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The Secret of the Strength

- by Peter Hoover

CHAPTER 24 A Bull in the China Shop

Clustered around its Benedictine monastery, Mönchen-Gladbach on the plains of the lower Rhein in Germany, was a city of song. Its monks sang. Choral groups of nuns from the convent of Neuwerk sang. The music of the great organ in the bishop's church broke into thousands of crystal echoes among the vaulted arches and Gothic stonework high above those who came for morning mass.

But in the 1530s, other songs began to stir the hearts of the people of Mönchen-Gladbach. Anabaptist believers, gathered secretly in city homes at night, loved Christ and sang to Him. They sang about giving up all they had to follow Him and it wasn't long until the whole city discovered the truth of what they sang.

In the winter of 1537, they caught one of the Anabaptists, Vit Pilgrams, and tortured him on the rack. Failing to make him recant after months of barbarous cruelty, they burned him at the stake on May 26, with a bag of gunpowder pulled up to his chin. Then they caught Theunisz van Hastenrath, the first Anabaptist messenger in Mönchen-

Gladbach, and killed him too. The man who took his place was a bagmaker named Lambert Kramer.

Lambert loved Christ and spoke of Him on every opportunity. He held secret meetings in his home¹ and provided Menno Simons with a place to stay when he came through the area. On one occasion, the authorities tore his house down and took his possessions because of his Anabaptist activities.

A close companion of Lambert Kramer was a charcoal maker named Zelis Jacobs. Zelis spoke bravely of Christ. They chose him to be a servant of the Word, and in the 1560s, he ordained two young men, Matthias Servaes and Heinrich von Krufft, to help him. Under the direction of Zelis and these young men, the believers met at night to sing and pray in a stone quarry between Mönchen-Gladbach and the village of Viersen.

The songs of the Anabaptists lifted their spirits to God. They did not stop singing when Matthias Servaes and 56 others fell into the hands of the authorities in 1565. But their songs took on a sorrowful note when the news of something much worse than that came to their ears.

¹ After joining the Anabaptists, Lambert Kramer lived for some time in the village of Visschersweert.

Disagreement in the Church Community

Little by little, the believers of Mönchen-Gladbach became aware of strange things happening among the Anabaptists of the Netherlands. Reports came of sudden excommunications and harsh shunnings: husbands refusing to eat or sleep with their wives, and many were put out of fellowship for trivial reasons. The Dutch Anabaptists, it seemed, no longer used excommunication to deal with clearly evident sins, but as a quick fix for any disagreement among the brothers. Anyone who questioned what the church (that is, the most widely respected elders like Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, and Leenaerdt Bouwens) decided was in



Prosperity and material peace, who should wish for anything less? As the Frisian Mennonites became ever more deeply involved in the fast-growing economy of the Netherlands (many of them buying land and milking cows), they left their "martyr complex" behind and became well-liked, respectable citizens, willing to serve God in private and become "the quiet in the land."

danger of getting “delivered unto Satan.” Then, in 1555, things came to a head in the Dutch town of Franeker.

The tradesmen and merchants of Franeker, on the flat land only ten miles from Leeuwarden in Friesland, were not poor. They lived in cozy rooms above their shops that lined the city’s cobblestoned streets. The farmers around Franeker, who tended cows and gathered hay for the winter, were not poor either. But they were hungry—hungry for the truth first preached by Anabaptist messengers in the 1530s.

Within a few years after the first Anabaptists passed through Franeker, a large congregation of believers gathered behind closed doors, watchmen peering out of candlelit rooms to advise of danger on the street. Two hundred and fifty, then three hundred, next five hundred, and eventually more than six hundred baptized members took communion there. With the children, the group numbered well over one thousand souls, but Satan was not pleased and did all in his power to make trouble.

After several harsh and sudden excommunications (to which many brothers and sisters objected), the elders at Franeker excommunicated a teacher of the Word, Hendrik Naeldeman, and all those who, like him, failed to support what they had done.² The news of this reached the lower Rhein area. Then, while Matthias Servaes was still in prison, Lambert Kramer, Herman van Tielt, and Hans Sikkens traveled to Wüstenfelde, the little village on the plains of Schleswig-Holstein, 300 miles north, to find out what was going on.

The men stayed in Menno Simons’ home. Lambert and Menno had been good friends for years, and they had a pleasant visit. For two days, they discussed the matter of the ban (excommunication)—when to use it and when not. Other leaders from the area came, and

many shared their views. Then Herman and Hans left, and Lambert stayed for two more days, visiting with the Simons family.

On his trip north, Lambert was impressed with Menno Simons and the positions the Dutch leaders were taking. But in thinking about it on the way back, and after speaking with the believers in his home congregation, something did not seem right. How could excommunication be used so freely? Was it right to “deliver unto Satan” where there was no clearly committed sin, and in cases when the transgressor was already repentant? Was it right to demand such drastic separations from those within and those who had been put out of the congregation?

Caught between the Dutch Anabaptists and their hardline position on one hand and the more moderate brothers of Switzerland and southern Germany on the other, the believers on the lower Rhein became steadily more uncomfortable.

In the spring of 1557, Menno Simons and Leenaerdt Bouwens called a meeting (at Köln am Rhein) to discuss things. They invited Lambert, Zelis, and other Anabaptist leaders of the surrounding towns. Matthias Servaes could not come. But writing from his cell in the Bayen tower prison, within easy walking distance of where the meeting took place, he admonished the believers to take a cautious and moderate position in the spirit of Christ. Then, several months later, Lambert and Zelis traveled south—this time to meet with Anabaptist leaders in the city of Strasbourg.

