particular—scrambled to find enough bedding space, a place to hang out all the wash, and how to cook food for everyone while keeping so many children happy at once.

The winter of 1530 turned out to be a cold one. With the snow, it became impossible to bring everyone together in one place to eat, so they settled on three houses in the old town of Austerlitz to serve as dining halls and meeting rooms of the community.

The South Tyrol people liked it well enough. But the preaching, they soon decided, just wasn't quite the same. Pretty dry, day after day, with little convicting power. Wilhelm Räbel, at the same time, found it strange that one-eyed Jakob and his brothers never invited him to speak at all. All he could do was "sit in the corner and listen."

As if that were not enough, rumours began to circulate that some of the original Austerlitz people, the leaders and their

wives in particular, were saving up money for themselves and buying nice things in town, on the sly. They were giving fancy gifts one to another, and “feasting on roasted meat, poultry, fish, and good wine while the rest of the people got peas and cabbage” as Wilhelm Räbel wrote in a letter to a friend.

Even more serious complaints came from the sisters saying their children did not get enough to eat, and were learning bad things from running around with so many others with so little to do. Some, they said, had died of the poor food, and of infectious diseases that could have been avoided.

But nobody had more to complain than the unmarried singles, for whom one-eyed Jakob and his helpers were arranging marriages as fast as they came. The young girls hated getting married off to older single men they did not like. The boys got upset when those older bachelors took the girls their age and four unhappy mismatched couples had separated not long after their weddings.

A tense unhappy atmosphere hung in the air as the believers gathered on winter evenings to eat and pray. One night, shortly after New Years, 1530, when one-eyed Jakob was not around, Wilhelm Räbel asked to say something. Kilian Volkhammer, in charge of the meeting, did not think so. But after the meal, Wilhelm went into another room and began reading from the Bible, out loud.

One by one, the brothers and sisters trickled in and sat down to listen. Soon the room was standing full. Even the young people and some of the children came. But not everyone felt comfortable with what was going on. A few loyal believers sent word to one-eyed Jakob (at one of the other meeting places) and he came quickly, very upset, wanting to shut Wilhelm Räbel up and send him away at once.

“The man is causing division among us. Can’t you see?” he blustered.

For a long time, for months, Jörg Zaunring had watched was happening and waited on God. He had prayed much. So had Burkhardt von Ofen, Böhmisch David, Adam Schlegel, and other spiritually-minded brothers. Now, when one-eyed Jakob threatened to put Wilhelm Räbel out for airing the exact concerns they also shared, they could not go along with it. “Let us pray about it first,” Jörg Zaunring said. “Let us at least let both sides speak and decide on that basis what to do.”

One-eyed Jakob would not hear of it. “Whoever sides with Wilhelm Räbel,” he fumed, “can get up and leave.”

The next day one hundred and fifty people, with many unbaptised young people and children besides, walked off with no more than they could carry. Nearly all the South Tyrol people went along with them (one notable exception being Ulrich Stadler, the young man from Stulfes in the Eisack Valley, just below Sterzing).

It was hard, but “in this way God purified us again, separating the godly from the ungodly,” wrote Klaus Breitmichel ten years later. By the end of January the new group had found shelter in an abandoned building at Steurowitz, and when spring came they found work in a vineyard, whose owner said he was also a believer. For a long time they worked, having nothing but bread and water to eat on most days. But when pay day came he turned them out with nothing, threatening to turn them in to the police if they did not leave.

Very strangely, the Abbess of a nearby convent, Mother Johanka of Boskowitz, took pity on the group and gave them a loan. She also found them a place to rent in the town of Auspitz. But the believers’ troubles were far from over.

More seekers coming from Germany now had to decide whether to go with the new group at Auspitz or the old one at Austerlitz. One of them, in speaking with Wilhelm Räbel, discovered that Wilhelm held some really strange ideas. But when the newcomer asked Jörg Zaunring about it, he knew nothing about

them. Together the two men went back to Wilhelm who now earnestly denied what he had said. But other witnesses appeared and Wilhelm grudgingly admitted the truth. Shortly afterward he turned sick—so sick he thought he might die, and gave a little bag with his private savings, twenty-four Gulden, to a sister he trusted, for safe-keeping.

The startled sister, Katherina Loyin, went to talk with Jörg Zaunring at once. Wilhelm defended himself fiercely, claiming his rights, and as soon as he got better he left—with his money—never to set foot in a Christian community again.

The shaken believers cried and prayed much. But that was not the end. A story began to circulate that Böhmisches David, one of the leaders of the new community, had hired armed plainclothesmen to protect the group during their walk in January from Austerlitz to Steurowitz. “Of course I did,” Böhmisches David readily admitted. “And why shouldn’t I have? This country is full of bandits. Do you think I would have let all those women and children fall prey to a pack of murdering highwaymen?”

Once more Jörg Zaunring shook his head and prayed, wondering what to do next. Could this be reconciled with the way of Christ? He did not think so. Neither did the rest from South Tyrol. But before David left in righteous indignation (feeling he had only done his duty) he dropped another bomb. “How is what I did any worse than what happened to you,” he pointed at Jörg Zaunring.

All the brothers looked at Jörg and little by little another story came out.

During those first months after leaving Austerlitz, while the brothers had no work and all lived unhandily crowded together, Jörg had much to keep him occupied. His poor wife, feeling neglected no doubt, had struck up a friendship with Thomas Lindl, a young convert from Germany. Thomas had been up to South Tyrol and knew the situation well. An intelligent and

pleasant fellow, Jörg's wife found him a good companion—until their affection for one another led them away from Christ and into sin. When Jörg was gone.

Both Thomas and Jörg's wife confessed their guilt with tears. Jörg was dumbfounded. He spoke about it with his brothers in leadership, including Böhmisches David, and they agreed that to avoid scandal they would just handle it privately. After all, weren't the two involved totally repentant and ashamed? Why embarrass them any further?

Now, when the rest of the believers heard of it, they were appalled. "Since when is adultery a 'secret sin'?" they wondered. If Jörg would cover up adultery, what else wouldn't he do?

With the brothers' and sisters' confidence in him gone, with his home in disarray and needing time to work things out with God, Jörg accepted the discipline of the group in godly sorrow but with grace. While the community at Auspitz, left with no leaders except their *Haushalter*, Leonhard Schmerbacher, dispatched a few young men with an urgent message to South Tyrol: Would the brothers please send help? Wouldn't Jakob Hutter please come down again?

Help in Time of Trouble

In South Tyrol, the messengers from Moravia made their requests known and told their sad story to a large Gmaa that gathered for three days on the Getzenberg to meet with them, to pray, and discuss what should be done.

All that came shook their heads and wondered what had happened down in Moravia. Another message of distress, much like this one, but telling only "the other side of the story," had come from one-eyed Jakob and the group at Austerlitz. Not knowing for sure what to think, or what say, everyone on the

Getzenberg agreed to send Jakob Hutter and Simon Schützinger down to Moravia at once.

Their mission, although a sad one, brought fruit that none had expected. On their arrival in Moravia Jakob and Simon quickly determined that the struggling group at Auspitz, even with all their troubles, were in the right and one-eyed Jakob, with his disorderly crew at Austerlitz, clearly in the wrong. But they also discovered these were not the only believers in Moravia.

Right in Auspitz a second large community, around a thousand believing refugees from Germany, had grown up under the leadership of Philip Plener. And, thirty kilometres to the northwest, at Rossitz, a third one, consisting of believers from Schlesien under the leadership of Gabriel Ascherham, had found a place to live. All of these people, it appeared to Jakob and Simon, held the same goals and could profitably work together. One-eyed Jakob no longer wanted to see them, but with Philip and Gabriel, the two brothers from South Tyrol found unity in Christ. They prayed together and promised to support and help one another as needs arose.

When Jakob returned to South Tyrol he left Simon in charge at Auspitz and everything seemed fixed. . . . Until more stories of mismanagement and distress found their way up to believers in the Puster Valley. What concerned them the most was to hear how the brothers and sisters in Moravia had gotten themselves so deeply indebted that their children going hungry. Even though the situation in South Tyrol was difficult as well—by now every servant of the Word had a bounty on his head—the Gmaani scratched together as much as they could, then met on the Getzenberg to send Jakob, with the money, off to Moravia again.

Arriving in the sultry heat of August, 1533, Jakob could see that everyone was unhappy and in great distress. Common funds had gotten poorly distributed. The women were unhappy, the men

overworked, the children cranky. But little by little, as he took charge and set things right, clarity and happiness returned.

The first thing Jakob did, with the money from South Tyrol, was to pay off the believers' overdue debts. Then, in a thoroughgoing and efficient way, he restructured the community so all would be fair, the women content, and everyone able to live in peace. Those that had been selfish he admonished. The greedy he warned, and so earnestly did some believers take it to heart that they went beyond what anyone expected.

Jörg Fasser, an ex-monk from the Inn Valley,¹¹ even brought his bed and his chest to the communal storeroom, in case anyone needed it more than he. His wife, however, shared neither his convictions nor his zeal. She went and hid some of her own money, with the money they had saved for their children's inheritance. But her plans failed. Someone found the hidden treasure and reported it. "Sapphira Fasser," the believers identified her at once, and under church discipline she got to eat alone, until she saw her error, repented and made things right.

The only complaint about Jakob's work in the Gmaa at Auspitz came from his long-time helper and co-worker, Simon Schützing. "What does all this mean?" Simon began to ask himself and others. "Who is in charge here anyway? Does Jakob have the right to just walk in and act as if he owned the place?"

Unhappy, and feeling like his own leadership had been slighted or ignored, Simon went to Philip and Gabriel—the leaders of the neighbouring communities—to ask their advice. They had questions about Jakob too. He seemed pretty "high-handed," and somewhat fanatical in his views. But an uneasy peace continued until Jakob, following up on an inner sense that something was wrong, checked things out a little further.

¹¹ Jörg Fasser came from Inn Valley. Early Anabaptist in Schwaz was a monk known as Fasser. He left the monastery, married, got a job as a water lifter in a mine.

Suspecting that some of the believers had been hoarding up personal wealth he found some hidden money, too much linen and too many shirts, stashed up in the Schützingers' apartment. For this he admonished Simon, who, in honest contrition, confessed that he also had forty Gulden hidden in a little bag up behind the ceiling beams.

Jakob Hutter, Leonhard Schmerbacher, and all the rest of the brothers were shocked and dismayed. Here, with all the debts the community had to pay, with all the dire needs at hand, and the “sweet offering” coming from their hard-pressed brothers and sisters in South Tyrol, their leader, the man in charge, had a major supply of cash hidden in his house the whole time!

It was too much. After nearly a week of fasting and prayer, with many tears, the brothers put “Ananias” Schützing out of the Gmaa and Jakob Hutter became the undisputed leader of the community at Auspitz.

New Life at Auspitz

Lovely songs floated through the kitchen, the wash-house, the gardens and workshops of the community at Auspitz after Jakob and those with him set one thing after the next in order. The sisters began to take orderly turns with the cooking, the sewing, the care of the little ones. Responsible brothers and sisters stood in charge of all supplies, making sure they got handled right. Brothers received permanent duties—caring for the horses, in the workshops, in the bakery (a man always baked the bread, with the sisters' help), and in the fields.

Discipline became prompt and strict. But it was fair, and nearly everyone loved the order it produced—especially the children. The brothers put Jeronime Käls, a gifted man, former court secretary at Kufstein,¹² in charge of the children and the school.

¹² When Jeronime's mother joined the Anabaptists and fled, the police burned her house down. But Jeronime heard the Gospel too, got baptised, and

Many sisters helped him. From morning to evening the children learned how to read, how to sing and pray, how to care for the garden, the fruit trees and animals, and with constant loving supervision they had great times one with another as friends.

Jakob Hutter, although he was still a young man—not yet married, when he became leader at Auspitz—loved children, and the whole community sensed the urgency of caring for their little ones, training them in the fear of God. Among the very first in Europe, or the whole world, to do so, they set up a school where every child had an opportunity to learn, regardless of his or her gift. They also helped the parents take their responsibility seriously. One brother (perhaps Jeronime Käls) wrote:

John says, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” In the same way, all God-fearing parents need to walk before their children, their little lambs, as true examples of a holy, Christ-like, and virtuous way of life. This they need to do in words and deeds, with all diligence, caring for them with the most genuine concern for their wellbeing. Parents stand just as responsible for their children, as they do for their own souls. God expects them to do everything possible for their children in holy godly love, through the power of his Holy Ghost.

In sorrow or in joy, in good times or bad times, in life or in death, it is the parents responsibility to care for their children, to watch out for them, to go with them wherever they need to go, by day or by night. It is the parents’ duty to work with them, to pray for them without ceasing, to read to them and instruct them at every opportunity. Using all the gifts that God has given them, it is expected of parents to go with their children through whatever comes—weeping with them when they are sad, rejoicing with them when they are happy, finding their way through rough and easy times, through hunger and thirst, through danger and need,

set out to tell others. In Bohemia he found work in the mines, and joined the group at Böhmisches Krumau that moved to Auspitz. He married a believing girl and was one of the few educated (Latin speaking) members of the community.

through sorrow, pain and persecution. Everything with a willing spirit and compassionate heart.

Let parents be an example not only to their children, but to the entire church community . . . willing to lay down their lives for the little ones God placed into their care. Let children honour their God-fearing parents, subject to them in all things, and serving them in obedience as unto God. Then, let both parents and children be faithful one to another, loving each other from the heart.¹³

After Jeronime became overseer of children's affairs at Auspitz their manners, their eating habits, appropriate clothing for winter and summer use, special care to avoid infectious diseases, and every other area of their physical and spiritual wellbeing got looked after. Parents rejoiced to see their children flourishing, both intellectually and socially. Even people of the world stood in astonishment at what the believers' children knew, how well they could read, and how skilfully they earned their living through a large variety of crafts and trades.

With everything functioning smoothly, the believers at Auspitz did not doubt they had lived to see the *Landesordnung* fulfilled. That they had arrived in Jesus' Land, the Kingdom of God on earth. What began as a little sprout in the valleys of South Tyrol had come to flower in Moravia, but more trouble was not long in coming.

Trouble Comes to Head

Nearly everyone loved the new order of things at Auspitz and thrived in it. But a few that did not have the love of Christ in their hearts, who had joined the community only to see what they could get out of it, got tired of "dying daily" and giving everything up, even their personal "rights and privileges," for the good of the rest.

¹³ *Von der Kinderzucht, in Hutterischen Episteln V4 210-227*

And they knew just where to go to air their complaints.

Right in Auspitz, in Philip Plener's community, these unhappy souls found support and sympathy. One little thing led to another until the Lord's Day morning of 26 October, 1533.

All the believers at Auspitz had gathered for an early morning prayer and instruction meeting. Jakob was planning to speak about the evils of gossip, about maintaining discreet relationships with people outside the community, and how young people should prepare themselves for godly marriage. But to his surprise, so early it was still dark, Philip and Gabriel slipped in the door.

Out of courtesy Jakob invited them both to say what they had on their minds.

At first the two brothers shared friendly words of greeting. But it soon became apparent they had other business in mind. They questioned the new order at Auspitz and brought up a series of issues already settled before.

Many words got exchanged. The atmosphere became charged, some saying this, and some saying that, while the earnest and God-fearing among them groaned within themselves at having to hear it all.

Once more, after the unpleasant visitors had left, the entire community fasted and prayed for a week. Was the way the Gmaani in South Tyrol had chosen simply too extreme—too “fanatical and unbalanced” for anyone else to understand? Should the new order established at Auspitz give way again to the haphazard, piecemeal type of community, the kind of “spontaneous sharing” that one-eyed Jakob, and now Philip and Gabriel thought best?

Many difficult questions tumbled about in the believers' minds and occupied their conversations during geese-butcher time, just before Advent, in 1533. Was all this small-minded greed and treachery what one should expect from following Christ?

Then, right at the time of the noon meal on a sultry day, the answer came. From all corners the children, the big boys, the young sisters and women, the bearded men in their work clothes came out to shade their eyes and glance at the awesome sky. It was true. For around an hour, three suns with a heavenly rainbow separating the one in the middle, shone on the sodden pastures and thatched-roofed villages of Moravia.

The believers stood in silence. They wondered and feared.

Then the two lesser suns, the ones outside the rainbow, faded, and the real sun, the good sun, the old sun they could trust, stood once more alone and resplendent in the middle of the sky.

What could this mean but that every imitation, every fake or false expression of Jesus' Gospel, for as pleasant as it might look for a while, would surely have to fade and only the Truth, only the Sun of Righteousness would be left to shine on those that fear God and wear his mark on their lives!

The brothers and sisters took great courage from the sign that God had set in the heavens for all to see. Then, with sad hearts but brave determination they disowned Philip and Gabriel as false prophets, impostors sent from the evil one to plant doubts and disturb the Kingdom of God. Where there had been a fellowship of three church communities in Moravia, only one was left. And, as time would tell, only that one (by far the smallest and poorest of the three) would survive.

The believers sent messengers to South Tyrol at once, to let Hans Amon and the rest know what had happened. Right after that Peter Veut came with a large group of refugees. More followed from the Drau Valley, from Germany and elsewhere—125 new people in a month's time—while the sisters scrambled to find enough bedding, and cook so much more food, in the wintertime, than what they had planned.

Trouble from Without

Through the entire period of inner turmoil in Moravia, the flood of refugees from South Tyrol, Germany and Switzerland never slackened off. In fact, it grew continually larger. From South Tyrol new groups—one of them bringing the noble heir, Sigmund von Wolkenstein, another one bringing Stindl Gall and Trindl Purst from Trens—appeared almost monthly. From Hessen in Germany, Gilg Schneider brought an entire Anabaptist church. But not everyone fitted into the picture nicely, and the community at Auspitz, spiritually mature after its “baptism of fire,” no longer wasted its time disputing with troublemakers.

From the start the Gilg Schneider people grumbled about common meals. They did not think it necessary to eat together, or live in quite as regimented a community as the believers at Auspitz. Then they grumbled about their work assignments. But when they saw that no amount of agitating would help and that they could cause no division in the group, they left in a huff and joined Philip Plener’s church.

Then came Jörg Scherer with another entire group from Germany. The Scherer people considered themselves more conservative, more *fromm* (pious), than the believers at Auspitz. They complained about the South Tyrol people’s colourful and embroidered clothing (even using gold and silver thread!). They complained about “strange Tyrolean food” and refused to eat it. The believers offered to let one of the Scherer women be chief cook, but none of them wanted to do it. Finally, they offered to rent another house for the Scherer people, less than two km away, but they did not want that either—and made fun of the idea. Finally Jörg Scherer and all his people just packed up and left, and no one was sorry to see them go.

In the meanwhile, Philip Plener’s people and Gabriel Ascherham went to the Moravian government and told them slanderous stories about the community at Auspitz. They told

the government Jakob Hutter had come with money and bought his way into the church so he could rule it as he liked. They called him the “biggest rascal that ever set foot in Moravia.”

But the believers paid no attention. They had other matters to think about.

In South Tyrol the intensity of persecution increased by the day. Bounties on Anabaptist leaders had gone up and unscrupulous people, hoping to make money did all they could to infiltrate the Gmaani and betray them.

The servant, Bastl Glaser, and an entire group of refugees from South Tyrol fell into the hands of the police at Hohenwart in Austria. Then Hans Amon brought a group, only to get thrown into gaol in Moravia, with Jakob Hutter and Jeronime Käls, when Mother Johanka suddenly demanded more rent money than the believers had.

The believers found the money, but they moved to Schäckowitz, on a nearby estate, to avoid further problems. At Schäckowitz, for the first time, they built a long, steep-roofed communal dwelling—in a hurry. The first families started moving in before all the windows were in place and the doors hung. But everyone from the old and new places gathered for a wonderful all-day communion, baptism, and wedding feast on the day of Pentecost, 1535.

Trindl Purst, who had left her parents’ home in the Ahrn Valley years before, who got baptised one night in a shepherd’s hut with Paul Rumer (long beheaded), who had lain in prison at Rodeneck and Brixen, and who had fled across the Alps with Stindl Gall after they burned her husband alive, stood as the bride before the gathered crowd.

The young man beside her, the one that held her hand and promised to love and care for her as long as life would last, was none other than the one who had baptised her and received her back into the Gmaa after she had fallen away—Jakob Hutter.

Their friend, Hans Amon, married them.

One month after the wedding, the city of Münster in Westfalen¹⁴ (northeastern Germany) fell, and the government of Moravia ordered all Anabaptists out of the country.

The owner of the estate at Schäckowitz withdrew his protection. Everyone had already left Auspitz, so with bundles on their backs, carrying their little ones, the believers set out on foot into the unknown. Moravian troops escorted them out of the village, drums beating and flags flying.

They headed for the wilderness—low lying marshes and intermittent lakes to the south, toward Strachotin. Even there the government sent spies seeing if they were congregating to plan an attack. To this Jakob responded:

Now we are here in the wilderness, on the wild brush land under the open sky. We take that patiently and praise God who considers us worthy to suffer for him. . . . We cry to God day and night that he will protect us and keep us from harm. We commend ourselves to his mercy, and he our captain, our guard, will fight for us. The prophets Isaiah and Ezra said all that forsake evil to love God and keep his commandments will get robbed of their goods, chased out of their homes, and driven away. Through this we know that we are heirs of God's glory, that he loves us, and is pleased to accept us in the company of the saints. . . .

But woe, and woe again, to those that persecute us without a cause! . . . God with fearful punishment and damnation will pay them back for the innocent blood they have spilled and all the trouble they have caused. . . . Now, in answer to what we are doing here, you have driven us out with no place to go. What can we do—the King's territories lie all around us. No matter which

¹⁴ For several years Münster had been held by heavily armed Anabaptists, seeking to establish the Kingdom of God on earth through military power. Because they also lived communally and taught many of the same things as the believers in Moravia, the government assumed a connection when actually there was none.

way we turn we walk right into the robbers' and tyrants' open jaws. On top of that, we have many helpless widows and orphans among us, many sick people and children. How shall we get anywhere with them? They lost their mothers and fathers to that godless tyrant, that enemy of truth and righteousness, Ferdinand, that prince of darkness, who killed them for the sake of God's truth and who robbed them of all they owned. What can we do but care for these widows and orphans, for these sick ones and little children that God has entrusted into our care? It is our duty to feed and clothe them, to give them shelter in serve them from the heart in every possible way. Therefore we cannot and will not abandon them. May God spare us forever from such a thought! We will not leave God's way even though it costs us our lives. . .

Here we lie on the open heath, no threat to anyone. We would do no harm even to our worst enemies, not even to Ferdinand himself. All we have done and what we are lies open to all men. And as you know, rather than steal a penny from anyone, we would lose a hundred guilders. We would rather get hurt, we would rather let them take our lives and die, than strike our greatest enemy with the hand—let alone with lances, swords and halberds, like the world does.

We carry no physical weapons, no spears no guns, as you well know. In short, our message, our words, our life and conduct is that people should walk in truth and justice, peacefully and in unity one with another, as true followers of Christ. We speak and live openly before all people and are not ashamed to tell anyone what we believe. The fact that many people slander us does not bother us, because Jesus has long prophesied that it will go this way. It has been this way from the beginning of the world and he and his apostles suffered it too.¹⁵

Not only the new community at Schäckowitz, but all those left with Philip Plener in Auspitz, those with Gabriel at Rossitz and with one-eyed Jakob at Austerlitz, all non-conformed believers in Moravia fled in the summer of 1535 to wherever they could go. Philip Plener's people headed back to southern Germany,

¹⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 1-6

many getting caught at Passau in Bavaria along the way. Gabriel Ascherham's people fled back to Schlesien from where they came, while the Austerlitzer fled to Poland and Slovakia.

Those with Jakob Hutter and Hans Amon in the swamps below Strachotin decided to split up into smaller groups and find places to stay in hiding nearby. But Jakob and Trindl, the newlyweds, with Jeronime Käls, and two young men, Michl and Kaspar, they sent back to South Tyrol to look up what remained of the Gmaani there.

Trouble on Familiar Ground

Not daring to travel through Salzburg and up the Inn (the easiest route between Moravia and South Tyrol) Jakob and Trindl, with the three brothers, made their way on foot, 450 kilometres through the heart of Austria by night. Through Reichenhall and Kitzbühel they headed south through ever steeper and higher ranges until they crossed the Hohe Tauern—the highest range in Austria—between the Grossvenediger, its awesome 3674 m peak gleaming white in the moonlight, and the Reichenspitze on the other side.

With Trindl, by now expecting a baby, Jakob and the boys descended into the Ahrn Valley of South Tyrol. Trindl had grown up here and many of her family, including her parents, still lived in the area. But it was too dangerous to stop. Neither would the people they met at Sand in Taufers, formerly a seeking family, put them up for more than a night.

Over the hills and through woods they made their way to the Getzenberg. The first home they tried, also formerly a seeking family, shut the door on them. But at Hörschwang old Hans Obern (Upper Hans) welcomed them as family in Christ and gave them food.

Before many days went by, both Hans and his wife, his daughter Dorothea, a young couple named Wolf and Els, and two hired



The Valle Aurina (Ahrn Valley) descending to Brunico (Bruneck in the foreground). Tures (Sand in Taufers) lies in this valley, through which Jakob and Trindl made their way after crossing the Hohe Tauern, the permanently snow-crowned range in the background.

hands, both called Martin, had given themselves to the Gospel, and Jakob baptised them all.

Nickl Niederhofer from Schöneck, whose experience with the Gmaani had been a patchy one, came around again, and Juliana, a young women of Kiens asked for baptism as well.

From Hörschwang, with its joyfully rehabilitated Gmaa (all the former believers had fled) Jakob and Trindl moved on to Afers and Lügen. There, in the woods, they held a meeting. Nickl Braun and his wife Apolina, keepers of the local bath-house, and Hänsel Oberegger, a young boy from Afers got baptised. More and more seekers came, and in spite of the danger, meetings continued in the bath-house and up on the slopes among the trees. Nickl Braun, with young Hänsel Oberegger carried bread, flour, sausages, cheese, and one occasion two pounds of lard up to the shepherd's hut where Jakob and Trindl stayed. Prader's wife from Lügen and her son Melchior also got baptised, but Prader himself opposed it.

From momentary safety in the heights above Lügen Jakob wrote a letter for the believers in Moravia, and sent it with a young man, Wäsl Zimmerman, who carried it across the mountains and through Austria in record time, alone. In the letter, Jakob wrote:

Most dearly beloved brothers and sisters, stand strong in the Truth you have heard! Do not waver. Do not faint. Do not doubt or lose your resolve, for this is the sure way of God. This is the Truth to which all Scriptures testify. The Truth for which so many in this land and others have shed their blood.

You are the chosen generation, the heavenly priesthood, the holy people of God. You are the church of the Firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. Co-workers of God, you are his children, and he loves you dearly. Therefore, do not doubt! Your Father in heaven is only giving you the chance to prove yourselves, to get marked and sealed in this time of great tribulation in Moravia. The blood of the martyrs, the pain of the torture chamber, stands in holy witness of your lives—in honour to God and an honour to you. Let it be your strength, your joy and your everlasting crown!¹⁶

Jakob and Trindl, by the time they sat in the shepherd's hut above Lügen had seen a great amount of trouble. Trouble from within and trouble from without. But they had learned how to live with it and overcome. What is more, the covenant of God's people, the bonds of Jesus' Land had held. Through all the trouble, God had pulled them together as a family, and pulled them through it all.

Why should he not continue to do the same?

¹⁶ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 59

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The Family

This past summer an older couple drove by our place, saw our “Rocky Cape Christian Community” sign on the highway and turned in.

“It was the word community that did it,” the pleasant faced white-haired woman told me. “Years ago we worked for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea. We just loved it. All the years we were there we lived and worked together with the other missionaries like one big happy family. It was so lovely,” she added wistfully, “that I wished we would never have to leave.”

The couple stayed with us for our daily *Gebetsstund* (prayer meeting), for our common meal and for the night. They loved every moment of it and we loved them. Both of them told us of their lives. She came from a broken home, not Christian, and had never really experienced a wider “family” or “relatives” except on the mission field. Now they went to a church in Sydney, of the denomination he had grown up in, but they lived alone. Their children had grown up and gone.

It was hard to say good-bye the next morning when they needed to leave early to catch the ferry to the mainland, to their home in the city, their backyard garden that needed water, the canary and the dog.

On the Tanganyika field, Mennonite missionaries lived the same phenomenon. After the revival in which all mission workers found deeper life in Christ, they discovered the pleasure of loving, supporting, and seeing one another around, all the time.

Every station became like a little family of its own—an older couple, if possible, to provide warmth and stability to the group, young VS workers enjoying one another during long evenings at home, ministers', doctors', and teachers' families in and out of each others houses, working in the garden together.

With the “mission family” at peace, and prospering in the Lord, the mission board had much less to fear. The missionaries' new fellowship and good-will spread quickly into the lives of their African converts, but as the mission board noted, certain precautions still needed to be maintained:

Fellowship with the African Christians is profitable for both missionary and African. They appreciate our coming to their homes to visit. We enjoy it too and learn to like their food. . . . On the other hand the missionary needs to guard against establishing intimate friendships with the African. This is even true when it involves members of the same sex. Taking the African into the home and trying to treat him on the same basis as the white person is unnatural and will lead to disappointing results. It will place the African in a position among his own people which will lead to jealousy and may actually hinder the missionary's ministry.¹

Instead of seeking close or potentially harmful fellowship with the Africans around them, the mission board encouraged its workers to develop a hobby—like bird watching or photography—and to visit the missionaries of other denominations working in the region, nearly all of them friendly and inspiring people from whom they could learn so much.

Paying constant attention to the missionaries' physical and social needs, the board soon discovered, bore wonderful results on the long run. Describing the situation in the 1950s a worker in Africa wrote:

One of the surprises which most missionaries have when they arrive on the field is the discovery of the fact that the missionaries

¹ *Africa Answers* 115

live in comfortable homes which are fairly well built, and that in many respects, characteristics of the type of life we have in America have been transplanted to Africa. . . . Kerosene burning refrigerators give the advantages of refrigeration in the constantly warm climate. Most of the missionaries have a good personal library. . . . The National Geographic Magazine, Reader's Digest, and various other magazines can be seen in their homes. The weekly newspaper . . . gives the contact for world news.

The missionary's days are usually busy, but, when evening comes, there is a marked change. The Africans are usually in their villages by dark, and do not go out unless there is something quite unusual. As the sun sets and the short twilight settles, Africa becomes still and quiet. . . . The missionary settles into the quiet and security of his own home in the evening. There is reading, study, correspondence, and family interests. It is only occasionally that outside interests take him away at night.²

Years later, living in tropical Costa Rica, our mission church besieged with never-ending struggles between the white and the brown, the rich and the poor (Latin America's infamous "class system") I wrote a paper describing what I believed our problems were and how to fix them. First I wrote about the problems:

We fit people into "convert" or "missionary" roles.

It is no pleasure to forever be the "convert" or the "native brother". Neither is it a pleasure to forever be the "missionary." When asked recently why he took some half-hearted and obviously unprepared people into his congregation as members, a missionary from our church replied: "Mission work is like farming. We put out a lot of money, then we expect a crop. That is what my home congregation did with me. They went to all the expense of sending me out here. Now I must have something to show for their investment."

Such pressure on missionaries does not build the kingdom of heaven. It multiplies the problems we have to work with in our

² *Africa Answers* 123-124

Latin American churches. Too many immature and unprepared missionaries bring immature and unprepared converts into immature and disastrous congregations.

We feel inclined to misrepresent what is going on.

Our job is not to ensure the church's rapid growth in numbers. Our job is not to write glowing missionary journals and newsletters, to ensure continued monetary support. Our job is to build the Kingdom of Heaven.

Too many times our missionary accounts are trumped up and unrealistic. We see open doors when in fact they are closed. We invent "interested contacts" where people are not interested. We say the work is taking root, becoming more stable, etc. when we have white missionary couples floundering along in little outstations, with a handful of disgruntled "natives."

What would happen if United States support and oversight were suddenly cut off from our missions in Latin America? Would healthy, reproductive seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven survive?

People receive but they do not give.

Many poor people come to our Latin American churches hoping to receive economic help. We do not mind that. We are here to help people. But in too many cases our helping does more harm than good.

We help the poor to get started with raising chickens, feeding pigs, building stepladders or whatever. But the more we give them, the more they have to make their next blunder with. Poor people consistently mismanage, waste materials, make unwise decisions, and deal foolishly with the material help we give them. Then they get upset, not with their own blunders, but with us.

We do wrong by only letting people receive, and not expecting them to give. It is more blessed to give than to receive. We well-to-do American brothers are actually stealing a blessing from the poor people we go to help. By paying for the construction of their meetinghouses, their schools, and for all the free literature that comes into their homes, we are actually warping their personalities.

I am not saying we should not help the poor. Of course we should help them. But the poor, in return, should give everything they have to help the church. If they are not willing to do this, they do not deserve the church's help.

The poor find themselves in desperate situations.

Many people in Latin America are poor because they are discouraged. Times have changed very fast for them, ten times as fast as what they changed in the United States or Canada. Just a few years ago they lived on dirt roads without electricity, farming with oxen or by hand. Now they are plunged headlong into the middle of the computer age. Many are uneducated and disoriented. They are unable to cope with the situation today. Jerked out of European Mediaeval style communities they suddenly find themselves all alone in the twentieth century city. Every man on his own. Everyone struggling desperately to get ahead (just as they struggle to get into overcrowded buses or trains). In their discouragement they turn to strong drink. They make debts and bad deals one after another. They invest unwisely. They clamour for government handouts that corrupt. Then they accept the Gospel message of salvation in our missions stations.

How can we help them, other than in Christian community?

We are unrealistic in our demands on the poor.

All of us missionaries to Latin America face the impossibility of teaching our converts how to manage their finances like we did at home.

It does not work. For as much as we would like, we cannot pass on the blessings of frugality, industry, and good business sense to men and women who grew up without knowing anything about them. Perhaps another generation may learn. But Latin American converts, as they come, will forever be our financial nightmares.

Why try it at all? I do not know how many frustrated Latin Americans have gotten excommunicated from our churches because they didn't pay their debts, squandered their money, or did anything else that was foolish in the line of finances. The approach we usually take is to counsel and admonish them,

warning them with church action if they do not shape up. The approach they usually take is to get upset at our meddling into their affairs. Then they do things behind our backs and disregard what we say until finally we have to discipline them.

This cycle has repeated itself entirely too often. I am ashamed and ready to quit. I am ready to say as the early Christians and the Anabaptists said: "Membership in our church involves turning everything in, and letting the brotherhood manage all finances together. If you are not ready for that, our church is not the place for you."

It is not right to force people to manage their finances if they are not capable of doing so. We cannot have harmony in our Latin American churches as long as we all hang on to our private enterprise, some of it Latin and some of it "Protestant Work Ethic" from North America.

We do not live like equals.

Nowhere do our differences in lifestyle become more pronounced than in Latin America, where missionaries live next door to people in cornstalk houses with roofs of palm thatch. I am weary of the problems we have created, of the envy we have aroused, of the materialism we have planted and the endless personal hassles we have had to untangle as a result of the problem of money. I am tired of explaining to people why it is right for some to have more than they need (a fleet of tractor trailers, several cars, expensive sound equipment, dairy herds, factories) while their brothers next door do not have enough to buy a bicycle (and live in rented houses with debts hanging over their heads). We can preach about social justice, playing fair the rugged American way. We can preach about the evils of communism and the safeguards of capitalism, but our preaching in light of our current practice is so often in vain. I have spoken recently with church workers from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay and the West Indies. All of them reported severe struggles in the recent past, and in some cases shared real discouragement about the outlook. New members are gained and new churches are begun, but in most of them, converts leave almost as fast or faster than they come.

We face totally different opportunities.

Some of our young people growing up in Latin America are white. They speak English. They have money. They go on trips, sometimes as far as to Canada, Europe, or the Holy Lands. They generally marry other white North Americans.

Some of our young people growing up in Latin America are dark-skinned. They speak only Spanish. They have no money. They cannot go on trips. They have a very small selection of people whom they could marry.

But we insist that the Christian life is the same for all of us. We shake our heads and sigh when another young Latin boy or girl needs to be excommunicated, runs away from home, or falls into sin.

Would we be faithful under their circumstances?

Oh that righteousness would come! I am grieved and very angry. Here we lead people to the Lord and to the church, and the church gives them contaminated food and water. They get spiritually sick and die. Like a nightmare the faces of those we have led to Christ, but lost in the church, go riding by.

Jesus and “The System”

The economic system, the trade and the commerce of Western society is not built on Christian ethics. Rather we live in a society that is the product of violence and ambition. Any student of British, Spanish and Portuguese colonial history can see that. Western mores are foundationally corrupt and anti-God. This is where Jesus’ “upside-down kingdom”, the Kingdom of Heaven, comes in.

But how upside-down do we Christians look in today’s society? If you ask me, we look surprisingly right-side-up. Nothing about us is really different from everyone else, except perhaps our personal integrity or our clothes.

I see the chief wickedness of our time as social, economic and ultimately spiritual wickedness. Mammon rules the world and I am afraid that as churches we have slowly been adjusting to his terrible rule. What subtle connections might there be between this

service to mammon and the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:11-18?

The Peaceable Fruit of Righteousness

Believers in the new churches of South Tyrol and Moravia had just as many troubles—actually even more and greater troubles—than those of Africa or Central America, centuries later. They also lost many converts and suffered internal tension as a result of it. But their troubles were of a different kind. And after they blew over, they “yielded the peaceable fruit of righteousness (justice).”

With Jakob and Trindl, and Jeronime Käls back in South Tyrol, the believers in Moravia clustered here and there in small groups in the woods, or gradually found work in rough mining camps and outlying places where their work was needed and no one cared what they believed. Eventually the owner of the Schäckowitz estate let them come back and finish the large communal dwelling they had started. At Kostl, a short distance southeast of Auspitz, they built another Gmaa. At Drasenhofen and Steinabrunn, across the river in the fertile Austrian *Weinviertel* (wine quarter), they even managed to find places for new Gmaani “right under Ferdinand’s nose” (less than a day’s walk from Vienna).

Through all this more seekers kept coming, and miracles began to happen.

During the big flight from Moravia, one-eyed Jakob Widemann and some of his people had fled into Slovakia (Upper Hungary) and Austria. There the police caught Jakob and brought him to Vienna where he got sentenced to burning at the stake. He stood boldly for Christ and left a good testimony before he died. Then, in what began as a trickle of people here and there, but that terminated as a flood of many hundreds of people, not only the people at Austerlitz, but also the followers of Gabriel Ascherham (who had fled to Schlesien) and most of Philip

Plener's community returned into full fellowship with the Gmaani. All the old grievances were forgiven and forgotten, and the believers rejoiced in newfound unity under the headship of Christ.

Immediately following the last of the three reunions, when the one remaining sun shone in undiminished splendour again, all that could make it came together for a great communion meeting at Kostl in Moravia. Even Jörg Fasser and his wife (no longer hiding her money from the rest), Jörg Zaurring, his wife, and Thomas Lindl could take part in it again, all restored, all forgiven, ready to serve Christ and one another again.

After this, the Gmaani sent Jörg Zaurring on a mission trip to Germany, where he got beheaded at Bamberg in Franken, in 1533. The also sent Jörg Fasser on long mission trips during which his wife supported him faithfully until he got burned at the stake in Austria in 1538.

Peter Walpot, the boy that had watched the burnings at Gufidaun, but who became a much-loved leader of the Gmaani in Moravia for many years, wrote:

So we do not forget from where salvation and our redemption comes, we refresh our memories through the breaking of bread and drinking wine. Every time we do it, we thank him for rescuing us who were lost, and for setting us free again.

Besides this, we confess and demonstrate that we have all become members of the body of Christ by God's grace. No one should take part in Christ's evening meal unless he is a green branch of Christ, the true vine—unless he has become a real *Gemeinschafter* and member of Christ's body, his Church. This we demonstrate through the bread we break, made up many grains, broken, ground up, and baked into one loaf. The wine we drink, made of many grapes, pressed together, shows us the same. That is why Paul writes: "The bread we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we who are many have

become one bread and one body because we all eat of that one bread.”³

Communion, for the believers, was a family affair. But they did not lose sight of the fact that they also had . . .

Families Within the Family

Erhardt Urscher, from the Etsch Valley south of Bozen, fought with the farmers under Michael Gaismair. With a group of young men he raided the estate of a wealthy land-owner and took his grain. But when he heard the Gospel of the Kingdom Erhardt became a follower of Jesus, got rid of his carnal weapons, and gave back what he had stolen.

In a Gmaa on the Breitenberg at Leifers, a servant named Blasy from Krossen—whom they caught and executed soon afterward—baptised Erhard and his wife, also captured promptly by the police. Not yet practiced in fighting with the sword of the Spirit, Erhardt wavered and recanted. So did his young wife. He paid a fine of 200 Gulden, but no sooner did they get home and talk it over than they resolved with greater determination than ever to seek the Truth and the Life again.