The Breakdown

From all over southern Germany, Switzerland, and the German regions of France, the brothers came. In Strasbourg, they met in a believer’s house and read a letter Menno Simons had written asking the South German believers to accept his position on excommunication. Menno Simons called on

the Swiss and South Germans to draw stricter fellowship lines and to separate themselves from all those who did not. But they prayed about the letter and discussed it at length until they decided to kindly but firmly reject it. They wrote a letter in response, asking Menno and the Dutch Anabaptists to reconsider and to handle church discipline in the spirit of Christ, not in a rash, authoritarian way. In the letter, the South German and Swiss brothers stated their hope that this issue would not divide them but that they could continue to follow Christ together.

Their hopes met disappointment.

Lambert and Zelis, traveling north to Mönchen-Gladbach, carried the letter to believers in the Netherlands who reacted strongly to it. The Dutch believers called it false doctrine, an accommodation to the world, and other uncomplimentary things. Menno Simons replied with a strong letter, which he called a Thorough Explanation and Account of Excommunication.³ He sent it to Lambert and Zelis. After thinking about it for some time, they wrote back.

Neither Lambert, the bagmaker, nor Zelis, the charcoal seller, could write like Menno Simons. Neither of them wanted a controversy. But they called on Menno to reconsider and return to the more moderate view of excommunication that he formerly held. They told Menno in this letter that they would rather be excommunicated themselves than go along with his extreme and un-Christlike way of putting people out of the church community.

Menno wrote a reply: A Thorough Answer, Full of Instruction and Counsel, to Zelis and Lambert’s Undeserved and Unjust Accusations, Their Slander and Bitter Name-Calling About Our Position, Which Is, As We Believe, the True Teaching of the Holy Apostles in Regards to Excommunication and Shunning.⁴ Soon afterward,⁵ Dirk Philips and Leenaerdt

² Hendrik Naeldeman and those who believed like him were put out of the Franeker congregation in the first mass excommunication that took place among the Anabaptists.

³ Grondelijk Onderwijs ofte bericht van die excommunicatie, 1558

⁴ Antwoord aan Zylis und Lemmeken . . . 1559

⁵ 1559 according to the Julian calendar

Bouwens traveled south along the Rhein, through Koln, Viersen, and Mönchen-Gladbach, all the way down to southern Germany, on a terrible mission. Everywhere they went, they read a letter, written by Menno Simons, excommunicating Lambert Kramer, Zelis Jacobs, and all the South German and Swiss Anabaptists with them.⁶

More Trouble in Franeker

No sooner did Dirk Philips and Leenaerdt Bouwens get back from their trip south than they had serious matters to take care of in Friesland. Menno Simons died shortly after their return, and Leenaerdt Bouwens became the leader of the Anabaptists in the region. But not everyone was happy.

Many brothers in Friesland felt that Leenaerdt “lorded it over the flock,” and they questioned his taking of money for preaching. They also wondered about his wine drinking (it seemed like he drank too much). Finally, in 1566, under Dirk Philips’ direction, Leenaerdt lost his responsibility as an elder in the church community.

Then came the question of how to replace him. The ordination (to take place in Franeker) brought to light a long-standing difference between the native Frisian brothers and the Flemish families who had moved in from Belgium to escape persecution.

The Frisians thought the Flemish dressed in fancy clothes. The Flemish, in turn, thought the Frisians lived in houses that were too fancy. When a Flemish brother, Jeroen Tinnegieter, was ordained by the elders at Franeker, the congregation di-

vided at once. Leenaerdt Bouwens sided with the Frisians (and took up his responsibility again). Dirk Philips sided with the Flemish, and the two men who had worked closely together, sharing many dangers, joys, and sorrows in the Lord’s work for many years, ended up excommunicating each other. With that, they excommunicated en masse all those who supported each other, and the two groups—Flemish and Frisian—shunned one another completely.

In the early 1550s, Menno Simons had written a compassionate letter to the congregation at Franeker, imploring the brothers there, “for God’s sake, to pursue peace. And if you have with words collided too roughly against each other, then purify your hearts and be reconciled in Christ Jesus... If you are baptized into one Spirit, then fulfill my joy and be of one mind with me in Christ. Build up and destroy not. Let one instruct the other in love, and do not disrupt, so that blessed peace may be with all the children of God and remain with us unbroken and unto eternal life.” But as a result of his own teaching on excommunication, Menno’s good desires came to nothing, and the bull of authoritarian church leadership began its rampage in the China shop of the Anabaptist movement.

The Exaltation of Brotherhood Authority

Not many years after he left the Roman Catholic Church, Menno Simons had written:

We counsel and admonish everyone to take good heed to the Word of God... We have not directed you to men nor to the teachings of men, but to Jesus Christ alone and to His holy Word, preached and taught by the apostles. All teachings that do not agree with the teachings of Jesus Christ and of His apostles, no matter how holy they may appear, are accursed.⁷

Christ commands all true messengers and preachers to preach the gospel. He does not say, “Preach the doctrines and commands of men, preach councils and customs, preach interpretations and scholarly opinions.” He says, “Preach the Gospel! Teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).⁸

We look not to lords or princes, to doctors and educators. We look not to the councils of the fathers nor to customs of long standing. For no emperor, king, doctor, educator, council, or decree can stand against the Word of God. We dare not be bound by men. We are bound by the commands of Christ, by the pure teachings and practice of the apostles... Doing this, we shall neither deceive nor be deceived.⁹

With a clear vision of Christ’s authority, Menno Simons rejected the belief that the church stands between God and man and stepped out of Roman Catholicism. But toward the end of his life, his vision got blurred, and his teaching changed.