The next time the police raided Erhardt’s home they found two believing brothers, Valentin Fell from Flaas, and Oswald Spiess from Bozen, hiding in the hayloft. These men they caught, but Erhardt and his wife (knowing they faced certain death if captured again) fled, leaving six children asleep in the house behind them. The police took them and placed them all in Catholic homes, where despised and mistreated, they went hungry day after day.

The oldest of the children, a twelve-year-old boy named Välti, got sent to the mountain to herd goats. But his father did not abandon him. Erhardt, who knew the trails north across the

³ *Geschichtbuch 227*



Laives (Leifers) in the Val di Adige (Etsch Valley), the town from which the Urscher family came, seen from the Breitenberg.

Sarntaler Alps, took his wife to temporary safety at the Peggelhaube Guest House on the Härscher. She was expecting their seventh child. Then he hurried back to where he found Välti, alone on the mountain with his flock.

Hurriedly the two made plans to rescue the other children. Välti got them ready in the middle of the night. His father came with three strong brothers that picked up the little ones and carried them running up the mountain into the safety of the forest. Välti ran too.

For three months the Urscher family lived in a solitary shepherd's hut. But with winter, and the baby, coming, Erhardt risked a visit to the village seeing if things were safe for them to come back. The priest saw and reported him. The police trailed him and caught the whole family.

This time Erhardt stood firm. "I would rather die eight times," he told the court, "than to give up the Truth." His wife stood with him.

On the pleading of the neighbours, the Urscher's sentence got commuted from burning at the stake to a simple beheading. But the seven children, including the baby, remained as orphans behind them.

Where parents had to flee they tried to make arrangements for their children to stay with relatives or friends, if at all possible. But as in the case of the Urschers, and the Goldschmidts of Sterzing who also left seven children behind it was not always possible. The police often took the children, had them baptised and placed in homes for a fee (paid for with the confiscated property of their parents). Some they put in *Spitalpflege*, workhouses for orphans, if space allowed.

At one point, the town of Kitzbühel in the mountains of northern Tirol, had fifty orphaned children on their hands, all of what had been the families of believers. Older children, from ten to fifteen years of age, got flogged daily if they persisted in "pernicious Anabaptist ideas." But the Gmaani did whatever they could to rescue them as quickly as possible.

Hänsel Mairpaul, Ruprecht Huber and others, working as an underground network, got dozens of these children smuggled into Moravia. Ruprecht carried fifteen of them across the mountains himself before the police caught him and put him to death.

Both the government and the state church of South Tyrol loudly deplored these "organised kidnappings."⁴ But once in Jeronime Käls' school and the believing sisters' loving care in Moravia, the children discovered how to be happy again. Jeronime was a kind brother with children of his own. He spent all his time with

⁴ As late as 1933 the Austrian Historian, Karl Kuppelwieser called them *regelrechte Kinderentführung* (authentic mass kidnappings).

the little ones who respected and loved him dearly—until the police caught him too, and until he, with his fellow-prisoners, could testify to a much greater dimension of God’s family than mere relationship through flesh and blood.

Three Brothers in Gaol

The winter night, at Neuruppin in East Germany, did not look like it would be a good one. For a long time my friend and I, with his aged mother, had been rumbling up and down the cobble-stoned streets looking for a place to stay. Finally someone directed us down one of the narrowest, most crooked, streets of all, between the looming half-timbered buildings of a “plague hospital” built centuries ago.

Through the low gate into a crowded courtyard in lantern-light, I found my way with a man who had appeared out of the shadows. Ducking into a door beneath a thick straw roof I found myself greeted by peals of raucous laughter and the sour odour of tobacco smoke and wine. Everyone roared in drunken laughter, slapping one another on their backs, as a middle-aged man came reeling up to greet me. (Playing cards, they had made a deal that whoever lost would kiss the first one coming in the door—me in this case.) I took one glance at the scene, at the type of girls laughing and drinking with the men, and made my way out as fast as I could.

Jeronime Käls, travelling with Michael Seifensieder and Hänsel Oberegger (the boy from Afers near Brixen, now married) ran into a situation much like this, en route from Moravia to South Tyrol, just after New Years, in 1536. But they could not get away from it so easily. For a while they sat quietly in the pub, waiting on their food. The place was full, and noisy. Someone proclaimed a toast and fresh gales of laughter and coarse talk filled the room. Only one man, sitting close to the brothers, said little, and when they did not participate he began to stare at

them. Suddenly he scrawled a message onto a scrap of paper, in Latin, and handed it to the bar-tender.

From where Jeronime sat he could see what the man had written: “We have Anabaptists here. Call the police.”

The bar-tender glanced at them, and disappeared.

Jeronime told the brothers in low tones what was happening. But they judged it foolhardy to try and escape. Better trust in God and see what comes of it.

The police came, handcuffed the brothers, and hustled them off to gaol. They next morning they stood in the Richter’s office at the city hall. “Are you from the Jakob Hutter group?” the Richter, backed by a panel of monks and priests for the interrogation, asked them.

“Yes,” Jeronime answered.

“Well, then you are just the right ones!”

“Praise God, yes,” Jeronime replied. “We are on the right way! We are sent out from God, and Christ taught us not to listen to any stranger’s voice. We are willing to give to all men the reason for the hope we have, but to speak with monks and priests and with the pope’s messengers we have no desire. The pope is the anti-Christ. His envoys are the greatest rogues, whoremongers, adulterers, rascals and deceivers on earth!”

“Hey, stop it, Jeronime!” the Richter cried. “Don’t your know you are speaking before *guten Herren* (fine gentlemen)?”

“Only God is my *Herr* (Lord)—not any of you!”⁵

One of the first letters Jeronime managed to smuggle out of prison (where the three brothers lay in different cells) was for his school children back home:

My dear children, you must have heard how wicked people caught me, along with several others, for the sake of God’s truth.

⁵ This conversation taken from *Geschichtbuch*, 159.

But this is no disaster for me. Actually I am very thankful to God for the chance to suffer for him and for you—even if that means I should need to die for him. I love you children from the heart. You are my joy in the Lord and it has been a great privilege for me to serve and teach you. Nothing shall separate you from my heart, even though Satan and the wicked world do their best to bring it about. God will preserve you and me so we may meet and see his face together! . . .

Remember, children, how we often spoke of what was pleasing or displeasing to God, how he loves those fear him and hates those that don't. We spoke of God's wrath and punishment for evildoers and of how he redeems and blesses his children. Think about these things and you will become holy fruitful trees in the garden of God! You will bear the loveliest, most pleasing, fruit in the presence of your Father in heaven. But the rest that do not bear good fruit will all get thrown out and burnt with the godless world. Many, just as in Noah's time, do not believe this and pay no attention to it. But they will throw their hands together above their heads and scream, cry and howl when their judgement comes! . . .

Fear God, dear children, for the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Never be afraid of people, even though they hate you, despise you, and make fun of you. That is how it has always been—the children of God persecuted by Satan's godless servants. Just remember how God has always protected his little flock, and know that he will watch over you. Sure, we look poor and insignificant to the world. But we are God's valued possession. . . . When the godless get destroyed in hell we will shine like the sun in our Father's presence! Yes, we shall shine over the whole earth! . . .

Never follow a godless person, my children, not even if that is your father or your mother, or your very own brothers and sisters. Never let anyone, not even your own parents, separate you or drive you away from the people of God. It would be better for you to die ten times than for that to happen!

In the same way, it would be ten times better for you to suffer persecution and anguish, while waiting for God's promise, than

to compromise and have whatever you like in this world. How much better it is to suffer with God's people than to have fun with the godless world!

My dearest sons and daughters . . . you may well remember how I disciplined you with words, and sometimes with the rod. But I did it to rescue your souls from eternal death. In the same way, do not resent it when your parents punish you or set you straight. Use it to better your lives and you will reap everlasting joy! But God will root out of his church community all that turn sour and pout when others correct them. . . . Keep to God's holy people. Keep God always before your eyes and follow the instructions of the brothers and sisters put in charge of you. . . . Don't make a lot of noise. Learn to serve God in quietness, doing faithfully what he calls you to do, while you wait on him.

May God keep you, children, in the peace of Christ. May he keep your hearts in innocence, in love and truth, through Jesus Christ. Amen!⁶

Jeronime prayed much for the children, and the church back home. But he also carried a large concern in his heart for Michael and Hänsel, so new to the Life, here in prison with him. The three of them smuggled notes one to another whenever they could, and sang loudly enough that they could hear one another from their separate cells. (Michael not only sang and wrote songs, but also played the flute.) Expressing the great joy of their unity as brothers in Christ, Jeronime wrote to Michael:

God be praised, my heart leaps for joy whenever I hear you singing in the Lord! Especially you, Michael—when you sing during the night I can understand almost every word, if I keep my window open, and if you sit close to yours. My dear brave brother, please wake me up oftener with your songs for our Lord Jesus Christ! I often wait, if I wake up first, for Hans' sake. For when I start singing you both join in, but I do not want to tire you out. It is such a great joy to me, hearing these songs on the front lines of this battle for Jerusalem! Just knowing how much grief it

⁶ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 98-101

brings to Satan is in itself a confirmation of God's pleasure. They think they have forbidden us to speak or encourage one another, so let us sing and shout until we burst our throats!⁷

In another note he wrote:

Dear Michael, I throw the arms of my heart around you and kiss you with the friendly kiss of our master, Jesus! You are altogether wonderful, your greetings make me leap inside like John the Baptist leaped inside the womb when Mary came in. Why did he do that? It was because Mary had Jesus inside her. And so it is now. Because we have Jesus inside, our words bring indescribable joy one to another. This mystery is very great. But I thank God that he has given us one heart, one mind, one way of thinking and that he has given us all of his one Spirit to drink. . . .

If only the children of God would know how joyful we are, one with another, here! It would give them much comfort. And if they were able to make contact with one of the local women, she could sneak something in, perhaps, pretending she was only bringing us more spices, wine or Semmel. How I wish we had another notepad, or two!⁸

Both Michael and Hänsel answered with loving and hopeful words. Nothing however, brought the captives greater encouragement than messages from home—arriving sometimes on sheets of paper baked into loaves of bread. Rejoicing for his place in God's family (although his Czech wife was not yet a believer) Michael the soap cooker wrote back to Moravia:

I cannot praise and thank God enough for his mercy to me, poor, miserable worm! For so long I found myself under false brothers and sisters in Bohemia, the ones that boast of being Christian, and who seek to give a good impression of themselves. But praise God, he delivered me! He lifted me out of that horrible darkness and brought into his glorious light, to his people and to his flock. The longer I live in this discipline, the more I learn and experience of the power of God. . . .

⁷ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 35

⁸ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 122-126

Oh brothers and sisters, most dearly loved in my heart, do not worry! Even though you suffer great misery, scattered here and there for the sake of the Gospel, do not fear! He who is coming will come soon! He will take us, who have no fixed home or shelter on earth, and will comfort us.

We do not even want a fixed or comfortable abode, for the judge is at the door. Let us only continue to love one another, so fulfilling the law of Christ, as John said. . . .

The note I enclose here in Czech is for my wife. If Christoph or anyone else goes up, would you please take it to her? And if you hear that we get executed (something we expect will happen any day) would you let her know? I would also like for you to tell her something about the children for me. Tell her that if any of the brothers come up to Bohemia, I want her to receive them and learn from you how to train them right. You can explain that to her. I know you are also on the run at this time, but I commend my little ones to you, even though they cannot speak German. I have entrusted them to God and know that he will care for them, for his own glory. That is my hope, dear Father in heaven—that you will do it, and listen to my cry. Amen.⁹

Shortly after this (and after Jeronime had written to the judges, giving them one more chance to repent), the three brothers got taken out to the square at Wiener Neustadt and burnt alive.¹⁰

Married to Christ

After the fall of Münster, when the believers had to abandon their half-finished community at Schäckowitz, some of them found farm and mining jobs in out-of-the-way places. Here and there throughout Bohemia and southern Moravia they worked and lived as best they could for a whole year, keeping up their daily meetings if at all possible. Kaspar Breitmichel told how it went:

⁹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 63-65

¹⁰ Friday, 31 March, 1536

To these meetings the members of Christ's community came in peace, of their own free will, with eagerness and great joy. With seeking hearts they came together by day and by night, through wind and rain, through mud and snow, walking for miles if necessary, to hear God's Word. They came in the true love of God, and received one another in brotherly heart-felt, friendly and delightful love—no matter how lowly and crowded the houses in which they met. They made the best of it all and supported one another through all tribulation, poverty, danger and fear. They praised God and carried one another's burdens as befits those that profess to be pilgrims and strangers en route to their heavenly fatherland.¹¹

As soon as persecution lessened and they could re-establish the Gmaani in Moravia, the brothers sent messengers out with the Gospel, two by two. More seekers found the Life and more communities took shape than ever before.

Many of the sent-out messengers did not come back. Their wives and children hated to see them go, but "the Kingdom first" was their slogan and they considered their marriage to Christ "worth a thousand times more than marriage here on earth."

All the same, when Hans Wucherer and Bärtil Synbeck fell into the hands of the police and lay in chains at Burghausen, across the river from Salzburg, Hans missed his wife Bärbl, and his little children, very much and wrote her a letter:

My wife, loved from the heart, I wanted to write something for you, so that after my departure you could have something to keep for the good of your soul. But I cannot really do that now. I am too weak in the flesh from the fever, the long imprisonment, and the torture we have suffered for the sake of God's Truth. It appears the hour of deliverance will soon come for my dear brother Bärtil and myself. How wonderful it will be to lay off this mantle of flesh and go home to our Father's kingdom! How we shall rejoice when he snatches us from the claws of these roaring

¹¹ *Geschichtbuch* 165

lions, from the teeth of these bears and wolves that rage against God's Truth! I would never have believed it, had I not seen it for myself.

We have gotten our sentence. Tomorrow, Wednesday, they want to execute us with fire. Now I struggle with thoughts of death, day and night. I really cannot tell you how it goes or feels. It is a very great struggle, but I want nothing more than to stay faithful to God through it all.

God has shown us the way, through Jesus our Lord. Jesus has gone this way before me—through this narrow door into his kingdom and eternal life. I look forward so much to the other side, to be with him and all his chosen ones, and I trust he will help me through. I want to be a faithful witness of God's Truth.

Just don't get discouraged through what is happening to me. Do not look at this through human eyes or common sense as the world sees it. Look to God! Set it all out before him, and he will help you understand. Be quiet within yourself and trust him too. For I know your time of temptation will come as well. God will test your faith like gold is tried in the fire. But in that fire, in the oven of misery when you must let go of all things you hold dear (*den Ofen des Elends und der Gelassenheit*) he will keep you safe!

Dearest Bärbl, I beg you for God's sake, fulfil my joy in the Lord by staying true to him. Stay true to Christ and his people, this church community in which I left you, as long as you live and we shall get together again. Stand firm, and we shall live forever with his chosen ones!

I know, and fully trust God, the brothers and sisters will take excellent care of you and of my little fatherless ones. They love



An air-hole in the castle at Burghausen let a little light into the cells—and in the winter the cold.

you as their own family. They will be compassionate and merciful to you. Just be really co-operative and obedient. Work nicely with them, as becomes a widow. Stick it out through the bad times, as well as the good, and you will make it with them into eternal joy!

I could tell you much about our capture and imprisonment, but I don't have time. We wanted to carry out what Brother Hans told us when we left. We wanted to encourage the brothers and sisters, and we did so wherever possible. But one night we slept in a mill and at the break of dawn the whole godless crowd came down, banging on the doors and saying they wanted flour. The miller's wife opened the door. We hid in a bedroom. But they came charging right in. Several men with spears blocked the door and a policeman, his gun pointed at us, took us captive. It was a great shock to us.

They brought us to Mehring¹² and locked us up. They interrogated us twice—once under torture—but we withstood them. From there they took us, bound, to Burghausen, put us in separate cells and chained us up. We got interrogated six times, then, on the seventh occasion, those dreadful priests came into our cell. They promised us all sorts of things if we would recant, but praise God, we withstood it by his grace.

I was sick by this time but they stretched us anyway. They pulled Bertl twice. They dealt horribly with us in ways I cannot and will not describe. The eighth time three officials came and told us they would burn us alive. We commend ourselves to God.

Greet all the brothers and sisters with the kiss of our Lord Jesus, in godly, brotherly, love. Bertl greets you too. We are sorry we cannot write to all the brothers and sisters but we wish them God's blessing in never-ending peace through Jesus Christ.

Do take care of the little fatherless ones, that they may grow up in the fear of God. For God's sake—I ask this of all of you—deal gently with them, as with the other orphans and widows, and comfort them. I keep thinking of you, my brother Ulrich, as well as of Michael Kramer and Hans. May God keep you!

¹² Known in Mediaeval times as Mermes.

Written in prison at Burghausen an der Salzach, eight days after St. Margaret's, on the evening before our execution, 1537.¹³

Before Hans and Bärbl had become part of the Kostl Gmaa, under Hans Amon's leadership, Hans Wucherer had belonged to one-eyed Jakob's group in Austerlitz. Now, the evening before his death, he remembered those people and added a note:

Regarding our accusers from Austerlitz, I tell you again as I have said before, I do not seek my own good, but the eternal wellbeing of all involved. May the Lord not hold against them what they do not understand. I just pray, earnestly, that their eyes might get opened. It is high time. May God have mercy on them, is my sincere desire in Jesus. Give them a helping hand wherever possible, so they can be brought onto a better way. I give it to God. May he comfort all sorrowful and troubled hearts through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hans did not live to see the day, but his gentle spirit and his prayers were rewarded when the Austerlitz people came back to the Gmaani, not long afterward.

A Flurry of Letters

From the beginning, God's family in South Tyrol and Moravia kept in touch as closely as they could, one with another. They knew one another so well, from having lived together in the Gmaani, that if they had to separate they missed one another dreadfully. So, even though sending and receiving letters was a highly dangerous affair (getting caught with an Anabaptist letters could warrant a death sentence) hundreds upon hundreds of letters got written, delivered and circulated among friends.

Most believers wrote friendly letters of encouragement and greeting. But many also wrote admonitions and warnings. From the community at Altenmarkt in Moravia (where Walser

¹³ *Hutterischen Episteln* V3 141-145

Maierhofer from Niedervintl had become *Haushalter*) a sister named Elisabeth wrote to her loved ones in Germany:

Dear brother Ludwig, my dear son Hans and my sister Luickl, I greet you and wish for you nothing but what serves the eternal blessing of your souls. My love to you compels me to write and tell you a little of how it goes with us here. The children, Eilla, Emmicha, Lena, Lissl, Engelhardt, and Bärbl, are all cheerful and in good health, happy in the will of God. I am also happy, praise God, but thanks no doubt to my age, I feel I am nearing the end. Because of my current weakness, I feel I must write one more time before I die. This is my friendly plea to you, would you pause for moment to consider the state of your souls?

Especially you Hans, now that you have been here and seen for yourself the difference between our way of life and that of the world. You have understood and acknowledged that there is no salvation outside the right and true Church of Jesus Christ—the Church built through God’s Word on the apostles’ foundation. In my heart I am fully convinced and sure that these are the real people of God, and this is the way to eternal life. Do not run yourselves short. Seek your soul’s salvation! I beg you to follow the good counsel of the brothers, and if you would do it soon I might live to see it yet before I go.¹⁴

Kuentz Stubnickh, A young man wrote from the newly established Maskowitz Gmaa in Moravia to his parents in Germany.

Dear Father Emrich and Mother Anna with all your children, I saw a letter you wrote to your brother-in-law, Henn Rebenstock, where you asked about him. He is still living at Paulich in Moravia, and is doing well. But I must tell you that even though I came here to Moravia with him, I did not stay with him for long. God brought it about that I came upon a people known here only as the “Brothers.” I am still with them at a little place called Maskowitz under the Lord Marshall of Mährisch Kromau.

¹⁴ Teuss Schott’s widow to her son Hans Schott, carpenter at Niederglenn in Hessen HE V2 93

Now, dear Father, I cannot keep from telling you what I discovered and what I now have for plans. It did not take me long to see that these people were the true children of God, and what they teach is the right and only way to eternal life. For this reason I have firmly decided to cast my lot with them and stay with them all my life. . . .

I have done this for nothing else than the salvation of my soul. And I beg and admonish you to change your way of life as well, so you may please God. As you now live, in the world, you could not possibly stand before him and be saved. . . . Ask the brothers that bring this letter to you. They can explain everything you need to know.¹⁵

Lorenz Kaspar and Else Kaspar, newly arrived at a Moravian Gmaa, wrote a letter to the relatives they had left behind:

We had a good trip down here to the faithful. Everything went well, and we love it here, in the will of God. All of us, even our sister Lenz Krey's wife, are happy and healthy, for which we praise him. Along with this, we beg you to consider your unsatisfactory and sinful ways, the life you now live in the wicked world. Stand off from it and begin a new life in Christ! Then you will be able to serve God in truth and be saved. Ask the brothers that bring you this letter. They will tell you all about it. . . .

From the carpenter Lorenz Kasper and his wife Else, at Stiegnitz in Moravia, to relatives in Ettingshausen bei Lich.¹⁶

The believers' concept of family in Christ, however, went far beyond the circle of flesh and blood relationships. All their letters one to another, even Bible instruction and important business letters, ended up with greetings and local news that joyfully testified to their brotherly and sisterly feelings one for another:

Dear brothers and sisters, loved from the heart, we greet each of you in particular—you, my brother Kasper, and you, Georg Hän,

¹⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 95

¹⁶ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 97

with Christl, and Hans Fleischhacker, and Lorenz, and Hans Plattner—everyone in the two kitchens, in the school, in the bath house, in the cotton room, and in the bakery. We greet every child of God, also those at Austerlitz, from the whole heart. We, Jakob H., and Klaus B., with all that fear God here with us, greet you with the kiss of our Lord Jesus Christ and in his peace. With the arms of our hearts we embrace every one of you. And now may the God of peace and love lead you all into victory to the glory of his holy name, through Jesus Christ!¹⁷

Falkenstein

After the expulsion from Moravia when Münster fell, some of the believers regrouped at Steinabrunn in Austria. Klaus Breitmichel (who was there at the time) described what happened on a Saturday evening, the sixth day of Advent, in 1539:

Out of jealousy and hatred the old serpent, speaking through the mouths of his false prophets, constantly whispered evil things about us into the Roman Emperor Ferdinand's ears. This went on and on. The false prophets incited him against us, day after day, until he gave in and sent the Marshall of Vienna with his provost, a band of mounted soldiers and a great crowd of rabble-rousers out to get us. They fell upon our Christian community at Steinabrunn on the sixth day of December, late in the evening. They seized all the men and boys and locked us into a room. They behaved themselves in a shocking manner with the women and girls, set a watch, took all they could get their hands on, and left.

What they most wanted was to catch the servants and elders of the community. They hoped to find much money among us and to rob the poor of their food. . . . But thankfully, the ones they wished to catch were not there.

¹⁷ Jakob Hutter in letter to brothers and sisters in Austerlitz and Butzowitz, *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 11

This very evening a group of men had come from the Philippites to visit us in Steinabrunn, to learn about our way of life. So, all in all, about 150 men got captured and led under guard to the nearby castle fortress of Falkenstein. Among us were a number of youths not yet baptised, and others that had fallen and stood in proving.

When we got to Falkenstein and had time to ourselves, we all gathered in the courtyard. We wanted to know who stood in the faith, and whether we could all testify in a united way for Christ, regardless of whether we belonged to the community or not. Everyone testified with a glad heart that they were ready to suffer and witness for Christ together. Whoever wasn't baptised or stood outside the brotherhood promised to make things right as soon, or if, they got back home. Then we wrote a letter and sent it to the church community. Everyone rejoiced for that.¹⁸

From Falkenstein, one of the imprisoned brothers, Christoph Aschberger, wrote to his wife in the Philippite community (already in the process of getting reunited with the Gmaani) at Znaim:

Grace and peace to you from Christ who has bought us, not with silver or gold, but with his precious blood!

My sister, loved from the heart, you must know how we all got caught in Steinabrunn, and how we were led here to Falkenstein, to witness in this trouble for the Lord. I have given myself totally to God, to accept whatever he allows, be that to suffer or perhaps to die for him. Since he gave his life for us, the just for the unjust, why should we shrink from giving our lives for his priceless Word? With his help alone, I stand ready to go through death for God's truth. The Lord himself will fight for us.

Do not be sad, dear sister! Pray to God for us and all whom God may choose to witness for him to the end. May God be exalted, whether through our lives or through our death! May the God of all grace give you strength to fight bravely on. It is through great tribulation that we make our way into the Kingdom of God.

¹⁸ *Geschichtbuch 202*



Falkenstein Castle, now in ruins above the rolling fields of the Austrian Weinviertel.

I commend you into the faithful protection of God in heaven. And now I must bid you farewell. May God lead us into his Kingdom together! Never give up in the fight and we shall meet at the resurrection in great joy. . . . Most beloved sister, a kiss of holy godly love for you and all those with you, a hundred thousand times. Amen¹⁹

Leonard Roth wrote home to his wife Klara at Pulgram in Moravia, another community joining up with Hans Amon and the Kostl Gmaa at that time, and passed on messages from other prisoners to their wives:

Dear Sisters, we are well aware of how the tribulation of Christ has reached into your lives too. People also hate, persecute, slander and scatter you about for the sake of God's truth. But just be patient a bit longer. Your sorrow shall yet be turned into joy. For the time being, the Scripture is fulfilled in you that all who separate themselves from evil get robbed. Like Ezra says, they will rob all that fear God, taking their belongings and driving

¹⁹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 108-110

them out of their homes. But in this it becomes obvious who God's children really are. Like gold they get tried in the fire, but they survive!

I (Mattheus) heard that the children have turned sick. Do not be frightened my dear Sophie, the Lord may be showing his grace to us in this. If they do not have long to live, at least they will not fall into the hands of the godless. Just accept it with thanksgiving to God. I do the same. . . .

You dearest Sophie, Klärl, Schuch, Hans' Rottle, and Hans Frank's wife, all you dear sisters in Pulgram, be greeted with the kiss of Jesus Christ many thousands of times. . . . Please write to me, Klara. I would love to see your handwriting.²⁰

In other letters sent to the ones back home, Leonhard wrote:

Take especially good care of my Klara for me. Send some brothers to my mother in Tannowitz and speak to her about God. But let Klara give you some direction in this. One must go about it carefully because of my step-father. He is a great hindrance to my mother. On her part she would have long allowed herself to be instructed. My Klara will tell you how it stands with her. I do not have time to write much, but you can ask about the rest that also wanted to come to the brotherhood with me, but who may have gotten frightened off by all this turmoil. They are the tailor, Hans, from Gutenbrunn, Gilg from Rägwitz, Shoemaker Paul and his wife, along with Anna from Paulowitz.²¹

Oh how deeply grateful I am, how I praise God in my heart, that he has brought me into this church community and peace! How much happier I am to bear these iron chains on my wrists than to lead an easy life in the world. . . . This is the only way to eternal life, this way through which Jesus attained perfection through sorrow and suffering. The way he pointed out to us, and along which we follow his steps.²²

²⁰ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 114-115

²¹ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 112-113

²² *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 117

The believers from home sent messengers to Falkenstein continually with new letters of instruction and encouragement. The same messengers brought back messages, greetings and songs the captives had written. Of these, none meant more to the whole brotherhood than the one they called their *Falkensteiner Liedl*, written by many of the sons, brothers, and husbands they so sorely missed:

Oswaldt Falger: “Father, stand with us, so we may freely confess you before the world! The world makes fun of you and asks, ‘Where is God that we should believe in him?’”

Christoph Aschberger: “Dear Father, will you save me from the fear of those that want to kill me? They come upon me in a rage and dig traps for me. But you are my captain, my shield and my defense!”

Jobst from Villach: “Arouse yourself Lord, and remember our plight! The godless think you do not care what happens to us. But lift your hand and save us from eternal pain!”

Bastl Beckh: “The godless will not listen to what you have said, Lord. They sieze your people on the earth and devour them. Have mercy, therefore, on us! Save your little flock and keep us in your arms!”

Blasy Schneider: “You will not forsake us Lord. You hate the scheming of the godless and will overturn what they have planned. Keep us, through this hour of great need, in your hands!”

Wölffl Schwägl: “Do not let our present need frighten us back from you, Lord. Do not let the evil and godless crowd persuade us to sin again. With the hypocrisy of the priests and the threat of the hangman, the Antichrist wants to ensnare us. But save us Lord, from falling prey to him!”

Leonhardt Roth: “Give us the grace Lord, to carry your cross with willing hearts. Give us your Spirit’s love. Do not let us look back, but help us keep your covenant every day, every hour, until the end!”

Hans Prügl: “Strengthen me in your covenant Lord, is the deepest desire of my heart. Let me wait patiently, quietly, on you. Take my weakness and make it your own. Protect me!”

Kasper Braitmichel: “Praise, thanksgiving, and honour to Christ, for letting us hear his Word of grace! Let us exalt him! Let us bring him our offering in righteousness with great joy! Let us praise him with song!

Georg Krel: “I want to bring my offering to you Lord, with joy. In the power of Jesus Christ I want to bring it so you may give us your saving grace. Fight for us until we make it through!”

Jörgl Salzburger: “We have a great number of enemies. They surround us. Help us to fight bravely until we take, with Christ your Son, the eternal kingdom!”

Georg J. Schneider: “We trust you Lord, from the heart. Give us love, unity, and faith. Stand with us until we receive your eternal Kingdom with all the saints. We will be quiet in your presence as long as our bodies and lives remain.”

Hänsl Taurer: “Give us your blessing Lord so we may offer up our bodies and lives to you. Give us grace to confess you before men at all times, and never to be ashamed of your cross.”

Peter Hagen: “Help us Lord so we may praise you! Lead out in the battle so we may follow you and confess you courageously before all. Let your love burn in us!”

P.T. : “My deepest desire Lord, is to stay true, no matter how great the pain. Help me, even while dying, to be brave! Stay with me so nothing will weaken my resolve.”

Gilg P. Jr.: “Take us by the hand Lord, and lead us safely into your kingdom, the promised land! With our hearts aflame we want to confess you before the world.”

Georg Schüster: “Lord, keep us forever in what is right! Let the sap of your Holy Spirit flow into us so we may wrestle like knights, fearlessly! Help us to subdue our fleshly inclinations.

Anthoni Schüster: “Lord, I will praise you for standing with me, and that you have kept me from falling. You are my strength, I

am your creation. You are the one that rescues me, my God, my security, my shield, my helper in every distress.”

Jakob from Sternenvells: “How friendly you are to us, Lord! All saints depend on you and trust you in everything. You will give us whatever we need. You will save us from eternal pain. My heart finds comfort in you, my castle, my strong support!”

Martin Schüster: “Lord, help us fight the wolves and bears that attack us from every side! Help us throw our enemies down! We trust in your strength for the victory.”

L. H. : “We cry to you Lord with everything inside us, deliver us from this valley of death! Take us to your eternal Kingdom to be with you!”

Matthäus Schüster: “Set your eyes, brothers, on what awaits us! After he leads us out of this valley of death the Lord will give us an eternal reward. Let us fight manfully on with the Lord’s help! We have committed ourselves to die together. May God help us so we may reign with Christ in eternal joy!”

Uli Hoffer: “Help us Lord to fight like men, not fearing death in these dangerous times. Let us win the crown in another world!”

All the brothers together: “We praise your name Lord! Deliver us from the devil’s trap and give us the strength to overcome. We will trust you. With your help we will finish our course with joy.

Finally, under orders from Vienna, the authorities at Falkenstein prepared all the fittest of the men for transport to Trieste, to serve as galley slaves on the Mediterranean Sea. Klaus Breitmichel describes how it went:

At this time many believing sisters came to the castle at Falkenstein. Some were the captives’ wives, others were friends and family members. With the men they all knelt together and cried earnestly to God that he would protect them from injustice and all sinful ways of life on land and sea. They prayed that God would keep all of them faithful to death.

After they finished praying the officer told them to prepare for departure at once. There were many hot tears as they all took leave one of another. Promising to stay true, they committed each

other to God and his gracious care, not knowing if they should meet on earth again. It was a great struggle to separate all the husbands from their wives, and for the fathers to leave their little children behind. Flesh and blood would not do this, but woe unto those who made it happen!

So tragic was the leave-taking that the military personnel could not keep back their tears, but as soon as everyone had their packs on their backs they led the troop of believers out the gate. They were ninety brothers, tied together two by two.

The sisters stayed at the castle. They climbed the walls and stood watching their loved ones go, as long as they could see them. Then the officers ordered them out and sent them home.²³

Those who were too old and frail, or too young to send to sea, the authorities kept at Falkenstein. One by one they gave out the youngest boys as bondservants to Austrian lords. But nearly all of them managed to return, sooner or later, to the Gmaani. Klaus Breitmichel, who marched south with the captive brothers, continues:

The pope and the priests with all that godless crowd convinced King Ferdinand to send these men to Andrea Doria, admiral of the imperial navy, to row his galleys employed in robbing and plundering the Turks. But the brothers told them they would no sooner serve in such doings on sea than they would on land. They said they would refuse to row at all, by the power of God, and that God would keep them in that.

So these witnesses for Truth got marched from town to town, from market to village, like criminals on parade. But God in his mercy allowed them, every morning and every night, to gather for prayer and words of encouragement one for another. Seeing their godly testimony, the people of the villages wondered and felt sorry for them. The captives had opportunity to speak to great numbers of them and witness to what they believed. Even the soldiers guarding them told them not to miss the chance, but to

²³ *Geschichtbuch* 203-204

speak boldly for the Truth as they marched from one town into the next.

In this way they were led overland, through Vienna, Semering, Bruck an der Mauer, Graz and Leibnitz to Maribor in Slovenia, and from there on to Celje, Šoštanj, and over the Savninjske Alps to Ljuljana, and through upper Ljubljana to Trieste on the sea. They suffered much hunger and need. They ate the bread of fear and drank the water of sorrow many times. But the testimony of their faith touched many. A great number that had lived in darkness saw the light, and all the way down through Styria and Carniola in Slovenia, and down into Italy, people heard the truth, some of whom are serving God with a true heart today.

News of what had happened spread quickly from Austria and Moravia through the Gmaani in South Tyrol and Germany, all of whom stood in spirit with the sisters and families left behind at Steinabrunn. Hans Amon wrote to them:

Oh, dear sisters, loved from the heart, what a great concern we feel for you! How I wish we could have done more for you, and we still stand ready to do what we can, if God allows us to come together somehow! How I would love to spend time with you and share with you this grief. If it cannot take place here, stay true, so we shall find and embrace one another in the Kingdom of God!

Oh my Märtl, Oswald's wife, and you Maier's wife, Ursula the Haushalter's wife, you dear sisters in the kitchen, with the cows, and all the rest of you, every one by name, we commend you to our kind Father in heaven! May he give you man-like hearts, steadfast spirits, a stiff faith, and joyful overcoming hope! May he fill you with all patience to accept God's will and chastisement for the time being. Do not worry, he will stay with you through fire and water, through all tribulation, and work out all things for good, in the end. Trust him for that, in your hearts!

We would have really liked to see you get away, dear sisters, but since that hasn't happened, we rejoice in your steadfastness. May God look into this and have mercy on his little children!

Oh Lord, my God, the heathen rise up and conspire against your people. Rise up, God, to rescue your Israel! Scatter the godless.

Frighten them in your wrath and save your church community for the honour of your name! Demonstrate your help and mercy and let the heathen see that you are our God! Oh God, the heathen plot the destruction of your people. Do not let them triumph lest they lift themselves up and say they have overcome!²⁴

Trieste

On arrival in Trieste, a strange Italian city by the sea, the men held serious council among themselves. Everyone agreed to die before they would row a single stroke on Andrea Doria's battleships. They also promised each other to stick together, the strong helping the weak. If any found a way of escape they would all take it, or none.

Not long after their arrival in Trieste, the brothers were greatly cheered when Peter, a young scout from the Gmaani in Moravia, suddenly appeared. He had trailed them the whole way, bringing them letters from home and promptly left again to carry back the news of the brothers' steadfastness and wellbeing—this message from the captive, Christoph Aschberger, being only one example:

Through God's grace I am joyful and not alarmed—joyful to accept whatever God lets happen to us. . . . They have brought us here to Trieste by the sea. We do not know what will happen to us, but God will give us strength for whatever is to come. . . . Just stick to God and he will never let you down. Love him with all your heart and all your soul, and trust him into death. I greet you with the kiss of holy godly love. Greet all the dear brothers and sisters for me in godly love many hundreds of thousands of times! Amen²⁵

With Peter, Hans Amon had sent this letter to the captives at Trieste:

²⁴ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 196-197

²⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V2 111

You chosen witnesses, you knights of God and heroes in Israel, fighting to the end with joy, the love we have in our hearts for you, compels us to stay in touch as best we can. . . . Oh God, like you fed Daniel in the Lion's den, feed the souls of our brothers wherever they are. We do not know their state, but we know that you see them well. Oh Stoffl Aschberger and Jörg Planer, you my Jörg Mör, Kasper Miller, my dearest brothers Matheus and Leonhard, Michl and Philas and Oswald from Ladendorf, Jörg Geier, Martin from Allbogen, Thomas Graber, Nathan Schmidt, Melchior Staker, all dearly beloved from the heart, all of you who were taken down to the sea, how we long for you from the bottom of our hearts, how anxiously we wait on news about you! . . . We could have no greater joy on earth than to know that you stand well in God!

Let me tell you a bit how it goes with us here. We are living at all the same places in Moravia, especially in the big house at N where we were. Threats of terror and persecution come upon us daily, especially now after the Reichstag (meeting of the Imperial Government) in Regensburg. But we stand in God's hands, and nothing will happen to us unless he allows it. Hans Gentner has gone up country (to central Germany) where we have many brothers and sisters, may God be praised! Peter still lies in prison in Hesse, where he got caught eight years ago, and where he now lies for nearly a year at Grätz. Also Anderle Keller who got caught on the way in and was left behind. Jörg Liebich still lies in Innsbruck, imprisoned with a sister. Stoffl, your wife, M. Planer, has gone to sleep in the Lord. Your father, Staker, along with your mother and all your brothers and sisters except the oldest one, are here with us. Their message to you is that you would stay true to God. Your sister, Kasper, died at Tillen. But Stoffl, your Tilga and Sophie are still with us. Matheus, your Agnes, and Valentin, along with your sister and Jörg Geyer are all with us in the Lord and beg you from the heart to stay true to God. They tell you not to worry about them. They will gladly wait, if the Lord wills it, to see you when we meet with all the saints forever.

You, Jörgl Mär, my son in the Lord and my brother-in-law according to the flesh, your father Balthasar and your mother Justina want you to keep fighting, like a brave knight, for the

truth. They pray for you all the time. All of us carry you with us all the time, praying that God will give you manly hearts, a steadfast and immovable faith, a joyful overcoming hope, and the patience of our Lord Jesus. We commend you into the presence and protection of God, under the wings of his mercy. He will be your fortress, your castle and tower, your refuge in time of need.

Our married sisters, especially your wives, greet all of you that have been carried down to Trieste. . . . Our hearts, our souls, our spirits are with your hearts in God. Along with Peter we send you these handkerchiefs, one for each of you, as a little token of remembrance. May God wipe all tears from your eyes and ours! May he clothe us with pure white linen. May he lift us and take us to the marriage feast of his Son! Amen.²⁶

Knowing they had little time to spare, the brothers at Trieste developed a bold plan of escape. Using the ropes with which they had been bound, with careful organisation so as not to make a sound in the night, one after the other scaled the wall, let himself down on the far side and ran.

Up from the town, among the brush on a hilltop overlooking the sea, they all knelt and prayed. Then, splitting up into smaller groups they made it back to Moravia—that is, all except twelve, who got recaptured and no doubt returned to Trieste and the sea. No one ever heard from those brothers again.

The Enduring Family of God

It took me some time, harvesting moss with the men at the first community I lived in (in New Zealand), to put my finger on what it was. Something in the atmosphere, whether in the workshops, in the dining hall or the dairy barn, was different. Was it in the polite but totally familiar way the brothers and sisters spoke one with another? In the merry conversations, in the songs, in the gentle deference, perhaps, or their willingness to serve?

²⁶ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 105-113

No. These qualities exist in many church groups and workplaces around the world. It had to be something more.

I could not tell what it was until the day it dawned on me that every one of the brothers with whom I was pitching moss into the sacks, some my age or older, others much younger and stronger, would give—and were giving—everything they had for me. And for one another. We belonged one to another and knew it, even with no one mentioning it at all.

Was this real “church life”? No. This was family. The awesome realisation that my brothers stood ready to give their lives for me, and the wonderful desire in my heart to do the same for them.

Family in Jesus—once it truly happens it can never “unhappen” again. One may hurt or disgrace or abandon the family. One may walk off and deny the family for years. But God’s family, in the depths of one’s heart, comes along.