In the end, Menno submitted to the authority of a new “mediatorial church”—that of the Anabaptist church he had helped to establish. His earlier love for Christ gave way to an inordinate affection for the church.¹⁰ And, thanks to the writings of his old age and of the Dutch and Alsatian (Amish) Anabaptists who followed him, his later position prevailed.¹¹

⁸ Van die gheestelicke verrysenisse...ca. 1558

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ In 1558, two years after he excommunicated Hendrik Naeldeman and a large part of the Franeker congregation, and the year before he excommunicated all the south German and Swiss Anabaptists, Menno Simons wrote to his brother-in-law Reyn Edes: “Oh my brother Reyn! If I could only be with you even a half day and tell you something of my sorrow, my grief and heartache, and of the heavy burden that I carry for the future of the church...If the mighty God had not strengthened me in the past year, as He is now doing also, I would have lost my reason. There is nothing on earth that I love so much as the church, yet just in this respect to her must I suffer this great sorrow.”

¹¹ J.C. Wenger, speaking of Menno Simons in the introduction to his complete works (Scottsdale, 1955), exclaims: “It is right that the church he served should be called Mennonite!” Considering the disastrous effects of Menno’s later position on the Anabaptist movement

⁶ After the great excommunication of 1559, the Anabaptist movement was permanently divided into two camps—those who held the strict authoritarian view of the north, and those who took the more moderate position of the Swiss and South German believers. Seventy years later, in 1632, those of the north set down their views in the Dordrecht Confession of Faith. This confession (which teaches the rigid view) was adopted by Jakob Amman and his followers (the Amish) in France and Switzerland in 1660. In 1725, it was also adopted by the Swiss and South German brothers who had settled in Pennsylvania. About that time, the Swiss and South German Anabaptists in America became known as Mennonites.

⁷ Van die gheestelicke verrysenisse...ca. 1558

Four hundred thirty-five years after Menno Simons died, I listened to a Mennonite bishop preaching on “The Anabaptist Key to Sound Doctrine.” He said:

The Anabaptists discovered the key to defining and maintaining sound doctrine. They discovered the “filter of the brotherhood.” No doctrine can be known to be Biblical unless it passes through this filter of the Biblical brotherhood. Therefore, all personal convictions must be presented to the brotherhood, where sound doctrine is defined, the Scriptures are properly interpreted, and the truth is discovered.

It is in submission to this Biblical brotherhood that we find doctrinal stability... God has charged the Biblical brotherhood to bring the Bible to the people... So may God help us to reconfirm our commitment to the brotherhood—the basis of our faith, our source of stability, and the place from which we may go out to evangelize the world.

The bishop’s sermon was well presented, and it expressed what Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, and Leenaerdt Bouwens no doubt believed by about the 1550s. But it was not the teaching that gave birth to the Anabaptist movement. And it certainly was not what many Anabaptists of Switzerland and southern Germany believed.

The Anabaptist movement began with the belief that the church was not called by God to “bring the Bible to the people,” the truth is not found in consensus, and that church councils do not have the right to define or interpret the teachings of Christ. Menno Simons, in the earlier years of his ministry, wrote, “Our concilium (council) is what was written in the Scriptures... Nothing may be preached in Christ’s kingdom but the King’s commands. Nothing may be taught in Christ’s house and church but Christ the husband’s own words. The entire household must govern itself ac-

cording to Him.”¹² Once this changed it did not take long until they had. . .

Still More Trouble in Franeker

After the tragic division of 1566 that divided most Dutch Anabaptists into Frisian and Flemish congregations, the Flemish group in Franeker needed a new meetinghouse. Their elder, Thomas Bintgens, entrusted with the church’s money, was happy to find a bargain. A poor man of the city (a drunkard) had been forced by his creditors to sell his house to the highest bidder. The drunkard knew Thomas Bintgens. He offered to sell him the house for 700 florins, but to avoid the possibility of higher bids, he falsely made the receipt read 800 florins.

Thomas Bintgens did not think much about this insignificant detail. He gave his report to the other ministers, not sparing any information, and expected them to be pleased.

They were not pleased.

In fact, Jacob Keest, Joos Jans, and Jacob Berends were horrified. “You mean you bought the house from that drunkard without talking to his creditors!” they exclaimed. “How could you do such a thing as accept a false receipt!”

No sooner was Thomas confronted with his error than he repented heartily. “I would rather pay for the house two times with my own money than offend someone,” he declared. But his fellow ministers were not satisfied.

“Thomas needs to be silenced,” they decided. “Such a major lack of judgment shows that he is not qualified to serve in the ministry.” But many in the congregation did not agree.

“Thomas is a good man,” they said. “In fact, he is more consistent in his daily life and deals more forthrightly with sin and worldliness than the other ministers.”

It was true. Thomas Bintgens had been the most “conservative” among the

Flemish Mennonite ministers at Franeker. Before long, the “conservative” members of the congregation rallied around him, while the “liberals” supported his opponents. On three occasions, committees of elders from other congregations—Haarlem, Amsterdam, Groningen, and elsewhere—were called in to settle the dispute. But they could not bring the conflict to a conclusion, and once more they resorted to excommunication to settle their differences.

Both groups excommunicated and began to shun each other. The division spread throughout the Netherlands and northern Germany. Before many years had passed, practically all the Flemish Mennonite churches had divided into conservative “House-buyer” and more liberal “Contra-House-buyer” groups.¹³

The Trouble Increases

As the Anabaptists of the Netherlands turned their energies to enforcing their authority and the rules they had made upon one another, those who once persecuted them relaxed. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants no longer feared the Dutch Anabaptists. Instead of warning people against them, they joined in making fun of their many divisions and small-minded rules.

It was true. As their focus shifted from following Christ to submitting to brotherhood authority, the rules of the Dutch Anabaptists multiplied. Every area of life, from the kinds of tools and trades one used in making a living to the exact style of clothing, shoes, hats, and haircuts, became important. In 1589, the Frisians (Leenaerdt Bouwens’ group) divided into Harde Vriezen and Slappe Vriezen (Hard Frisians and Slack Frisians). The Hard Frisians (who considered themselves the only church of Christ) soon divided into the Jan Jacobsgezinden,¹⁴

¹³ The unfortunate names, especially the former, remained in use for a long time. One hundred and fifty years after Thomas Bintgens, a Dutch catechism was still called Mennonite Book of Questions... As Used in the Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches Called House-buyers.

¹⁴ This group, the longest-lasting of all the little conservative groups, existed on the Dutch island of

¹² Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers 1539

Thijs-Gerritszvolk, the Pieter-Jeltjesvolk, and dozens of other tiny groups and subgroups.¹⁵ Some of the Slack Frisians united with Hendrik Naelde-man's group (the Waterlander Mennonites), and some joined the Anabaptist congregations of the lower Rhein. At the same time, the Flemish Mennonites (Dirk Philips' group) split into Oude Vlamingen and Zachte Vlamingen (Old Flemish and Slow Flemish), and both of these groups broke up into many more: the Vermeulensvolk, the Vincent de Hondvolk, the Thomas Snepvolk, and the Jan-Evertsvolk to name a few.

Practically every group "delivered unto Satan" the group from which it came and got "delivered unto Satan" in return. Within thirty years of Menno Simons' death, most Dutch Anabaptists had been excommunicated three or four times by other Anabaptists who claimed to have authority over them. Among the few exceptions were the Bekommerde Vriezen (Concerned Frisians), who refused to excommunicate the rest, and the Stilstaanders of Zeeland, who did not take sides with any group but got "delivered unto Satan" and shunned by them all.

Then, as a final shattering of Dutch Anabaptism, the Lammerenkrijgh (War of the Lambs) broke out in the 1650s. It started in the large Flemish congregation bij 't Lam (by the Lamb) in Amsterdam.

The War of the Lambs

The congregation by the Lamb chose Geleyn Abrahamsz, a 26-year-old medical doctor, to serve them as a teacher of the Word in 1648. Geleyn had grown up in a Stilstaander congregation on the island of Schouwen-Duiveland in the Dutch province of Zeeland. As a child, he had been taught to speak sparingly and deliberately, to dress simply, and to live a modest life.¹⁶ He did not learn

much about the other Anabaptists in the Netherlands until he went to study medicine in the city of Leyden. Then he married a Mennonite girl from Amsterdam and settled there.

Geleyn's first goal as a teacher was to bring the Anabaptists of Amsterdam to unity. But many of them opposed him. They clung to the confessions of faith and their written lists of rules that divided them. This grieved Geleyn and raised questions in his mind. On January 11, 1657, he presented to the congregation by the Lamb a paper for their consideration. In his paper and in his conversations with the leaders, he asked these questions:

1. To what degree may leaders exercise authority over their congregations? May leaders ever decide what the members of their congregations should believe?
2. May a congregation or denomination claim to be the only church of Christ?
3. May the authority of human leaders ever override the authority of the conscience?
4. May statements of belief or interpretations of Scripture be considered infallible? Is there anything infallible outside of the Scriptures themselves?

Geleyn's questions struck the congregation by the Lamb to the heart. They all knew how Geleyn lived and what he taught. None of the other Anabaptist leaders in Amsterdam followed the example of Christ as he did. But a number of the older leaders saw his questions as a threat to the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement itself. They called a great

what they had with the poor. Another young man of their congregation (a friend of Geleyn Abrahamsz and about the same age) was Pieter Cornelisz Ploekhoy. While Geleyn studied medicine in Leyden, Pieter traveled to England, where he wrote *The Way to Peace* and *The Way to Happiness for the Poor*. In 1663, he and his wife set sail with 25 families to the New Netherlands, where they settled at Horekill on the Delaware River. They lived in community of goods and concerned themselves with the spiritual and social needs of the Dutch colonists and their black slaves until the Anglo-Dutch war scattered them. Theirs was the first Anabaptist settlement in the New World.

meeting at Leyden, inviting leaders from all over the Netherlands and northern Germany to come and discuss Geleyn's questions. They chose Thieleman Jansz van Braght, the compiler of the *Martyrs' Mirror*, as their moderator.

At this meeting, Geleyn explained his belief that the Scriptures are a sure guide and that every man needs to study and follow them personally (not only as prescribed by the brotherhood). He believed that all truth can be understood by everyone who comes to know Christ and who learns from His words and example. Finally, he believed that God will judge us, not so much by what we believed as by what we did, and that if we seriously follow Christ, our common goals and lifestyle will bring us together in harmonious brotherhood.

At this, the Dutch Anabaptist leaders shook their heads. "The man is doing away with sound doctrine," they said. "He is replacing the established positions of the church with a strange emphasis on lifestyle."

When Geleyn challenged the infallibility of the Mennonite confessions of faith, many of those who had come for the meeting rose in their defense. "The confessions of faith have come down to us from the time of the martyrs. They present a Biblical view," they insisted.

"But the martyrs did not all believe the same things," Geleyn reminded them. "Even Menno Simons changed some of his beliefs along the way."

At this, the Dutch leaders decided that Geleyn would either need to give up his views or be silenced. He responded with another question: "May a meeting of elders silence a man who was chosen by a congregation to lead them? Shouldn't that silencing be done by the congregation itself?"

This last question fell on deaf ears.

Most of the members of the congregation by the Lamb could not go along with the silencing of Geleyn Abrahamsz. They knew that he was a godly man, blameless

Ameland until 1855.

¹⁵ Historian and author Pieter Jansz Twisck was the leader of a "Hard Frisian" group called the Jan-Pietersz-Twisckvolk.