That is the “insiders’ understanding” of which Peter Ridemann wrote:

Dear Brothers, keep the unity, the love and the brotherly community into which you have been called by God. Let no one turn you against it, for it is the right way. The true grace of God will let you grow in this way until you come to perfection. Do not worry about people saying they have no command for this Life in the Scripture—that it is nothing but the rules and traditions of men. They slander what they do not know. Like cattle, they simply cannot understand, and perish in the error of their own way.

Brothers, remember to what our Lord has called you! Live no longer by the rules of the world, but act and do as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Set your hearts on things above, not on things of the earth. Let your desire, your longing, your goals be set on God so you may go your way unhindered, growing in Truth like children, newly born.

You have tasted the wonderful works of God and seen what he has done among you. Let your life now shine in holy, orderly, disciplined, and loving unity among yourselves. Let it bloom like a rose among thorns, for all the world to see!

This, in fact, is the reason for your life together: Your orderly community points men everywhere to God. Through it he makes himself known. Through it he demonstrates how he works in justice, in love and peace among the peoples of all the earth. Take the challenge seriously, children of God! If you represent him well, he will stick with you and keep you unspotted by the world for the glory of his name! Amen.²⁷

So, what shall we say the “Christian family” really is? An experience? A feeling in the heart? An outward acknowledgement of inner reality? It is nothing at all unless its members have given themselves in living sacrifice to God.

²⁷ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 136-138

7

The Offering

Sunday morning meetings in the mission chapel on Katuru Hill offered new missionaries their first exciting glimpse of the Gospel at work in Africa. From all directions they came by twos and threes, entire families from the surrounding villages, the sisters in dresses and white head-coverings, the men in British colony shorts and clean shirts, all with wide smiles and noisy greetings. But once the congregation assembled and the singing began, many things seemed oddly familiar. Describing life at Katuru Hill in the 1950s a missionary wrote:

Church services in Africa are conducted in much the same way as our Mennonite services at home. The church building, of course, is a much simpler structure with ground floor, grass roof, and backless, mud-brick benches. Singing is led by a chorister who stands in front of the audience. The songs are in many cases adapted from familiar hymns and the same tunes are used. Scripture reading and prayer precede the Sunday-school hour. The congregation divides into classes for the first hour. After reassembling, there is usually a memory verse period. There is more singing, then announcements for the coming week, Scripture reading and prayer, and the morning sermon. After the message there is often opportunity for testimony or confession.

Africans learned Christian ritual quickly and easily—whether Mennonite, Catholic or Protestant made no difference to them. But what they did not learn to imitate so easily was the practice of dropping money into the offering box just inside the door. One tenth, the missionaries said they should give, of the money they earned every week.

The problem, for most Tanganyikans in the mid-twentieth century, was that they did not make much money. Certainly not every week. What they made came in lumps at irregular intervals, from selling a cow, a goat, or some millet—and all that, they needed right away to pay off debts or to buy food. The few among them that had “wealth” had it in cattle or wives, perhaps, but hardly in cash for the offering box.

Besides this, logic told the Africans the missionaries already had nicer houses, better clothes, modern transportation—in every way more goods and privileges than they—so why give them more? Shouldn’t the “rich foreigners” be doing the giving and sharing?

With real urgency the missionaries tried to help their converts understand that money or gifts brought to church were *not* for their personal benefit. They belonged to God. Everything they brought would be used for God’s church—for the care of the poor and the spread of the Gospel. Africans nodded blankly, not understanding, and kept on testing each new missionary that arrived, making it necessary for the board to write in its instructions for new workers:

The African is found to be likable, good-natured, ready to laugh, and interested in the ways and things of the white man. It is easy for him to come to the missionary for help, and, without any ulterior motives, he would be ready to receive anything the white person would give him. The apparent needs of the African home, as compared with the missionary’s home, and the good-heartedness of the new missionary is apt to make him over-generous at first. Later he will learn that he may do harm by being too free with gifts and help.

The attitude of the Africans toward gifts from the missionary is revealed in some of their expressions. They have said that when missionaries are new on the field they are very good, but after they are here a while, they are spoiled by the older missionaries.

This is what some have thought when they see that the seasoned missionary seems less generous.¹

Seasoned missionaries could see, of course, that true prosperity would only come to Africa if they kept their money and privileges to themselves, not “spoiling the natives” but living as models of industry and civilisation before them. For the secret, they well knew, lay in teaching people how to fish, not in supplying them with canned fish from overseas.

The slower the Africans (thinking communally) caught on to this truth, the more convinced their white instructors became that Tanganyika’s “tribal economy” (the village) was a hindrance to the Gospel and an obstacle that had to be removed. Getting African believers out of the villages onto their own land, with their own houses, assets and income, looked to the missionaries as a matter of greatest necessity. For only as mini-capitalists, every family on its own, would Africans ever learn to know the blessing of thrift, good management, pride in achievement and, last but not least, the prosperity of divine favour that would surely come from putting a tenth of their earnings into the offering box every Sunday morning.

Not One Tenth—Everything

The believers in South Tyrol and Moravia took—and did—their offerings in an altogether different way. And it never occurred to them that their gift to God should be primarily one of money or goods.

Jeronime Käls, who accompanied Jakob and Trindl back to South Tyrol after the troubles in Moravia, wrote:

Do not take anything into consideration, neither wife, child, nor anything else in all creation, when it comes to God’s work and his calling for you. God’s work for you is to be the sign of his Gospel in this present age. Forget what lies behind you. Force

¹ Eshleman, *Africa Answers*, 113-114

yourself onward, toward the goal. That goal is to serve him faithfully to the end, to persist with all that carry God's mark, until you get crowned at his heavenly evening meal!²

Forced onward, toward the goal, Jakob and Triendl, had no illusions of safety on coming back across the Hohe Tauern into their beautiful but tragic homeland. Everywhere they stopped they heard more about it. Some friends, fearful and ashamed, urged them to move on. (They had recanted and feared getting caught with Anabaptist company again.) Others, grieving the loss of family members recently put to death, clung to Jakob and Trindl with tears, but joyfully took them into their homes.

Hänsel Mairpaul, still on his secret missions of mercy, showed up at once. So did Trindl's old friend Nändl Steiner from Afers, the girl with whom she got baptised that night with Paul Rumer at the shepherd's hut.

On Corpus Christi, 1535, not long after Jakob and Trindl's return as many surviving believers as possible met for a wonderful Gmaa in the forest above the Ehrenburg. Nickl and Anna Niederhofer were there. Ulrich Häring's wife, Rassteiner's wife, and Sigmund Velser's hired maid got baptised. In a letter back to Moravia Jakob wrote:

We have so much work with these new brothers and sisters, with others that make enquiry into the faith, and with the children—in short, with everything. We simply cannot do it all at once. Some things just get overlooked for the time being, but we will try to accomplish what we can, not sparing our flesh, as long as possible. Sometimes it feels like we should be everywhere at the same time! The needs and the great work press heavily upon us. Brothers and sisters whom I love in my heart, I

² Jeronime Käls to his companions in prison at Vienna, *Hutterische Episteln* V2 31

would gladly have written more if I had the time, but I cannot do so now. Remember us before God!³

From the Puster Valley Jakob and Trindl, with Nändl and Kaspar (one of the young men from Moravia, Michl, having gone back alone with a message for the believers), made their way up through Mittewald and Sterzing the second time. The two sisters stayed at Trens while Jakob met seekers throughout the Sterzing area, held meetings, and baptised here and there. Kaspar stayed on to encourage the believers.

On their way back, coming through St. Andrä and St. Georgen in Afers, Jakob and the two sisters hoped to find lodging with Nikolaus Braun and his wife at Lügen. But word came that the police had captured the Brauns with half a dozen others, and they hurried up to Hörschwang on the Getzenberg instead.

There, in a shepherd's hut up near the tree line, Jakob wrote:

We wait night and day, every hour and moment, for the police to



Shepherds' huts above Hörschwang, where Jakob and Trindl found refuge at the beginning of winter, 1535.

³ *Hutterischen Episteln*, V1 62

discover and capture us. They are hot on the trail and have many clues. . . . That godless judge, Peter Troyer, has gone so far as to arrest his own daughter and son-in-law (Anna and Nickl Niederhofer), along with his granddaughter—our dear sisters and brother in Christ—and locked them up. The great whale, the sea dragon has his mouth open wide. The young girl (Trindl Tagwericher) has escaped after making a good confession at Schöneck Castle, even though all three of them are new in the faith and largely untaught. They are sincere believers and stand well with the people of God.

Peter Troyer's daughter testified before the court at Schöneck that she would die ten times, with God's help, before giving up the truth. But I cannot guarantee that they will stand fast or hold out to the end. That we will not know for sure until they die. The son-in-law still lies in prison at Schöneck but his wife's brother, Paul Troyer, has taken his wife down to Kärnten. I fear for this couple because they face incredible temptation, the threat of torture, and the wholesale opposition of their family. Many have stumbled and fallen which gives us great pain.⁴

Believers, Hans Obern's family in particular, brought food and blankets up to the shepherd's hut. But it was mid-November, starting to get cold, and Trindl's time for the baby was coming close. In one of Jakob's last letters to the Gmaani in Moravia, he wrote:

Praise God, he has taken away my fear of getting captured or killed. . . . Because of Jesus I no longer worry about preserving my life. I have given myself, my life and my body, to him and prepared myself to suffer or die for him and the Truth if necessary. Whatever he thinks best for the glory of God and the welfare of his holy beloved children on earth, is what I also want. I just pray that the fire of God now kindled in the hearts of the weak and those new in the faith may blaze up brightly and strong—so powerfully that no downpour of tribulation, be it ever so great, may put it out again.⁵

⁴ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 48-49

⁵ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 27



Hans Obern's house at Hörschwang.

During the third week of November, 1535, Jakob and Trindl, with Nändl Steiner along to assist them, left the hut to seek shelter in the Eisack Valley.

Several nights later the police raided Hans Obern's house at Hörschwang, finding only the children at home (their parents gone to Lüsen), with Trindl Tagwericher whom they took and beheaded at the Michaelsburg.

A Strange Advent Season

While Jakob and Trindl found their way along the ridge of the Getzenberg, Sir Kaspar Kunigl of the Ehrenburg Castle, at the foot of that very mountain, held a meeting with Dr. Jakob Frankfurter, the Brixen and Bruneck police and whoever else he thought might help to clean up the "heretics" once and for all.

Three years earlier, thanks to the high bounty on Michael Gaismair's head, one of his companions had knocked on his door early in the morning, and when Michael answered, stabbed



Visitors from Canadian Gmaani in Hans Obern's house at Hörschwang, in 2007.

him to death at Padua in Italy. But so far, no one had claimed the equally high bounty on Jakob Hutter. What could be done to catch him?

Sir Kaspar and his friends drew up a new and thorough plan. The government at Innsbruck had told them repeatedly to spare no cost in capturing Jakob Hutter. Now, for the fourth day of Advent, 1 December, 1535, they organised a blanket search of all Puster and Eisack Valley towns, and groups of mounted police combed all mountain trails and shepherd huts, not stopping at the boundaries of their own districts when they found a trail, but pursuing it to wherever it might take them.

Late on Tuesday, on the bitterly cold night before St. Andrew's, Jakob, Trindl, and Nändl hurried past the silent guard-house and across the Eisack bridge into Klausen, to the Messner's house. That is, it used to be the house of the Messner (the man that helped the priest set up for mass), but he had gotten baptised and killed. Now, his wife opened the door only very cautiously and only after they had pounded on it and called her for a while.

Later, the Messner's wife, Anna, told the court:

Around midnight I heard a knock at the door. I did not want to open it because a group of drunks had just gone by, making a terrible racket in the street. But whoever it was kept on knocking and I heard a woman calling for someone to open the door. When I unlocked it, I saw two women and a man standing outside. They begged me to let them warm themselves by the fire. Only when they came into the light did I notice they were Anabaptists. I did not give them anything to eat or drink, but out of mercy I let them warm themselves a little by the fire. Then I told them they had to move on.¹

Back on the street, the three fugitives hurriedly discussed where to go. Jakob thought they should try Jörg Müller's place at Villnöss. But Trindl did not want to. "He has fallen from the faith and become a good-for-nothing fellow," she said, even though she would have liked to go and see Jörg's wife and Nicklauer's wife, her dear sisters there.

They did not have long to discuss or decide.

The sudden clatter of horses' hooves broke the frozen silence and the Klausen police on patrol with the Unterhauptmann of Säben were upon them. They asked few questions. Tied up, they took them to the Branzoll castle behind Klausen, at once.

A man on horseback galloped up the valley to Brixen, from where by seven o'clock the following morning a letter was on its way, across the Brenner Pass to Innsbruck, asking what to do next.

The three captives stood for their first interrogation on the sixth day of Advent. The Messner's wife was there too. Then they took Trindl and Nändl to Gufidaun to interrogate them further, with torture: "When were you last to confession? When did you last take the sacraments? What do you believe about infant baptism and Mary the mother of God?"

¹ *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich III Teil*, pg. 302

This time Trindl did not waver. “I hold your mass and your sacraments for nothing,” she told them. “What you call churches are nothing but heaps of stone, and mean nothing to me. Your infant baptism is a cursed *Sudelwäsche* (mud bath), and your sacraments an abomination before God.”²

The court decided to bring an educated, well-mannered and understanding priest to Gufidaun to convince the two of the error of their way. But Jakob, in the meanwhile, they took bound and gagged across the mountains to Innsbruck.

Through Brixen and Mittewald, past Maria Trens where Trindl had worked as a hired maid, up through Sterzing and Tschöfs for the last time, Jakob rode with the Untermarschall Erasmus Offenhauser, a troop of mounted soldiers, and a squadron of the Bishop’s police.

At Innsbruck they kept him in the deep dark dungeon of the Kräuterturm until word came from Ferdinand what should happen next. With it being this close to Christmas and all of



The bridge at Klausen. The Messner’s house is the tall grey one by the river, this side of the church.

² From the *Urgicht* (court testimony) of Katherina Hutter, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Österreich, III Teil*, pp. 300-301

Vienna in a swirl of royal festivities, he could not, of course, be expected to answer until after New Years' Day.

Dr. Gall Müller, however, tried his “reasonable, persuasive approach” on Jakob during the week before. Wouldn't this make history—if the main character in the whole movement would be brought to conversion and help to convert the rest? What a feather wouldn't that be in Dr. Müller's hat! People might read and talk about him for hundreds of years!

Jakob told Dr. Müller nothing.

The imperial court at Innsbruck sent word to Christoph Fuchs, captain at Kufstein, to send two “punishment experts” to come and do the flogging. The Richter Peter Braunegger was to be in charge and all court personnel was to appear in a non-intoxicated state on the day of the trial.

They put him in ice water first until he was almost unconscious. Then they thawed him out and flogged him. They poured brandy into his wounds and set it on fire. A company of priests tried casting evil spirits out of him, setting a feathered head-dress on him and carrying him into the cathedral next door, to “break his spell.”

On the Friday before the first week of Lent, 1536, they burned him alive on the square at Innsbruck. A very large crowd gathered under the Goldenes Dachl (the little balcony on which the emperor stood) for the occasion, while church officials and Ferdinand of Austria rejoiced and congratulated one another on the “arch-heretic's death. But . . .

The Life

and the Light continued to shine in Jesus' Land. The Truth became more powerful than ever and many thousands more were added to the Gmaani in the following years.

Jakob died young—newly married, his wife expecting a baby in jail. The church community he had pulled with faith and courage through its first difficult years lay in great trouble at the time, humanly speaking. Nothing left but impoverished clusters of fugitives here and there. Not looking good.

But he died as he had lived, a witness to the Life that comes from letting go of all one has to gain Christ. Letting go of oneself, as Christ let go. That Life went with him through the flames for it was Christ, as plainly visible on his face as if someone had painted it onto his forehead with a brush.

Jakob’s words, his “ministry,” got cut short. But it no longer mattered. His life, sealed with the “mark and sign of all true children of God” (the sign of Christ being the Thau, a cross) was the testimony of Jesus shining from the flames beneath the



Young descendants of the South Tyrol believers, now living in Australia, on the square at Innsbruck where Jakob Hutter was burned on 25 February 1536.

Goldenes Dachl. It was the evidence of the Gospel, the beginning of a new reign, the banner and seal of Jesus' Land—the sun that keeps on shining when all others fade away.

Afterward

Letting go. So simple. So obvious. The mark that divides humanity between those that give and those that only want to get, unselfish followers of Jesus on one hand and selfish children of the devil on the other. Young Kaspar Kränzler, demonstrating clearly on which side he stood, fell into the hands of the police right after Pentecost. They put him to death at Sterzing with Gilg Lex and a fifteen-year-old boy.

Hans Obern and his wife never came back to Hörschwang after they heard what happened, but fled to Moravia. The Kasper Unterrainer family of Hörschwang (whose son Hänsel the authorities had already killed) took the children for the time being.

Nickl Niederhofer recanted, under torture in his father-in-law's gaol, and petitioned Brixen to let his wife come back from exile. They got together again, but in deep remorse. By August they were back with the Gmaani and went "underground." Peter Troyer leased their place out to another tenant. The police kept on searching until they found Anna sick in a shepherd's hut on the Getzenberg, and Peter Troyer begged the authorities not to kill her but let him keep her, blaming her actions on her incredible *Blödigkeit und Einfalt* (stupidity and naiveté).

Anna did not want to live at home again. Neither did she think her convictions stupid, so she fled and made it safely to Moravia.

Old Peter Troyer died shortly afterward. Anna's brother Paul took his office and the castle at Schöneck. Paul caught Nickl again. Once more he recanted. Once more his conscience tormented him and he tried to rejoin the Gmaani. But they did

not trust him anymore. He became a lonely shepherd on the hills, until his longing for Anna overcame him and, under bond from the court at Brixen, made his way to Moravia as well.

Trindl, in the meanwhile, escaped from prison at Gufidaun, obviously with the help of sympathisers. Perhaps it took place over the time of her baby's birth. Nändl also got out but they caught her again. And two years later, in 1538 they caught Trindl for the last time, putting her to death at Paul Troyer's castle in Schöneck.

“Unless you give up everything you have,” the believers from South Tyrol had heard Jesus say, “you cannot be my disciples. . . . But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. . . . I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mothers or father or children or fields for me and the Gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them persecutions) and in the age to come eternal life.”³

Little wonder it failed to surprise them when all these words came true.

³ Luke 14:33, Matthew 16:25, Mark 10:29-30

8

The Takeover

If you are still reading this book you must long have asked yourself the obvious question: Is it fair, is it right, to set a twentieth century “foreign mission” next to a church born in the fire of sixteenth century persecution?

Yes, it is fair and it is right. Because the Tanganyika mission and the Gmaani of South Tyrol are only two brightly coloured chips of one infinitely greater mosaic—the picture in which you and I, and everyone else that loves or seeks Christ today, can also find our faces if we look carefully enough.

Like Petrus Johannes and Gioacchino would have wanted us to see it, there is no such thing as “Bible Times” or “Anabaptist Times” or “End Times.” It is always “our time”—layers upon layers of it. Transparent layers, through which we can look to find ourselves, our work, our war, and the Gospel we preach, neatly laid out, neatly predictable in the patterns of history (or prophesy—whatever you wish to call it) that have neither a first “beginning” or a final “end.”

By the time Elam Stauffer died on 9 January, 1981 (the year we got married and went to Mexico) much had happened and changed in the *Kanisa la Mennonite Tanzania*—the Tanzania Mennonite Church, as it came to be known after Tanganyika merged with Zanzibar to become an independent nation in 1964.

The first major change was in the church’s government. After a long “independence struggle” of its own, the church stopped being a foreign mission and became a full-fledged church conference. Two bishops from Pennsylvania flew over to ordain

Zedekia Kisare as its first African bishop in 1967. With them came Elam Stauffer, already grey-haired and living in American retirement, but still buoyant, still bursting with “the vision,” unable to hold back tears of exultation and awe for what God had done in Africa. A self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing “indigenous church.” Here it stood, as big as life! The product of all that work and all those prayers. And with the new bishop, Zedekia, stood a host of other African ministers, doctors, teachers, youth workers, and native missionaries, serving the conference that grew steadily to fifty thousand African members and beyond.

Only a few concerns still tugged at Elam and the bishops’ minds. The new African conference had taken an ambivalent stand regarding separation from the world and returning good for evil. And not only did its young men serve in the army, it really looked in the 1960s as if that army might take “the wrong side” in the Cold War then threatening to pull the world apart at the seams.

The trouble, as the American brothers saw it, began with Julius Nyerere, independent Tanzania’s first president.

One of the few Africans to have graduated from a European college at the time, Julius was a brilliant and far-sighted planner. Not unlike Michael Gaismair with his vision for the Gmaani in South Tyrol, Julius promoted the African concept of *ujamaa*—a word that means “familyhood” in Swahili. God meant for everyone to live in *ujamaa*, Julius said. In extended families, in villages where each generation cares for the other, not in cities where people rush about, getting lonely and sad.

Julius believed Africans had “naturally known” how to live in *ujamaa* until recent times, and he hated the money-focused capitalism that “foreign imperialists” (Germany and Great Britain) had imposed upon them. Now, if they would only recapture what they used to have, he told the people, they could all support themselves in delightful unity—good for the body,

good for the soul—on Tanzania’s vast fertile hinterlands. The only way to overthrow world capitalism, he said, was to stop depending on it to stay alive.

His ideas might have worked. Only the people of Tanzania did not want to live out on the land, in little villages, anymore. Large numbers of the country’s men had served in Europe during World War II where they saw what others had. Now with the coming of radio and television they heard and saw even more. They wanted nice houses, comfortable jobs, and money to spend like “everyone else.” They wanted to travel, to look good, and drive nice cars—not to live somewhere out in the sticks with Grandma, feeding the ducks.

It took the Tanzanian army and the steady support of Maoist China to get the people out onto the land. But even there they kept resisting Julius’ “out-of-date ideas” and his plan for *ujamaa* never produced its desired results. By 1976 Tanzania had gone from being Africa’s largest exporter of agricultural products to being its largest importer. The country had no money left to pay its foreign debts and all the wealthy nations (to whom it owed the money) threatened to take action against Julius for his impractical and retrogressive government.

Steadfastly unwilling to govern Tanzania in a way he did not believe in, Julius finally chose, in 1985, to step aside. In his farewell speech to the people, he told them, “I failed. Let’s admit it,” and a new government with a new president took over, “allowing the country to enter the free market era” as the Wikipedia puts it.

During all this time, the Tanzanian Mennonites, to the relief of their brothers and sisters in America, felt just as dissatisfied with Julius Nyerere’s “pro-communist” government as everyone else. From the missionaries they had learned the joys of having their own homes, their own land, their own money and radios and bicycles. Who wanted to go back to the village?

Certainly not Mennonite pastors who had begun to wear dress suits and ties and drive their own motorcycles, or Mennonite women who had begun to taste the freedom of education and equal status with men!

By the time Julius' government collapsed in Tanzania, only the oldest of the Mennonite sisters still wore dresses or veilings. The rest, many of them in make-up and career suits, followed the trends of Christian denominations around them—while the revival that had begun with Phebe Yoder and the balokole continued to spread and transform whatever it touched around the world—above all, the home churches in Pennsylvania.

Years later, a book, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival*¹ would tell the story in graphic, yet sympathetic detail. How Pennsylvania's Mennonites, seeing what God did in Africa when the missionaries dropped their "sectarian distinctives" decided to drop theirs too, and how the church cautiously, step by step, entered the American Evangelical mainstream. Falling birth rates, fashion and sports. Old meetinghouses long replaced by glittering churches forced to compete with home entertainment, the shopping mall, Disneyland and the whole wide world at their members' disposal. Competing for their members' attention and their offering money on Sunday mornings.

But all that was a perspective we could not have had in 1969 when we began to talk about

The Phenomenon

in Canada.

I remember it like yesterday. We came in from doing the chores on a winter morning in southern Ontario. While we washed our

¹ By Richard K. MacMaster with Don Jacobs, one of the Mennonite bishops who ordained Zedekia Kisare in 1967.

hands at the corner sink and my sisters scurried about, getting the last of the breakfast on, Dad already sat at the table reading *The Budget*.² Suddenly he began reading out loud and we paused to listen. “The Lancaster Conference Mennonites,” he read, “have divided into two groups. The smaller of the two, led by bishops Isaac Sensenig, Aaron Shank and others, has taken a stand against worldly influences coming back with their missionaries from Africa: a push for higher education, conformity to the world in attire, the acceptance of divorce and remarriage, to name a few.”

Sitting at our breakfast table we discussed what had happened in Pennsylvania and began to relate it to other situations closer at hand. Mom and Dad began talking of how things were during the 1920s, and longer ago. “Everyone used to look and live pretty much alike,” they told us. “You could hardly tell the difference between a plain person or a Lutheran or a Catholic or a Methodist. All the women wore nice dresses and didn’t cut their hair. Everyone farmed with horses, and we all helped each other. We used to have Lutherans and Catholics in our threshing rounds!”

For us children, growing up in the 1960s, that already seemed strange. Only “we plain people” did such things anymore. But it was not hard for us to see that some of our people were heading the same direction as the Lutherans, the Catholics and the Methodists around us.

Everything, everyone, it seemed, was heading into greater independence and isolation. As farmers got bigger machinery they needed more and more land to pay for it—but they no longer needed each other. The same was true of factory workers and business people. The less people needed one another, the more time and more money they spent on themselves.

² A weekly newspaper serving Mennonite and Amish communities throughout North and South America and Europe.

During the 1960s Ontario consolidated its schools. Children no longer sat in rural classrooms where everyone knew each other and the teacher (like Mrs. McKay who taught at our school, S.S. 13 Wellesley, while her husband farmed just around the corner from our place). Now they got massed by the hundreds into vast new “educational centres” in town.

Then the grocery stores closed up in the villages around us. Little places where the bells jingled when you pushed the door open with its Borden Ice Cream signs, where the wooden floor creaked when you walked in beneath all manner of utensils hanging from the ceiling while Rebecca Horst or Grant Schnurr, standing behind their glass-topped counters, would ask what you needed today. Conestoga Mall opened on the outskirts of Kitchener-Waterloo and everyone started shopping in the city.

During the 1960s we still drove into Kitchener with our horses and buggies, careful not to let our wheels wedge into the tracks of the tram cars in the brick pavement of Victoria Street, where we put up our horses at the livery stable. But the horses and buggies went, and the roads (and the trams) went with the coming of super highways. And farms and fields and entire villages and regions went as the cities grew and merged to become a megalopolis of many millions of people from Kitchener and Hamilton to Toronto and Niagara Falls.

As all this happened we suddenly needed quotas and licenses to buy or sell. Our people balked at first. We continued shipping our milk but they sent us warnings again and again to get our license or they might not collect it anymore. The last warning came when we all got our milk returned with dark green food colouring in it. We had dark green custard and dark green cheese on dark green butter in our school lunches for a long time afterward. But we stopped shipping milk, and only the big farmers—those that co-operated with “the system”—survived.

Then came the Canada Pension Plan, provincial health care (OHIP), the Social Insurance Numbers without which no one

could hold a job, and a host of other legal benefits, duties and regulations affecting almost every area of life from birth to the moment one died—all funded through a tax and legal system that kept rising and expanding like my mother’s bread-dough on the bench beside the stove.

My father, with half a dozen other leaders of Mennonite and Amish communities travelled to Ottawa to plead for exemption from it all. “We do not need the government to care for us,” he told the prime minister (Pierre Trudeau) and the Canadian Parliament when they gave him a hearing in the House of Commons. “We trust in God. We work together. We care for our own. We have never needed a ‘pension plan’ and we do not want one now.”

We children found it highly amusing to see Dad’s speech published in the Hansard in English and French and his picture in the papers (we had only heard him preach in German at home and we did not take pictures of ourselves). But “the system” kept right on rising and growing without a hitch. The first time I got my Social Insurance card, to begin teaching in a Mennonite School, my Dad found it and burned it. Later he got one too.

I married a girl of the Old Colony Mennonites from Mexico, thousands of whom left their villages for new opportunities in Canada during the 1950s and 60s, where all the same things happened to them. They lost their sense of “peoplehood.” Their extended families fell apart.

All across Canada, as our Mennonite people took jobs in the city, as TV and computers and cell phones came into their lives, convictions faltered, morals collapsed, women cut their hair, put on trousers and started trying to act like men. Single parenthood and mixed unions became common as divorce and remarriage entered the churches and rapidly increased. (We also have scores of family members and relatives in “broken homes” by now.) Church attendance plummeted in the younger generation as ever greater numbers of our people lived independent,

isolated lives, all looking alike, all acting the same way—but not like Mennonites. Like Hollywood. And all kept looking for something to make them really happy but nothing really did.

A World-Wide Phenomenon

It did not only happen in Canada. Or in Pennsylvania. Or in Tanzania. When Susan and I came to Mexico we settled on a vast plateau—the Páramo de Morelos in Chihuahua state—that had not a single electric light. Nothing but coyotes laughing and howling on the plains where mud brick villages, like Bethlehem, lay silent under a sky almost white with stars.

The first Mexicans we knew looked like they might have stepped out of a turn-of-the-century postcard: Friendly village men in giant hats. Wide white smiles under black moustaches. Silver buckles, boots with spurs and cowboy shirts. Even schoolboys, riding bareback, showed off like rodeo experts. Gracious women in simple dresses, with their uncut hair tied up at the back, cooked the world's best enchiladas in dirt-floored kitchens under mango trees. White-haired men in *guayaberas*, Don Pánfilo, Don Enrique Sáenz, an old widow lady that always wore a black lacy veil, keeping a tiny shop on the plaza of the Villa Guerrero.

Then “the system” came, with electricity and TV and computers and cell phones. Everyone started thinking they needed more stuff to make them happy. For that they needed money and started racing about to get it. Instead of helping each other they started competing one with another. The birth rate went down—way, way down. And as families became independent they cared less, one for another. Many left their villages to live in the cities or *al otro lado* (“on the other side,” that is, in the USA). Organised sports (on TV) took the place of village fun. Women cut their hair and put on jeans, trying to look and act like men. Families fell apart as divorce and remarriage became legal and popular. In the end, vast numbers of people all lived

independent, isolated lives, all looking, all acting alike—but not like Mexicans. Like Hollywood. And all kept looking for something to make them really happy but nothing really did.

Then we lived in Costa Rica. High up on the Tilarán Mountains three Tico³ friends and I (it took us all day to get up there on horseback and down again) visited Don Macedonio Badilla and his wife. They lived that far from the closest vehicle road, from the closest telephone or electric line.

When they saw us coming, still far below them on the zigzag trail up the mountain, Don Macedonio's wife ran and caught a chicken to butcher. She slapped up the tortillas, fried the rice and made us a picadillo de aracache to eat with the beans. In the meanwhile Don Macedonio, dignified old man who never went to school, picked avocados, and sour oranges to make us a fresco, with a few lemons to go with the meal. By the time we got close enough for him to shout us his greetings, and his sweet wife stood beaming in the open doorway of her bamboo "kitchen" the aroma that came from it overpowered us with sudden appetite. We tethered the horses and ate together while she served us. What a time catching up on the news! Macedonio and his wife knew everyone on the mountain villages, so everyone and everything came up for review. She, in her black print dress and silver hair tied up in a bun, as delightfully modest as he was jovial and gruff. We had to stroll about, looking at all his fruit trees, his bee hives, his cane fields and his cows before they let us go—loaded with as many gifts from the farm as our saddles could hold on the steep way down.

Doña Digna the midwife that delivered a whole generation of babies on the western slope of our mountains above the sea, travelling on foot or on horseback, by day or by night. Don Lolo Cambronero, raising his family with the help of the village, after his wife died on the birth of their twelfth child (when his oldest was twelve years old). Doña Chalina, Doña Sofía, Don Lico and

³ Costa Rican

Doña Caridad in their rickety little house below us on the mountain—my life will forever be enriched for having known this generation of Costa Rican villagers. The families that invited us to the pig butcherings (where the whole village came and the entire pig, or two, was eaten on the spot for lack of a place to keep meat). The families that shared with us so many plantains we didn't know what to do with them all. That served us strong hot coffee with tortillas and sour cream whenever we stepped through their open doors (which was often) and who continually came to our house for one thing or another but repaid us amply with more favours and blessings than we could ever return.

But Costa Rica changed. Every so often we saw the lights of another whole village connected to the grid, twinkling like a new constellation on the unbelievably rugged slopes and spurs of our range, hanging down to the Pacific Ocean. And with the lights came electricity and TV and computers and cell phones. And people started thinking they needed more stuff to make them happy. The birth rate went down—way, way down. Commercialised sports (on TV) took the place of village fun. Almost all the ladies, even the grandmothers, on the mountain cut their hair and started wearing trousers. (Someone started the rumour that wearing long hair causes head-aches.) Families fell apart as many took jobs in the cities and came back only on holidays, painted up like movie stars. Once again we saw it happening all over, people living independent, isolated lives, all looking, all acting alike—but not like friendly Ticos. Like Hollywood. And all kept looking for something to make them really happy but nothing really did.

On the first sunny morning of the new millennium, New Year's Day, 2000, I walked up the hill from our house in Chile with my two little boys to get some sheep manure from our neighbour, Ignacio Kahler. More than a century earlier Ignacio's family came from Germany, sailing around Cape Horn, to settle on this beautiful farm, high above Lake Llanquihue. Here, where one

looks across the water to Chile's "Mount Fuji," the Osorno Volcano, they built their rambling wooden farmhouse with its veranda and the barns, Württemberger style, around a protected Hof. This morning we stood at the gate, watching the hired man carve an ox yoke out of a piece of new timber, long slow curves of his knife adding new curls of shavings to his growing pile, while bees buzzed about their hives under the apple trees, birds twittered loudly in the still morning air, and a flock of sheep shuffled down to the paddock, hanging steep and green to the village and the lake, far below.

A new ox yoke for the year 2000. Will anyone be farming with oxen a hundred years from now? Or fifty years? Or ten?

On the Caribbean island of Trinidad, in remote settlements on the Pomeroon River in Guyana, on little farms high above the wild west coast of Norway—everywhere I go I find the same things happening. And they are happening fast. But the more things change, the more they all—suspiciously—look and sound the same. Everywhere I go, in every country, the last islands of distinctive culture crumble and sink beneath the waves of one great sea of uniformity rolling around the face of the whole earth in our time.

Millions and billions of young people around the world listen to the same music and watch the same DVDs. All cut their hair by the same styles and wear the same brands of jeans and get into the same trouble with the same type of boys and girls in cities that are all the same. They all grow up wanting few children, but access to lots of partners of the opposite (or of the same) sex. The same "body cult" has taken them all, and whether they get educated or not, their values (shaped, largely, by what they see on television) are the same.

Does being Catholic or Protestant, or Muslim make a difference? All want to work as little as possible for the most fun and the largest amount of stuff they can get. All look for

something to make them really happy while nothing really does—and that, precisely, is what drives them into the arms of

A Strange Religion

This month, with our Haushalter’s wife on maternity leave, Susan and I have been doing our community’s shopping in the lovely north coast town of Wynyard, Tasmania—set among the tulip fields and dairy farms of Table Cape. The locals all know us. But if anyone new happens to be in Woolworths, heads turn and eyes bulge at the sight of two or three trolleys full of bread (we wipe it all up at a discount at the end of the day) or cans of milk, bottles of detergent, boxes of tea in really unusual amounts. Not to mention the unusual number of children with us, or the “exotic” sight of home-made clothing, head coverings and suspenders—obviously something that dropped out of another time period or another world.

Perhaps we have.

But who, I ask myself, is really strange?

Looking for something to read while the rest finished their business in town, I visited the Wynyard library last week. A neat modern building, it sits near St. Stephen’s church among flowers and palm trees behind yachts in the harbour and graceful verandas with gingerbread trim—a touch of Victorian England in the South Seas. Only the “Religious Books” section of the library (wedged in between its “self help” sector and the sex manuals), when I looked it over, did not bring Queen Victoria or merry England to mind.

One paperback New Testament, in a contemporary version I did not recognise, sat on the shelf. The remaining titles were: *The Goddess Path*; *Deepak Chopra – The Third Jesus*; *What Dying People Want*; *The Atheist Manifesto*; *Gangaji – The Diamond in your Pocket*; *Gnosis – The Secret of Solomon’s Temple Revisited*; *Rudolf Steiner*; *Anticipating the Future*; *Ignite your*

Potential; Happiness in a Material World (by the Dalai Lama),
Zen Flesh and Zen Bones.

I picked the only one of the selection that looked readable to me: *The New Believers—Re-imagining God* by Dr. Rachael Kohn, host for ABC's popular talk show "The Spirit of Things."

Dr. Kohn, who lives in Sydney, begins her book by describing "one of the most compelling moral tales of the modern world," the story of the Wizard of Oz. Just like the make-believe wizard got Dorothy and her friends tricked into being noble and brave through learning how to believe in themselves, the book suggests, the "trick" of all world religions (getting people to believe that an omnipotent God stands nearby to help them) has transformed and helped humanity for thousands of years.

By the time I got through Dr. Kohn's book (for as little as I liked it) I could not help but grasp the point she was making. First came fake religions (Western Christianity among them) that pretended to be what they were not—using tales of a "Father God" in heaven and a miracle-working Jesus, just like they used Santa Claus or Winnie the Pooh, to comfort people or make them feel cheerful and brave. Then, when enlightenment and maturity came, people realised that God did not live in any fairy-tale heaven at all. "God" is just how we envision the intuitive power, the spirit, that lives within ourselves.

We no longer need to fear a supernatural God, for he (or *she* if you prefer it) lives within us. Listening to God speaking through our intellect, through our bodies, is the way to real happiness. For we do not find fulfilment until we boldly trust and believe in ourselves—in the "God" that lives in our souls!

Yes, Dr. Kohn correctly evaluated what people have made of "God" in our time, but where will that take us?

After my visit to the library, Susan and I stopped at a Salvation Army shop. Beside a small selection of Bibles on their "Christian Books" shelf, I saw three other titles: *Good Morning*,

Holy Spirit! by Benny Hinn, *Conversations with God, Volume Three*, by Neale Donald Walsh, and the book I laid on the counter, *The Bridge Across Forever* by Richard Bach. “You can have that for free,” the sweet old grandmother in curled hair, lipstick and slacks told me. “It’s a religious book.”

That is right. I remember the Salvation Army shop in Kitchener, Ontario, in the 1960s, giving Bibles away. But what was this? The first chapter began:

We think, sometimes there’s not a dragon left. Not one brave knight, not a single princess gliding through secret forests, enchanting deer and butterflies with her smile. . . . What a pleasure to be wrong! Princesses, knights, enchantments and dragons, mystery and adventure, not only are they here-and-now, they’re all that ever lived on earth!

Our century, they’ve changed clothes, of course. . . . Yet masters of reality still meet us in dreams to tell us that we’ve never lost the shield we need against dragons, that blue fire voltage arcs through us now to change the world as we wish. Intuition whispers true: We’re not dust, we’re magic!

That some Australians should read this did not surprise me. But is this *all* they have left to read in the name of Christianity? What on earth for a religion is this?

Were this not coming at me from every side I would dismiss it as an aberration. The product of some sick mind, perhaps, not something the rest of us must pay attention to. But I can dismiss it no longer. It is all around us: A religion that puts humanity in the place of God.

The strange thing about this religion (not a new religion, by the way) is how well it works and how much it has to offer—to everyone. Once we make the switch from serving God in heaven to serving ourselves, from worshipping Christ to worshipping awesome people, it makes little difference, as Dr. Kohn points out, whether we are of this religion or that. It works as well for

Hindus as it does for Christians. It works for “born again Evangelicals” just like it does for Catholics or Jews.

And, if formal religion is not your thing, it works just as beautifully for the totally secular, the agnostic, the scholar, the factory worker, or the family with the villa and the four-door garage. For the first time we have a religion of universal appeal. A religion with a god who is always there, always real and ready to talk to you. For the worship of people means you may worship yourself (or whoever you admire most) however and wherever you want.

After my trip to the library and the op shop I came home and opened the paper to an almost full-page ad for a book, *The Gods of Sport*, featured as a “whopping 224-page collection of nude and shirtless images of AFL and NRL stars,” sold as a fundraiser for the McGrath Foundation, an Australian charity that helps cancer victims. “Order the book from www.nakedforacause.com.au for \$129.99.”

The Gods of Sport. Glorifying humans, appealing to the flesh as the only way left to “do good.” To my astonishment I read the ad and it made perfect sense.

Why not?

Standing in awe of themselves and of their own achievements, seeing nothing greater in the universe than themselves, it is no wonder that people in our time have made up their own religion and their own rules. No wonder they live to please themselves—to “be happy”—instead of living to please God.