¹⁶ The Stilstaanders of Schouwen-Duiveland, who wrote a book against taking part in harsh judgments and divisions, tried to follow Christ in the way they lived. They lived in unadorned houses and shared

in his private life, and an example to the unbelievers. But some wealthy families who held fast to the old conservative position withdrew under the leadership of Samuel Apostool and founded yet another Mennonite group in Amsterdam—the one that met in a meeting house called de Zon (the Sun). Much to the distress of Geleyn Abrahamsz and the congregation by the Lamb, the division spread rapidly, and within a few years the Dutch Anabaptists had regrouped under the new names of Lamisten and Zonisten (those of the Lamb and those of the Sun).

Among those who sided with the Lamisten were the remnants of the once flourishing Anabaptist congregations of the lower Rhein. But...



While Dutch Anabaptists prospered in the north, the believers of Bavaria, Austria, and Switzerland continued to suffer constant harassment. In mountain villages like Trub, high above the Emmentaler in the Swiss Canton of Bern, some found a measure of security. Should the police come up the valley, secret trails into forested slopes behind them offered a means of escape. Kindly disposed Protestant neighbors further down the valley (the Halbtäufer—Halfway Anabaptists, as they came to be called) often served as informants and sent messages or supplies to those in hiding. But emigration, in the end, became the choice of nearly all who persisted in the faith—and even among the emigrants, sharp differences of opinion led to further isolation and partings of the way.

Their Singing Died Away

After they beheaded Matthias Servaes on Saturday, June 30, 1565, his companion Heinrich von Krufft wrote a song:

My joy in this life is taken away.
Into anxiety and grief have I come.
Therefore, I sing with a sorrowful spirit,
and if it doesn't sound nice, I ask you not to hold it against me.
Ezra says that there will be a great falling away. Oh God, the pain!
The righteous suffer persecution in every place.
Wickedness is taking over. They kill those who teach the Word of God.
Oh God, where shall I turn?

In the name of the Lord, I lift my eyes to the hills from where my help comes.¹⁷

Persecution caused grief to the Anabaptists of the lower Rhein, but it was a small grief compared with the sadness of seeing the church disintegrate.

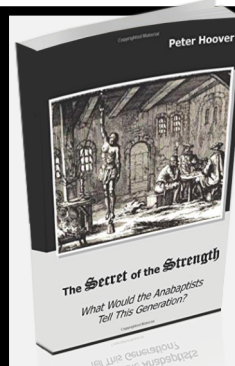
After Menno Simons excommunicated Lambert Kramer and Zelis Jacobs, along with all the Swiss and South German brothers, in 1559, the Anabaptist movement entered a period of confusion and distress. What Zwingli, Luther, and the Pope could not accomplish through force, the terrible abuse of brotherhood authority accomplished in the space of a few years.

In the north, the movement broke into dozens of quarreling fragments. In the south, many got discouraged and fell away. Thousands of Anabaptists, including most of those in the lower Rhein area, gave up and joined the state churches. Among those who remained (mainly in out-of-the-way rural areas in France and Switzerland), Jakob Amman introduced the same disastrous teaching. Then the proud spirit of “we are the ones who own the truth” and “following Christ means submitting to us” was carried by what was left of the Mennonites, the Amish, and the Hut-

terites to America to reproduce itself a hundredfold there.

Four hundred and fifty years later, Mönchen-Gladbach is still a city of song. But its music is Rock and Roll and Reggae...and the songs of those who follow Christ in that city are practically unknown.

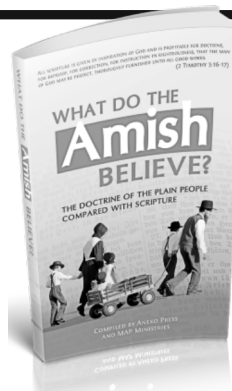
The Anabaptist congregation at Mönchen-Gladbach died out in 1654.



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¹⁷ Ausbund, 24

Most mornings, Esther and I meet in the living room to read the Bible and pray together. Sometimes we read a dozen or more verses, and other times just a few. Our main goal is to get something from what we read.

This morning, we spent time in Hebrews 11:1, and we never made it past that one verse. We read it, talked about it, prayed over it, and tried to understand what it truly means.

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

As we sat there and talked, the following came to our minds. Faith often starts in a place we cannot see. You might even say it begins like an imaginary picture in the mind before it ever becomes real in life.

Faith is not just wishing. It is not just hoping something might happen. It is seeing in your heart what God can do, even before it happens.

For instance, what do you want to see?

- Do you want fear to leave your life?
- Do you want peace instead of worry?
- Do you want freedom from bitterness?
- Do you want your children to grow up and follow the Lord?
- Do you personally want a closer walk with God?
- Do you want to get married and have a family?

Can you picture it?

Not in a selfish way, but with God in mind. Ask yourself, "Would this bring glory to God?"

For example, it honors God when our children grow up and follow Him. It honors Him when they pass on the faith to the next generation. So, we can picture that. We can pray for that. We can trust God for that.

Right now, that picture may not be real. You cannot actually touch it or see it with your eyes. But that is where faith lives.

Faith holds on to what is not yet seen.

The Bible also says in 2 Corinthians 5:7, *"For we walk by faith, not by sight."*

This means we do not base our lives on what we can see around us. We live by trusting God, even when nothing around us seems to be changing. Faith keeps walking, even when the path is not clear.

Another verse that came to mind is Romans 10:17, *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."*

Faith does not grow by looking at our problems. It grows when we spend time in God's Word. The more we listen to God, the stronger our faith becomes.

We also thought about Mark 11:24, where Jesus said, *"What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."*

Jesus is teaching us that faith believes before it sees. When we pray, we trust that God hears us and will answer in His way and in His time.

And then just a few verses later in the same chapter, we read this powerful truth in Hebrews 11:6:

"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

This shows us how important faith really is. It is not just one part of the Christian life; it is at the center of it. God is pleased when we trust Him, even when we cannot see what He is doing. When we come to Him, we must believe that He is real, that He hears us, and that He rewards those who seek Him.

Then, in God's time, what was once unseen becomes real. That is what Hebrews 11:1 calls "substance." It becomes something you can see and touch.

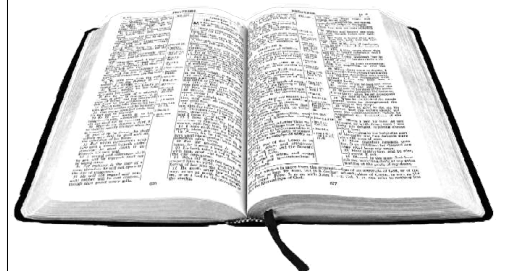
I also thought about Peter the Apostle. Before he stepped out of the boat, he had to believe it was possible. By faith, he saw the impossible before it happened. Then he stepped out and walked on water.

His faith is what held him up. But when he allowed the wind and waves to distract him, fear came in, and he began to sink.

And that is where God's grace comes in.

Faith holds us up, but when our faith grows weak, God's grace will kick in. We see this in 2 Corinthians 12:9, *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."*

Even when we struggle, God does not leave us. His grace carries us when our faith feels small.



So today, walk in faith. Hold on to what you cannot yet see. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Stay in His Word. Pray and trust Him. And believe that in His time, what is in your heart will become real, for His glory. When that happens, call me. I desire to rejoice with you.

The author invites you
to text or call with
questions or comments!
(419) 651-6813

Why do Anabaptists make rules about what the head covering should look like? Have they always done this, or when did they start? Why did we start refusing certain types of head coverings as not being acceptable for our churches?

These are questions that have been rolling around in my mind for the last few years. And I have found that when you ask questions, some Anabaptist church members and ministers get very defensive and angry. One minister said, “The only time anyone asks questions like this is because they are trying to find an excuse for the women to stop wearing them.”

Making statements like that work well to keep the masses from questioning too much.

So I started studying history books instead to find answers. I am not a historian, but it’s been an interesting journey. I found that some of my theories, such as assuming the rules came about because women in mid-twentieth-century society weren’t wearing any type of head coverings anymore and the Anabaptists wanted to keep the practice, weren’t as accurate as I thought.

In the first half of the twentieth century, most American women still wore some type of head covering at least to church. But yet, Anabaptists began making rules for their coverings in the late 1800’s. So why did they start making the rules about the size, shape, and specific cloth?

Apparently, during the 1800’s, women wore both prayer caps and bonnets. At some point throughout that century, women began to drop the prayer caps, but Mennonite women who were members of the church continued to wear them to church.¹

It seems that when Daniel Kauffman’s book, *Manual of Bible Doctrines*, was published in 1898, he drew attention to a list of seven biblical instructions (compiled by J.S. Coffman) that were referred to as the Seven Ordinances. Although Kauffman wasn’t the one who came up with this list, he is often credited with it because of his book. For more information on the Seven Ordinances, check out Dwight Gingrich’s outstanding in-depth study.²

The Seven Ordinances named “Sisters’ Prayer-head-covering” as one of the ordinances and suddenly drew all kinds of attention to a Biblical command that hadn’t been emphasized this publicly before in Anabaptist congregations.

The ordinances came at a time when Anabaptist women, as well as other women in North America, wore coverings mainly to church. Apparently, “it was customary in some districts for women to leave their coverings hanging on pegs at church and not even bring them home after the service.”³

Interestingly enough, even the wife of J.S. Coffman, who first penned the seven ordinance list that we use, “wore her cap only in church as was the practice of others in the community at that time.”⁴

However, in 1878, the Mennonite

² This essay is still in “draft” version with further revisions planned, but I have found it to be an excellent historical source with all the research he has done

³ Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History*, pg.186

⁴ Andrew C. Martin, “Creating A Timeless Tradition: The Effects of Fundamentalism on the Conservative Mennonite Movement” (MTS thesis, University of Waterloo and Conrad Grebel University College, 2007), 60-62; available from <<http://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/10012/3441/1/Thesis%20The%20Effects%20of%20Fundamentalism.pdf>>; accessed 31 December 2011. According to Martin, the information about Coffman’s wife came from Coffman’s son, S. F. Coffman, recorded by Melvin Gingerich in “A History of Mennonite Costume” (n.p., n.d.), 40-41. Credited in Dwight Gingrich, *125 Years of Seven Ordinances: An Historical and Biblical Review*, pg. 20

Brethren group issued a resolution “that instructed women to wear head coverings in church and family worship.”⁵ So, apparently, the beliefs of this group at this time seemed to be also more about wearing it during times of worship *with* other believers, whether that was in public or with family members.

Anabaptist history from previous centuries – regarding how much the head covering was worn and where it was worn—is unknown. It wasn’t a subject that was written about by the early Anabaptists because their beliefs regarding it apparently did not differ from those of other believers around them. While the head covering was practiced by the rest of the world, they did not bother giving much attention to Biblical arguments for the practice and application of the head covering.⁶

Culture of the Period and Pattern of Ritualism

Throughout the nineteenth century, Anabaptists were doing a lot of good things, but apparently had forgotten why. The culture around them had good morals and did a lot of good things. But when the culture around them began to erode, they had to base their values on something else. For many fundamentalists, the solution seemed to be to make specific rules to “lock in” the culture of that time. But in doing so, they faced the danger of treating traditions and rules as the reason for their religiosity.⁷

J.S. Coffman taught his list of ordinances because there was a desperate need for Biblical teaching. He intended to give the biblical reason for our practices. For many, hearing 1 Corinthians

⁵ Marlene Epp, pg. 196

⁶ Melvin Gingerich, pg. 127

⁷ Melvin Gingerich gives an example of this: “J. S. Hartzler (1857-1953), an Indiana school teacher, who was ordained as an Amish Mennonite minister in 1881, told J.C. Wenger that at that time he did not know there was ‘any Scripture’ for the cap.” pg. 127

¹ Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, PA: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1970, dist. by Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA), pg. 126

11 expounded as the purpose for wearing the head covering was a wonderful revelation. For many people, it was the first time they had heard it taught.⁸ However, in attempting to bring correct teaching to these seven areas, a perhaps unintentional consequence was that it also caused an elevation of the importance of these specific commands over all other Biblical commands.