While this understanding made sense and helped me to see what is happening, it was not a comforting one. And it took me right back to a word I learned from the believers of South Tyrol and the fragments of their *Clarification* that survive:

Antichristianity

A religion focused on getting instead of giving. On having instead of being. On doing just what we want instead of being told what to do. Everything the exact opposite of Christ. From where could this have come but the *antichristus* Jeronime Käls and Petrus Johannes read about in their Latin Bibles? And what could this be but the *Antichristentum* (Antichristianity) the believers of that time described?

The *Clarification* written in the 1520s, already saw Antichristianity in what had become of the Reformation:

And I saw another beast rise up out of the earth, the beast of which Solomon prophesied, “I saw everyone that lived under the sun walking with the strange child that appeared in that place. The number of those that went before the child and the number of those that came after it, had no end. But none that walked with him were glad.”

This is definitely another beast altogether. But in what way? Daniel already spoke of these two beasts that will appear in the last times, calling them the “king of the north” and the “king of the south.” This second beast—the “king of the south” in Daniel’s prophecy—pretends to throw out the first one with all his works. But the whole affair is a farce. For this second beast, preaching liberty for the flesh, deceives and corrupts the people. It points them onto the broad way that leads to destruction. It persuades them with false doctrines, then comforts them with false prophecies.

This is the beast that arose with Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. In the beginning it gave the impression of having received enlightenment and knowing the Gospel. It made a big show of unmasking and overthrowing the former beast (the papacy) with all its horrors and abominations. It knocked the first beast over the head—that is, over one of its numerous heads—and wounded it unto death. But very quickly this second beast that also sought worldly honour and was just as selfish, as greedy for earthly riches and as devoted to pleasure as the first one, set

the poverty of Christ aside to make common cause with the wealthy and powerful (*die Fürsten und Grosshanssen*) of the world.

Very soon the members of this second beast led a life just as wicked and selfish as those of the first one (the pope and his crowd). But through it all, they loudly kept proclaiming the Gospel, even though nothing that Jesus said or did had any effect on their doings whatsoever. Only too glad to let Christ carry the cross and do all the suffering necessary to atone for their sins, these people skipped off with free consciences to live as they pleased.

This second beast, rising up against the emperor and earthly authorities, uses the sword, bloodshed, and military might to defend the “gospel” it preaches. Even though it also suffered imprisonment and the sword in its earlier days, it now persecutes others that stand for the Word of Truth. In all things it has become a new papacy, an even more potent brand of Antichristianity, much praised and exalted by earthly, carnally-minded people.

This second beast has two horns like a lamb. It uses the language of Christ, and boasts of having the keys to knowledge and the Kingdom of Heaven. But its members not only have failed to enter the kingdom themselves, they have made it their business to keep everyone else from getting in.

This second beast, like the dragon, that old serpent in the Garden, the devil, asks, “Is it really true that God said you must not do this or you must do that? Don’t worry, since Jesus came, nothing bad will happen to you for disobeying God!” In this manner it sets the Scriptures aside with its new Antichristianity by saying, “If we really had to live like the Bible teaches, no one would accept the Gospel and the whole world would be lost! That would be sad, because God is so gracious and merciful.”

This beast wants nothing but a God that will save anyone and call anything good. If we says we should obey God and live according to his will, this beast contradicts it and accuses us, “You works-salvationists! Do you think you will manage to obey the commandments of God? No human being is able to do that. And

besides, it is no longer necessary, because Christ has died for your sins. All you need to do is believe on him!”

This, of course, is just the tune the carnally-minded love to hear. And whoever has not heard these dragon-mouths whistling it in our time must not have ears. For they are everywhere—saying precisely what the devil did when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness: “Look, I will give you all the kingdoms of the world, if you will only fall down and worship me!”

The members of this beast (with the spirit of error planted in their hearts by the false doctrine they teach) believe themselves truly enlightened, and defend their Antichristianity with great vigour and zeal. Not able to keep silent, they go everywhere preaching and singing and testifying. They shout great things about having faith, about believing in God, about Christ and the Word. They claim the promises of faith, but the fruits of their lives—what they do, what they are and what they allow—stands in absolute contradiction to what they say.

Then, whoever does not recognise and honour this Antichristianity gets rejected and despised, gets cast out and persecuted. In the spirit of the beast that came before it, this second one forces everyone, the great and the small, the rich and the poor, the free and the enslaved to wear its mark on their right hands and on their foreheads.⁴

The *Clarification* identifies a prominent mark of the beast (the state-church beast of the 1500s) as infant baptism, without which no one could claim a right to citizenship, or interact freely with others in Europe. In the same way, religious ritual (particularly the Roman Catholic mass) was for the early Anabaptists the “abomination of desolation” spoken of by Daniel the prophet. But the rest of what the *Clarification* says fits to our time, to our beasts and Antichrists, just as easily as it did to theirs:

⁴ From the 13th chapter of the *Erklärung*, (pages 238-245 in the 2008 edition, published at Pibroch Colony, Alberta, Canada)

Whoever separates himself from the beast of Antichristianity and refuses to conform to it or wear its mark, gets rejected and despised. Whoever refuses to be yoked with its human works of righteousness, human doctrines and human will—whoever does not pull on the rope of unrighteousness with it and calls it Christian while accepting its signs and lying wonders—gets cast out. He can no longer interact with the members of the beast (buying or selling the Pearl of Great Price) as we see in our time.

Every child-baptiser and sacrament-gobbler that struts about with a long sword at his side and fancy clothes and a plume of feathers in his hat, every worldly Christian that sits at banquets, clinking glasses with the rest, putting God to shame and swearing like an expert (proudly displaying in this manner the mark of the beast to which he belongs) gets classed as a good and honest man and given free access everywhere! The world loves to do business with him, to buy and sell and interact and socialise with him in every way.

On the other hand, the one that refuses to go along with this kind of life, who does not wear the mark of conformity to the beast, gets ostracised and condemned as a heretic, a deceiver of souls. It is only a matter of time until he falls into the hands of those ravening wolves and gets locked up in gaol.

Here is wisdom. All that understand the words of this prophecy (John's Revelation) and apply them correctly, see right into God's heavenly Truth that is hidden from the eyes of the world. With these words God wakes them up. He opens their eyes so they can see who the Antichrist really is—so they can identify the beast and his image, with the mark of the beast, and avoid it all like the plague. For God says that whoever worships the beast and wears his mark will get thrown alive into a lake of burning sulphur.

Let all who are wise, all whom God has enlightened in this way, consider the number of the beast. Let them recognise in it the Antichrist and his hordes, for this is the number of humanity: 666. Humans got created on the sixth day. And as long as humans live in their own humanistic thought and works and ideals—everything centred around themselves, doing only what their

human nature tells them to do—they live in the six workdays of the week.

The number seven, on the other hand, is God’s number. Those that enter into godliness enter the seventh day of rest. These are the ones that quit all their self-centred activities, that no longer listen to their human inclinations instead of to God. Now they worship God, not man, and stand in silence before him.

The Antichrist, however, does all he can to keep everyone in the six workdays of the week. He coaxes and wheedles and tries to coerce them into all manner of humanistic activities, just to keep them occupied and to stop them from entering into that rest that God prepared. With his noisy activity he does what he can to disturb their silence before God, lest they hear what God says and start obeying him. For this reason his name is in the number: six, six, six.⁵

In the 144,000 “sealed ones” of the twelve tribes of Israel, Anabaptist believers saw the squared and final (but figurative) number of God’s elect—all that wear the mark of God on their foreheads and follow the Lamb wherever he goes:

The ones that wear the Father’s name written in their foreheads are those that obey the Father’s Word and Truth, which is Christ. The Holy Ghost plants this Word in their minds (the reason for the sign appearing on their foreheads) and causes them to live it out in a bold and entirely open way. They display the Word of God in the Life they live. Their entire Life is a witness to the Word and are they ashamed of it? Not in the least!

But the one who is too bashful, too ashamed to live by the Word denies the Truth and cannot possibly carry the Father’s name. The Father is ashamed of him too and will never put his mark of approval upon him.⁶

No doubt remained in the first Anabaptists’ minds about the outcome of wearing the “mark and seal of Christ”—or, on the

⁵ From the 13’th Chapter of the *Erklärung* (pages 246-248, Pibroch Edition, 2008)

⁶ *Erklärung*, Chapter 14 (pages 251-252, Pibroch Edition, 2008)

other hand, the mark of the beast. The *Clarification* described how it would go:

After this I listened and heard a voice like the sound of mighty waters, the sound of the Gospel, the Word and the Spirit of God sent from heaven, rushing out from the people of God, the kingdom of his chosen ones. This is the Gospel carried out by his servants and messengers (*Diener und Sendboten*), the Gospel spread by great multitudes of evangelists (*grossen Scharen der Evangelisten*) whose teaching is so powerful, so convincing, that none can withstand it, just like no one can stop or withstand a mighty river's flow.

And I heard the voice of great thunder rolling through the heavens. This is the voice that echoes God's judgement upon the ungodly. The deeply rumbling threat of disaster and condemnation, of divine retribution that frightens the wicked but makes them fear God and shocks them out of their worldly way of life—not at all like the smooth talk of those Bible experts, those hypocrite preachers that deceive the people and lull them to sleep.

James and John got called sons of thunder, or “the thunderers,” because they preached the Gospel as it really is. But although the chosen ones are frightened by the sound of the Gospel, like a child is frightened by the roaring of the sea, they love it. The Gospel of Christ that converted and renewed them is a great comfort to them and gives them courage. Like the lovely music of many harpers playing on their harps, it is the song of their inner being, singing and playing and praising God for his goodness they have experienced through faith.

Evil spirits of depression turn and flee from this joyful music in the hearts of God's chosen ones. The song of Moses and the Israelites praising God for rescuing them from Pharaoh's hand. The song of Deborah praising him for the deliverance of the hosts of Israel. The dance of the women (*das Reigen der Weiber*) rejoicing with David for the giant Goliath's death. It is Judith's song of triumph over the slain king, the song of the Maccabees delivered from the drunken elephants, the beautiful song of Mary, rejoicing in the magnitude of her salvation, when the angel's

announcement came. The song is the song of Simeon, praising God in the temple for having lived to see the Redeemer of Israel. All this was the song of the harpers playing on many harps.

But now they sing a new song before the throne of God and before the Lamb, proclaiming not in words alone, but through the entire witness of their lives (*durch Mitstimmung des ganzen Lebens*) the Gospel of the grace of God. With the Life they live, they testify to the greatness, to the authority, to the sacrificial order and rule of the Gospel in the *Gmaind* (Gmaa) that proclaims to all men the glory and majesty of God.

These are the ones that have refused to defile themselves with women—not thinking here of the marital act through which no one is defiled, but of spiritual chastity in the heart. These have kept themselves from all strange women, that is from church fellowships stained with the doctrines of devils. They have not, like Israel, gone whoring after other religions and other gods, but have kept themselves pure and unspotted from that wicked Jezebel and her daughters. From the daughters of the Moabites at Baalpeor. Like Joseph they have resisted the daily advances of Potiphar's wife, that great whore of Babylon we still have with us today.

These chosen ones have kept the virginity of their faith and their conscience undefiled. They are the wise virgins with extra supplies of oil for their lamps, watching and praying always, like Susanna, to keep from falling into the clutches of evil seducers that follow them day and night. They let no one rob them of the virginity of their souls, like Eve whom the serpent deceived. They let no one confuse them with clever speech, but carefully guard the pure simplicity of Christ.

These are the ones that follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They walk in the footprints of Christ, steadily keeping their eyes on him who has gone before. Whatever he taught them, they obey. Whatever example he left them, they take as a pattern for their lives—even following the Lamb to the butcher's bench, if necessary, with a cheerful and willing heart.⁷

⁷ *Erklärung*, Chapter 14 (pages 252-255, Pibrock Edition, 2008)

Reading the *Clarification* I could not help but see—so clearly it frightened me at first—where we are today and what is happening around us.

We are waiting on nothing. The “end” we expect could happen at any time.

My friends with their “end time” prophecies and conspiracy theories are dreaming. Waiting on future times of persecution. On future beasts and fabulous Antichrists to come. Who knows, it might happen yet. But why should Satan bother persecuting Western Christians, seeing he has snared them already through wealth and ease?

How many Western Christians are even worthy (like Job) of suffering persecution for Christ? Of being used by God as examples of steadfastness in trouble?

I started reading the *Clarification* with the assumption the early Anabaptists were “somewhat off on prophecy” because they thought themselves already in the end times. But as soon as I understood what “our time” and the “end times” really are (the perpetual *today*) the light of eternity dawned upon me and I found myself looking down through the transparent layers of the Eternal Gospel, down through Melchior Hofmann and the first Anabaptists’ time, down through Petrus Johannes’ and Gioacchino’s times, down through the time of the early Christians to what John and Daniel and Ezekiel said. Everyone’s time being a reflection of earlier times, every pattern fitting previous patterns, layer beneath layer. Yet everything revealed in the words of enlightened prophets that predicted the future by using the past (as recorded in Scripture) to reveal the mysteries of *today*.

That was when I saw our current “world religion” (worshipping people instead of God) fitting exactly on top of the Enlightenment, the birth of Italian Humanism and the Renaissance. Looking through that, I saw Roman and Greek humanism, and through that the outlines of Egypt and Persia and

Babylon and Sumer and Nimrod and the tower of Babel, all the way down to the fantastic idea first expressed in the Garden of Eden, “You will be like gods!”

The entire *Clarification*—like John’s Revelation itself—I came to realise, was written in this light. Every layer of world events with its dragon and its beasts, every layer with its Babylon, its children of God, its heroes of faith, and its dreadful whore, dressed in purple and drunken with the blood of saints.

It does not matter so much what the *Clarification* says or what applications it made to the sixteenth century. What matters is that we, like the believers who wrote and copied it in danger of their lives, also use Bible prophecy as . . .

A Weapon for Our Time

The *Clarification* writers understood why God used generic images to picture the people and events he showed to Ezekiel, to Daniel, and to John on the island of Patmos (animals with curious identifying features, such as claws and wings and tails and hair like women). God did so, they believed, to keep the Bible’s prophecies timeless and up-to-date. To make them understandable and easy to apply in every generation, anywhere around the world.

Using these prophetic images (without personal names but easy to identify—the “beast,” the “lamb,” the “eagle,” etc.) even tradesmen and unlearned farmers could look around them, and back through world events, to pick out the patterns Gioacchino described. And with this perspective, it became just as easy to decide what they needed to do, whom they should work with and whom they should oppose.

So it goes for us. Bible prophecy keeps us seeing the bigger picture all the time. But we also face challenges no one faced in the sixteenth century. Every layer of world events gets more complex and dangerous. Everything happens on a wider scale.

The humanism of our time, for instance, is much more than the idea propagated in universities during the Renaissance. It is infinitely more than just a national event or the problem of one generation like the fascist or hippie movements. This time round it is no passing fad or “cult phenomenon,” for worshipping people instead of God has become a way of life, the life of the poor as well as the rich, of Christians and non-Christians, the unlearned and the educated, the decent and the indecent in every culture and nation (with TV, computers, and shopping malls) around the world.

The Dark Ages of Mediaeval Europe have ended. Ours have begun. Like Petrus Johannes and Gioacchino and the Apostle John already said in the first century: “This is the *last time*. Look, *many* Antichrists are already here!” And every time “the end” comes around it ends in greater drama and tragedy than the time before.

Is It All Over?

With a strange sense of being a mouse in the cat’s house—Has the cat really died?—I drove through Eastern Europe alone, after the fall of communism in the 1990s. Here and there colossal ruins of collective farms brooded under a light snowfall. In a village with a dam under bare willow trees I picked up a boy in work boots and a vest. Wearing a cap. The only thing I made out of all he told me with rapid gestures and a smile was *Nové Mesto*. Going to Nové Mesto? I tried all the languages I knew but without luck. We shrugged helplessly and grinned, and drove off together.

Alongside the narrow street—the *very* narrow street—of the village, with its noisy geese and traffic on dirty snow, an old woman I could have taken for a Hutterite grandmother swept the walk. A younger woman in a mini-skirt and high heels, her very short hair dyed orange, strolled by. Two men and a boy, one

partially hidden under its hood, tried to start a battered Skoda on the street.

But when we came out of the Carpathian Mountains at Nové Mesto (Neustadt), my hitch-hiker thanking me profusely as he waved me off, I began to see Slovakia's new face on the partially completed super highway from Bratislava through Trnava and Trenčín. Rolling along the wide smooth highway through the valley where winter wheat stood green on the fields and patches of snow clouds hid the forested hills, I noticed, every so far, a great stone castle on a crag. Crumbling ruins where the lords had lived in places I vaguely remembered from reading the *Geschichtsbuch*. Trnava—that used be to the Austrian city of Turnau. Trenčín—Trentschin in German—wasn't this the site of one of the last Gmaani in Habsburg lands?

Driving up the valley on the new super highway alone, zooming around mediaeval towns and castles marked on green overhead signs—towns that only got their service plazas and fast-food eating places in the last five years—I had much to think about. Gone were the Communists. Gone was Hitler. Gone were Napoleon and the Habsburgs. Gone forever these ruined castles' lords that killed off and drove out the brothers and sisters of the Trentschin Gmaa. And in the place of all that bloodshed and misery, here stands Trenčín's unbelievably vast and shining Tesco "Hypermarket" (as shopping plazas are called in Slovakia). Tesco, a chain from the UK. Have the bad times really gone and the good times come to stay?

Will the final chapter of European history read: "Then they all stopped fighting and joined the European Union. They all moved into lovely houses and got nice cars and plasma screens. They stopped having so many children, got a dog and a cat and a microwave and lived happily ever after"?

No, I told myself, the blood and thunder of history cannot have fizzled out into the ho-hum of never-ending lasagne and digital sound. The clash of cosmic kingdoms cannot have died in the

sterile luxuries of suburbia. This is an ambush. A hoax. Nothing but a new strategy of the same old beast, and if we fail to notice it, my friends, we shall all be miserably utterly destroyed.

In a moment, the Bible says. In . . .

The Last Battle

of this great war on the saints.

I run into nothing more frequently than the astonishing idea that “our times” are so much safer and better than those dreadful “Anabaptist times.” People listen wide-eyed to what I tell them about the sixteenth century then close the meeting by thanking God for “this wonderful freedom of religion we now enjoy” and praying for “those still suffering persecution in China and Pakistan.”

The truth is, those persecuted believers in China and Pakistan have less to worry about than most of you reading this book. A World War of spirits—quite likely the final “war on the saints”—already rages around you. Entire cities and nations have fallen into the lap of the Antichrist while millions upon millions (distracted by his music, his never-ending barrage of information, and his world politics that don’t make a difference) rush down the broad way to hell.

Will you go with them?

Or will you, like the believers of South Tyrol, take your stand, resist him, and fight for Jesus’ Land today?

If so, your captain will lead you directly . . .

9

Back to the Field

Half-way around the world from Europe, two thousand years from Christ and the “Great Commission,” my bag of potatoes grew heavy as I dragged it with me, searching for more, in the field above Rulla Road. Along with it, I carried the question, “Is this potato field really our mission field? Have I done right in leaving conventional ‘outreach work’ to come here and do this?”

Only if every potato I pick, every move I make is part of an infinitely greater plot, the strategy of Christ in his war for Jesus’ Land. . . .

For a long time after they fled to Moravia, the believers from South Tyrol kept going out at price of their lives, year after year to seek the lost, warn the wicked, and build new communities—new “cities of refuge” for those that got converted—wherever possible. But after centuries of persecution and flight their descendants settled comfortably in Russia and America, where they could live in peace. There they became tired and weak. As they grew ever more ingrown and tradition-bound, the Lord had to look for others to preach his Gospel, to fight his war, and to set the Kingdom of Heaven before the seeking multitudes of the world.

In France and the Netherlands he used awakened believers led by Jean de Labadie. In England he worked through the Levellers, the Diggers and the Seekers (some of whom became known as “Friends”) by whose witness many thousands found the Light. In Russia and the Far East he poured out his Spirit on earnest believers (Spirit Christians, Siberian, Chinese and even

Arctic households of faith) that found the Life and held to it through dark centuries of tribulation.

From the community of the renewed Moravians in Germany, messengers to the West Indies establishing the Life in Greenland, in South and North America, in Africa and the Middle East, and in Ceylon. Through their witness untold thousands upon thousands heard the Truth and found Christ. The Moravians even helped the last members of the Gmaani in Central Europe to escape from Habsburg lands into Russia.

At Möttlingen in southern Germany, Johann Christoph Blumhardt called on Jesus to deliver his town from dreadful spiritual bondage (Satan's attack on people that knew religion but did not know God). Out of the awakening that resulted from his prayers grew an entire community filled with Life. Once again, many thousands were touched, and half a century later, after Germany lost the first World War, this community passed the torch to another one—that of Eberhard Arnold and the Bruderhöfe in Europe, who fled to South America, and spread from there to the United States and elsewhere.