Coffman was aware of the dangers of ritualism and even cautioned about it in a journal entry dated July 29, 1890, regarding a book (a minister's manual) that his boss was publishing, saying, "One danger of the book is that it may encourage ritualism."⁹

Near the end of his life, Coffman gave more warning against making rules about outward nonconformity: "The Virginia church and conference has done much legislating to keep our people down out of the world in dress and other things, but despite all the keeping down they have done, their young men are now more conformed to the world than ours at Elkhart where we do not legislate much, but do some teaching on this point, and instead put our young people to work and have them contend for these principles.... They have tried too much to do by force of law what grace alone can do. What is it worth to keep people down in any sense if they submit only by constraint? We are in the dispensation of grace, and I shall never again help to legislate on outward forms as I did once in the Virginia conference when I did not know better. But I shall work harder in another way for the same principle."¹⁰

As the doctrinal significance of the seven ordinances brought renewed interest in these specific commands, the wearing of the head covering was highlighted, and women began wearing it more

often. Many promoters of the ordinance began to push for women to wear it at all times, "if a woman was really to 'pray without ceasing.'" Interestingly enough, the men were not instructed to *never* wear a hat using the same scripture. Gradually, Anabaptist women began to wear it at mealtimes, family devotions, and finally all the time.¹¹

Melvin Gingerich describes how, after Daniel Kauffman's *Manual of Bible Doctrines* was published in 1898, the practice of head covering was also referred to as an ordinance by district conferences. It has remained as that ever since. What we take for granted as a long-established custom—although a biblical one—at this point took on a "hallowed meaning" and Mennonites began to view the symbolism as being almost in the same class as the Lord's Supper.¹²

The head covering then came to be viewed, among Anabaptists, as almost a mystical enigma. It was thought to offer a woman physical protection from molestation. It was imagined to encourage virtuous behavior. It was thought to be a reminder to women of who they are "morally and ethically."¹³ One group, the Manitoba-based Evangelical Mennonite Conference, called for women to wear them as a sign of humility.¹⁴

Some Mennonite women began to view their head coverings as a banner of their religiosity and a symbol of status.¹⁵ Many groups began to employ the wearing of head coverings to signify other things as well. For some groups, different covering styles or colors were used to signify the availability of a woman for marriage (as old order Amish and some more conservative groups still do). For others, it signified the wearer had been baptized and was a member of the church.¹⁶

¹¹ Marlene Epp, p. 186

¹² Melvin Gingerich, pgs. 130-31

¹³ Marlene Epp, pg. 186

¹⁴ Marlene Epp, pg. 196

¹⁵ *Strangers at Home*, Jane Pederson "She May Be Amish Now, but She Won't Be Amish Long": Anabaptist Women and Antimodernism, p.351

¹⁶ Marlene Epp pg.197

Mennonite church leader and Professor Harold S. Bender gave a more orthodox justification for it in 1922, when he wrote that the wearing of the covering was not of a moral or religious nature, but rather a social one. He felt it was to preserve social order and to enforce women's submission to men.¹⁷

As dress codes and specific directives regarding head coverings for Anabaptist women began making their appearance throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Anabaptist women began to look more and more different from the rest of society.¹⁸ (Before this, our female ancestors did not look much different from those around them.)

Responses to New Mandates

Fashion changes in the late 19th century included the demise of the Victorian-style bonnet, and instead, many women chose to wear a hat that was often decorated with feathers and flowers, etc. This was alarming to Anabaptists, who viewed the hat as being rather mannish and regarded it as being associated with and symbolic of women's emancipation. The bonnet was then prescribed by church leaders as being the only acceptable headgear. Church leaders feared that if the bonnet was discarded by women, the covering would also be dropped. Bonnet enforcement by American Mennonite churches occurred earlier and more rigidly than in Canada, which was soon influenced by visiting American Mennonite evangelists.¹⁹ Interestingly enough, Anabaptists of this time seemed to have forgotten that before the bonnets were in style, their ancestors wore flat hats. Some of whom were very reluctant to accept bonnets.²⁰

¹⁷ "The entire question is not one of moral or religious nature, but social...it is a necessity to preserve the divinely ordained social order from disruption and to enforce the lesson of woman's submission to man." Harold S. Bender, "An Exegesis of I Cor. 11:1-16" (paper, 1922), 19. Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen, IN

¹⁸ Jane Pederson, pg. 352

¹⁹ Marlene Epp, pg. 187-188

²⁰ Melvin Gingerich, pg. 112 records the story of a

⁸ Melvin Gingerich, pg. 130

⁹ Dwight Gingrich, pg.17

¹⁰ (Letter to brother-in-law Lewis J. Heatwole, December 12, 1893; recorded by Barbara F. Coffman, 254) credited to Dwight Gingrich, p.17

The enforcement of bonnet wearing caused much tension, angry debates, and conflict. In the early 1920's, one of the most bitter conflicts occurred at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, regarding the bonnet. The struggle became so angry that it resulted in a church split and the formation of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.

A large number of women in this area had quit wearing the prescribed bonnets in favor of a hat while working at their factory jobs in town. (Many single Mennonite women started working factory jobs that were vacated by the men because of the First World War.) As a result of this, the ministers and deacons in that area had a district meeting and passed a resolution that made wearing a bonnet a test of membership for women. When the district bishop refused to serve communion to anyone who did not agree with the resolution, a committee was assigned to investigate the situation. One minister who sided with the women argued that "making a certain cut of headgear the test of discipleship was ...not borne out by the teaching of Jesus".