In Great Britain, where the Industrial Revolution and a dense population brought the horrors of unchecked Western capitalism into clearer focus than anywhere else, the Gospel of the Kingdom stirred many to seek new Life in Christ. William Booth and the Salvation Army,¹ George McLeod and the brave pioneers of Iona in Scotland, Noel Stanton and the Jesus Army all fought for it at one time or another.

So did David Petander, wandering prophet of Scandinavia who left a string of faithful households behind him, Julius Kubassek of Hungary with his "Brethren of Early Christianity," E. Stanley Jones with the Christian Ashrams of India, Amy Carmichael

¹ William Booth's intention was to settle transformed alcoholics and poverty-stricken families in communal "farm colonies," a number of which were founded in the late nineteenth century.

with the fellowship that grew up at Dohnavur. Everywhere the real Gospel went it produced real families of believers, working models of the Kingdom of Heaven (some working much better than others), whose witness has touched the whole world.

But the same beast, the same power of Antichrist (people serving themselves instead of God) threatens to destroy and engulf them all—as he threatens us too, a tiny remnant of the Gmaani, on the island of Tasmania.

Will he get every one of us in the end? Or will the Life (that is Christ) grow strong and shine and march out with us again?

It All Depends . . .

on what we fight for, and with whom.

Our little Australian Gmaa, for as many years and events as may separate it from South Tyrol, is the obvious result of what happened there five centuries ago. Many of the outward forms, the clothing, the foods, even the spoken dialect, remain with us in part. But the war we fight with Christ is not to preserve what happened years ago. It is not to maintain our German customs, to raise lovely families in out-of-the-way places where others may come and join us if they wish.

We fight with Christ to establish on earth the Kingdom of Heaven. We go out with Christ to take the beast by the horns, to push him back and set up new outposts of peace and justice, orderly community, on the Antichrist's hostile domain.

For this we need infinitely more than the weapons that Julius Nyerere and the farmers of Brixen fought with. We need the Spirit's sword to cut injustice out by the roots. And the only insignia we may carry is . . .

The Testimony of Jesus

the mark of true Christlikeness, that comes from letting go of

everything (and everyone) else to follow him.

To testify for Jesus, to carry his mark no matter how much it costs, is easy—if you know him. If you walk with him, and speak with him and love him all the time.

If you belong to Jesus' family and live in the constant awareness of his presence around you, it becomes easy to see the world as he sees it. For his values to become your values, and his goal (to establish peace and justice in his earthly kingdom) to become your goal as well. Once this happens, you will do nothing else but represent him, faithfully, truthfully, fighting the power of greed and private wealth, like the believers of South Tyrol, until the testimony of Jesus rises again to shine in today's world.

Witnessing for Jesus you will naturally interpret the present in light of the past (like Petrus Johannes) and see what is happening around you. Whom you should join and what you should avoid. For the testimony of Jesus, John said on the island of Patmos, is the spirit of prophecy.² And Jesus needs nothing more than prophetic witnesses to carry out his mission today.

Prophetic witnesses, the only true missionaries left, exult in the Life wherever they go. They fight the great war. They not only preach but demonstrate Jesus' Gospel to a jaded, chaotic world.

Prophetic witnesses testify to a cause that is infinitely greater than themselves (or that of their mission boards).

Prophetic witnesses boldly withstand the spirit of Antichristianity. Wise enough not to shake hands with devils in spineless compromise, they choose rather to struggle with Christ up the narrow way.

Prophetic witnesses spurn the collection of stuff (sold to make people happy), and refuse to pamper their children, pets or spouses. Having let go of the world, they live in constant

² Revelation 19:10

witness against the world and its values, on the foreign field or on the potato field, all the same.

Prophetic witnesses demonstrate unity in the Spirit, submitting joyfully one to another, so others may know Jesus and believe in him too.³

Prophetic witnesses live in wonderful freedom above fashion, keeping their homes relaxed and “out of it,” with no TV.

Prophetic witnesses challenge men be men—strong and with beards as God made them. In charge. And let girls grow up protected, inwardly beautiful, prepared like Elizabeth and Mary for the high joy of motherhood.

Prophetic witnesses lead “successful lives” without careers or college degrees. They demonstrate to the world the enduring pleasure of the Life that money does not control. Of favour that does not come from being smart, or rich or good-looking.

Prophetic witnesses build stable and loving households where young people grow up and get married as equals, unhindered by status or wealth or privilege in Christ-like equality. Where older ones teach the young by example and the young ones care for the old (no matter how weak and helpless they get) for as long as they live. Households where promises made are promises kept. Permanent relationships. The family of God, day in day out, forever.

Beginning in Jerusalem and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the earth, Jesus has been looking for prophetic witnesses—soldiers on a mission—to go out to conquer and settle and live in his land in peace until it spreads around the whole earth. Until every last place at the tables in the house of the Lord is full. Will you be one of them?

If so, you may start now. You may enter . . .

³ John 13:35

Your Mission Field Today

Some of you that read this already live in church communities, direct descendants perhaps of the South Tyrol believers. That is wonderful, but it will not save you. No matter who you are (or think you are) you stand outside the boundaries of Jesus' Land until you become a true witness, a soldier on a mission, for him.

Does the community to which you belong uphold the testimony of Jesus in the area you live? Does it carry out the "Great Commission,"⁴ and picture on earth the Kingdom of Heaven? If not, you have no right from God to be a part of it. The only church to which you may rightfully belong (forget about family connections, or money, or "burying my father first" or keeping vows you had no business making) is the one whose leaders are men of vision, whose members are born again and who fight on Jesus' side today.

No group of people on earth, let alone a church community, will ever go right if its leaders are blind, trying to lead the blind. Is that the case with yours? Go talk to God. Go talk to them. You might be surprised.

If you approach them in the Spirit of Christ and find you can work with them—stay and help. If not, get up. Get out. Today. Find yourself a church community under Christ, or find others with whom you can establish a new one.

The rest of you, reading this book, may never have seen a Gmaa, or a church community of any kind, in real life. But, if Christ has called you to this Life of prophetic witness for him, you dare not ignore it or hope your longing for Jesus' Land will eventually go away. You need to get up and follow him—now.

Look for others that have also heard the call. If you discover an already existing household of Jesus' family to join—praise God!

⁴ Matthew 28:19-20

If not, start a new one. Two or three is all it takes, Jesus said, for him to be among you.

Choose a plan and stick with it. Decide on roles. Decide where. Figure out what you will do for work and money. New households never get off the ground without both, as Paul said, and if anyone refuses to work (or only wants easy jobs) do not feed him for long.

If you have sisters and children among you, make sure they get properly taught and cared for. If you need help, ask! “Ask and you will receive,” Jesus said. Or, if your needs have already been met, look! Open your eyes and see who needs help. Do not wait until your brothers and sisters get desperate or discouraged. Esteem others more highly than yourself, look first to the needs of others, and you will find numberless opportunities to serve them! This is how the Life works.

Stick with Christ and the urgent needs of those around you will keep you from ever becoming ingrown, ineffective, or bogged down in your own affairs. Establish your household and care for it well, but do not leave it at that. Send out witnesses, two by two, with the testimony of Jesus, as soon as you can.⁵

Households that witness boldly for Christ survive spiritually. Others do not.

Above all, never doubt that Jesus will help you. This is his work, his prophetic mission from God, as well. And while he works through your situation, for as roughly as it may go, keep praying, hang on! Rome was not built in a day. As my wife and I found out on the night of our . . .

⁵ Outstanding examples in this field were the Moravians (Unity of Brothers, Herrnhut) who built *Ortsgemeinen* (home communities) wherever they went, but who constantly kept a *Pilgergemein* (an itinerant travelling community) on the go.

Einverleibung

into a believing Gmaa at Elmendorf in Minnesota (four hundred and fifty years after what happened in South Tyrol).

The soft light of a winter evening faded from the prairies as we gathered in the Elmendorf trailer-kitchen for our reception into the church community at that place. Our *Einverleibung* (grafting into the body), they called it, and many had come from other Gmaani to celebrate it with us.

The first song struck home: “*Du seist ein Christ, das spricht der Mund, womit thust das beweisen? . . .* You say you are a Christian but how do you show it? On what foundation do you stand? Do you follow Christ’s teaching and example in everything you do? Have you given yourself to him? You say you are a Christian—show it with your works! Convince your enemies as well as your friends.”

Out the window I watched the snow-covered fields disappear in the waning light as David Vetter⁶ from the Neuhof read a Scripture and the *Lehr* (teaching). “Would life ever be the same again?” I asked myself in the silence of my heart. “Was it right to give myself away like this?” With great inner peace my soul answered, “Yes,” and I knelt with Susan, my faithful missionary wife (although the room was nearly too crowded to do so) to answer the questions put to us by Gary Vetter, servant of the Word:

Seid ihr aus dem Worte Gottes in euren Herzen überzeugt. . . Are you convicted in your hearts that to live the way we do here, in community of spirit and goods, is according to the teaching and example of Christ, that it is the work of the Holy Spirit among us?

⁶ All older men, regardless of their position are addressed as *Vetter* in the Gmaani. The word means cousin in German—hence “Cousin David” in this case.

Begehrt ihr euch also dem Herrn in Himmel zu schenken und aufzuopfern mit Leib und Seel. . . Is it your desire, therefore, to give yourselves to the Lord in heaven, to offer him your body and soul, along with all that you have, in order to follow the will of God in this church community, to fit obediently into its order, and to let yourselves be used as the need may arise?

Are you willing to accept correction and the admonition of your brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as to correct and admonish them if it becomes necessary?

Are you willing to suffer trouble and reproach with the saints, to stay true to the Lord unto the end, not denying the truth or turning away from the flock of Christ, even in times of outward physical persecution?

It took a long time, after we had answered the questions and the servants had taken us up, to make our round through the crowded building, greeting everyone, receiving everyone's embraces, words of encouragement and welcome into the community. Then, with great joy and volume we sang the hymn: "*Sei Gott getreu, halt' seinen Bund o Mensch in deinem Leben! Leg' diesen Stein zum ersten Grund, bleib' ihm allein ergeben. . .* Stay true to God, hold your covenant with him as long as you live. Lay as the first stone of your foundation, your promise to remain wholly surrendered to him!"

Einverleibt—grafted into God's family at Elmendorf—me sitting with the brothers at breakfast the next morning, Susan with the women, our children in *Essenschul*,⁷ after which I went sailing off with the boys in a beat-up farm vehicle to work in the turkey barns, no doubt could have remained about what had happened or whether it was real. We were part of the Gmaa—God's family—for this life and the next. But our battles for the kingdom of God were not nearly over. To the contrary it soon became apparent they had only just begun!

⁷ At the time we became part of the Elmendorf community children still ate separately from their parents. This is no longer the case.

American materialism, corrupting and weakening influences from worldly Christians threatened us on one side, while we faced never-ending opposition to the demands of Jesus' revolutionary Gospel on the other. Then one night old Samuel Wollmann from the Big Stone Gmaa in Minnesota—"Samml Vetter" they called him—came to our meeting in the crowded trailer house.

Samuel's Prophecy

"We need to wake up and do the *Aussendung* ("sending out," mission work, in early Anabaptist terms) again," Samml Vetter admonished us. "For far too many years we have sat here and done nothing. For that reason we have so much rubbish and so many troubles among us. If we would have kept busy and done the work that Jesus wanted us to do, all this would not have happened."

Samml Vetter was an old frail man, bald, with a white beard and I can see him yet, sitting in the meeting with his *Janke* and home-made pants, speaking earnestly to us in the dim light of the old trailer kitchen. "We must go out and find the people," he told us. "We must bring them into the Gmaa like they used to. But before we go ahead with that, we have a big job to do. Just like we clean out our barns before we get a new flock of turkeys we must clean out the Gmaani. We must throw out all the manure and the junk we have collected. We must wash down the walls. Then, once everything is clean and ready we must get busy with the *Aussendung*, as Jesus commanded us, again!"

Old Samml Vetter was right. We have a great work ahead of us—those of us that live in the surviving remnants of the Gmaani as much as the rest of you that long for Jesus Land. For Christ's mission to get accomplished in our time, we need far more than David Livingstone stories and Julia Haskell's missionary hymn. We need far higher goals than the social justice that Michael Gaismair and Julius Nyerere hoped to

attain. To stop the takeover, to resist the beast and overcome the forces of Antichristianity in our time we need the sign of the Thau (the cross) on our foreheads, that only Christ will put there.

If we let everything go, for him.

From prison in Vienna, Leonhard Lanzenstiel wrote:

Brothers and sisters, chosen ones, earnestly keep together as pleases God! Do not worry what the devil might do. Pay no attention to his howling complaints, to him gnashing his teeth around you. He sees eternal condemnation coming down on his head. He sees the destruction into which he, with all his followers, shall soon be hurled. But you, brothers and sisters, do not love each other any less. Keep true community alive among you in the Holy Ghost! Let it be your outer witness in word and works, and do not for anything let go of your holy assembly, even though some have acted unwisely within it.

Finally, chosen ones, sweet smelling flowers of God, honour him who has made you holy and listen to what Ezra says: “Wait on your shepherd! He will bring you into eternal rest, and he who will come at the end of the world is already near.” Prepare yourselves now for the award of his Kingdom. Flee the shadow of this world. See the number of those that carried the mark of God, already sitting down to his wedding feast! Having escaped the shadow the world, they have put on shining robes, given to them by God.

Oh Zion, may your number be complete! May you receive your children, marked and preserved for you—all that have kept your commandments to the end!

The number of Zion’s children, marked by God, already stands secure. On the mountain of Zion they appear, a great multitude that no man can number, praising God. And in the midst of them I saw a young man, taller than the rest, placing a crown on the heads of every one of them. I asked who they were and the angel told me, “These are the ones that have put on the robe of immortality, the ones that confessed the name of God before the world.” Then I asked him about the young man. “He is the Son of

God,” the angel said. “The one they made known throughout the world, whose name they confessed, and for whom they so boldly took their stand.”

Rejoice, oh beautiful city of Jerusalem! The time of your delight stands near! Wait just a little longer and the Lord your God will remove your garments of mourning to deck you in eternal splendour, the glory and honour of never-ending joy! In your parade will march the heroes of Zion, the mighty of Israel, one by one—no more weak ones, no more lame or crippled ones among them. All of them tall and straight and strong, robed in perfect health, dressed in the shining righteousness of God.

All things imperfect shall no longer plague you. Your neighbours, oh Zion, the ones that see you in prison and great tribulation now, shall see your redemption come in splendour and eternal light.

Therefore, dearest brothers and sisters, do not worry about suffering a little longer at their godless hands. Soon—very soon—we shall see their destruction come! They will fall and we shall stand in triumph on their necks! Oh brothers and sisters, chosen by God, may God give us patience to stoop and to bend until we break through—until we burst out victorious, to rise, to rejoice in the triumph of his chosen ones!⁸

Not the End—the Beginning

Evening overtook us quickly on the potato field up Rulla Road. One of the men, our young *Haushalter*, drove about, collecting all of us and our bags before *Gebetzeit*—time for evening prayers. The children laughed and had much to say. We praised God for our successful gleanings and bumped out the lane while the cows walked home, our hands dirty, our hearts and our vehicle full.

Yes, we need food. And working together in peace, we already taste the delight of Christ’s heavenly kingdom on earth. But what fills our hearts, what lifts us with inner exultation to God,

⁸ *Hutterischen Episteln* V1 276-279

is infinitely more than a nice afternoon of working together, or the blessing of more “food that perishes.”

Secretly, in the crowded and happy load of potato harvesters, I rejoiced in the white and brown faces of the adults and children around me. A few of them with ancestors from South Tyrol and Moravia, slipping words one to another in German when they thought no-one else was listening. The rest of them with Maori and English and Irish and Scotch and Spanish and Indian ancestors. Some of our “Hutterite” children with parents and grandparents who were Rastafarians, hippies, Mormons, or who worked for years in a bar. A few (the brown-skinned ones) with roots in Polynesia and Latin America.

It is true, our material future may not look much brighter than the dark sky hanging on the Sisters Hills. In the eyes of our neighbours we are poor. Strange, and somewhat mediaeval besides. A cult? Many do not understand us. Most do not even try.

But, having taken the road that Jakob and Trindl took, the narrow way, the way of Truth and *the Life*—what else could we expect but challenges, triumphs, and ever more complex struggles in an all-out war of opposing ideals? Opposites in possession, opposites in personal achievement, opposites in goals and values, how could we, as followers of Christ, make peace or live in harmony with the world?

We want no worldly peace, no place in society or stupid “prosperity” now, for in the work, in the ceaseless struggle to build a church community from scratch in Australia, we clearly sense the rumblings of an underlying world order, the cosmic overthrow of the beast and the great whore, the end of Antichristianity, the triumph of the Gmaani when the King comes back to reign. Not for a thousand years. Forever! In resplendent glory and light, in the fiery dawn of a reconquered earth—Jesus’ Land—unspeakably fairer than any Tyrolean

valley of which Peter Passler and Michael Gaismair could have dreamed. New heavens and a new earth, where justice dwells.

Right before he left, in Ezekiel's vision, the man in linen took coals of fire from among the wheels of God—that is, from the revolving patterns of Bible prophecy, the eternal Gospel—and flung them out across Jerusalem. For some it was their burning destruction. But for those with the mark on their foreheads it was the fire of Pentecost, leaping, cleansing, enlightening tongues of flame that made them speak in many languages and drove them on missions to Asia, to Africa, to Europe, to the New World, to islands across the sea—all the way to the island state of Tasmania, literally “at the ends of the earth.”

Have any of those coals, scattered perhaps by the people whose voices you heard in this book, fallen on you?

If so, take them and run! It is your mission too.

Epilogue

Brothers and sisters from Australia and New Zealand, from Europe and North America reviewed the manuscript of this book and offered many helpful suggestions. But nothing I heard left a deeper impression on me than this letter from a servant of the Word in a Canadian Gmaa. In his eighties, the father of fifteen children, he speaks with the prophetic wisdom we need to hear and take heed to in our time:

Even though your work is extensive and your insight is thought provoking, if it will wake up a slumbering Church who materially enjoys the fleshpots of Egypt and craves for more and more, is doubtful. It would probably take a persecution of the magnitude you documented in your manuscript to bring them to their senses that man does not live by natural belly-filling bread alone, but more so by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

At the present moment the ship of prosperity for all too many church communities is sinking fast. This overload has not a little to do with the concern, “What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?” and the added burden on top of that to consume this great wealth and the riches demanded by every person’s right to happiness and pursuit of the good life. By far not the least of this overweight is the debt-load of borrowed and already-spent money, from always-at-your-service banks and financial tycoons, who lend today, but just as surely as night follows day, will be there tomorrow to collect their pound of flesh and draw a lot of blood on top. Never mind the poorest of the poor, we are the poor if by losing out on wealth, we lose out on happiness.

And as for religion, original Christianity with its outreach does not anymore fit into this modern version and organised religious mindset. The religion that is being promoted, and is lauded as genuine grass-roots Christianity, is the one that serves the

above-mentioned lifestyle, consisting of health, wealth and the right to financial security, the pursuit of happiness and a well-cushioned lifestyle.

This mindset sits well with the surrounding society at large and it might well be that disintegration into this larger society will be the outcome. As the saying goes, birds of the same feather, flock together. If past history serves as a warning and throws some light into what direction our present day church communities are heading, then we know the outcome, same as happened to all churches and societies that did not care to read the handwriting on the wall of human history. Dissolving was the final outcome.

Don't feel disappointed if your timely warning falls on deaf ears. Few societies take to heart sincere, truthful prophetic voices in their very midst, let alone a voice coming out of the wilderness, miles removed from the great centres of learning and commerce, Jerusalem and Rome. Nonetheless, if you feel called to represent a lone voice reminding them that that the Lord of the harvest is close at hand, bringing his winnowing fan with him to separate the chaff from the wheat, this is all you can do and all that is expected from you. Even though the greater majority will not heed you, nonetheless God did preserve for himself a handful who refuse to bow their knees to Baal.

And who are those few? The ones who cultivate a personal, intimate relationship with God their Creator. Who permit no other gods and authority figures to come between them and Him; neither church, system, nor collective brotherhood, to overrule with man-made laws and dead-end ceremonies this unseen connection on the inside, this hand-in-glove, constant communication, dependence and first love relationship with Jesus whom alone they insist they will obey at any cost.

S. H. Concord