This issue continued to be a source of contention for quite a number of years in this church, and in 1924, it resulted in three ordained ministers being excommunicated and about one-third of the members leaving the church.²¹

When clothing stores no longer carried the out-of-fashion bonnet, women had to begin making their own. Many women resisted the bonnets (and the caps) through small acts of rebellion. Some would leave the strings hanging, rather than tying them, and some would remove the strings altogether. Some girls delayed their commitment to becoming members of the Mennonite

woman from Forks church community in Lagrange County, Indiana, who, on her deathbed, begged her daughters to promise they would never wear a bonnet. She wanted them to always wear the flat hat.

²¹ Marlene Epp pg.188-189

church so that they could wear the hats longer. Some modified the hats to make them look more like a bonnet by adding strings that tied under the chin.

The historical periods of time when women were involved in non-farm occupations seemed to bring the most resistance to the bonnet. Many women chose to only wear the bonnet to church but refused to wear it to their jobs.²²

Today

Today, mandates for coverings still exist in some form for most conservative Anabaptists, but for most, the "bonnet" is a prayer cap, and each church/conference has its own specific rules for their covering style. Many wear head coverings with strings attached, but hanging. Others no longer have strings attached at all. The hanging veil, in either black or white, has also been added to many circles as an accepted form of the head covering.

Church membership is not granted to those who do not follow the specific practice of the church they are in. Baptism is usually denied to those who are not willing to become members. Members who dare differ from their established church prescripts are confronted and eventually excommunicated if they refuse to wear the right style of covering.²³

Conclusion

It seems the wearing of the head covering for Anabaptists continues to be a ritual with extra man-made rules that are still held as highly as Scriptural commands. This does not seem much unlike the Pharisees that Jesus was reprimanding in Mark 7 and Matthew 15.

We are often more grieved about the prescribed shape/size/color of the covering not being followed exactly than we are about women who are not living obediently within the headship order that her

²² Ibid pg.193-195

²³ I have personally observed this happen

head covering is supposed to represent. It seems we teach "commandments of man" for "doctrines" as Jesus spoke of in Mark 7:7.

We regard the head covering as a mystical cloth that carries protective powers of angels for our women (using 1 Corinthians 11:10—and yet the word protection is never used in this verse) and empowers them to somehow live a more righteous life than those who do not wear it. It has become, in essence, an idol that seeks to take the place of grace (the only thing that can empower anyone to live above sin) and attempts to diminish the power of an omnipotent God who will not allow anything to come into your life without His permission—whether or not an angel is guarding those covered women who are deemed to have "extra protection."

Wearing the head covering for praying women is a good thing, but the elevation of it, the extra commandments we've added, and the idolatry we've been allowing, need to be repented of. If the seven ordinances are the root cause of this, then we need to go to the root.

The Catholics had their seven sacraments that caused ritualism and added to Scripture. This is another area that the earliest Anabaptists strove to break free from. We have unwittingly allowed a variant of the same type of thing (however well-meant its intentions may have been in the beginning). Is it not time we turn from ritualism and sacraments (or ordinances as we call them) and just teach all commands in Scripture as being equally important?

I'd like to publicly thank Dwight Gingrich for all his help and patience with all the questions I've peppered him with over the last while. Also, for giving tips and editing advice on this blog post, and for directing me to some additional resources. It was greatly appreciated!

Last night, while most people were running from the storm, I ran straight into it. I stood at the lake with the wind in my hair, thunder rolling across the sky, lightning splitting open the darkness — and instead of fear, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time... nostalgia. Growing up, storms were never something I hid from. That started with my dad.

When the sky would turn dark and the thunder would start to rumble, he'd sit out on the porch just to watch it roll in. And we'd sit with him. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we didn't. Sometimes it was just the sound of rain hitting the roof and the steady rhythm of thunder in the distance.

But what I remember most wasn't the storm. It was the safety. As long as I was sitting there with my dad watching the lightning dance across the sky, I never felt afraid. The storm wasn't something coming for us — it was something we were witnessing together. And somehow, sitting beside him, it felt like nothing could touch me.

Last night took me right back to that porch. To that little girl who felt completely safe in the middle of chaos. And standing there by the water, watching the power of the wind, the thunder, and the rain all move together so perfectly — I couldn't help but feel the power and majesty of God in it all.

"The Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever." — Psalm 29:10

"He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still." — Psalm 107:29

Storms have a way of reminding us Who really is in control.

They look wild. They sound fierce.

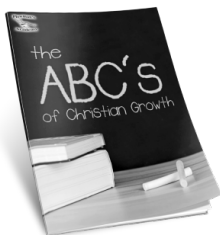
But there is purpose in them. There is beauty in storms.

And there is peace when you know you're not facing them alone.

So it is with the storms of life and our Heavenly Father. - Sylvia Miller



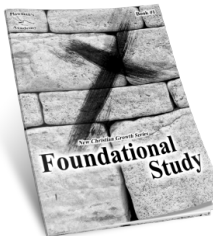
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September

101 Bible Questions

(Part 7 of 11)

The truth about temptation and warfare.
By Andrew Farley.

101 Bible Questions

(Part 8 of 11)

The truth about a relationship with God.
By Andrew Farley.

Stress, Burnout and Finding Rest

In this episode, Haley and Dustin, from Hope Talks sit down with Dr. Eric Scalise, President of Hope for the Heart, to talk about one of the most pressing issues in our fast-paced culture: stress and burnout.

Four Sources of Condemnation

(part 1 of 2)

Duane Sheriff teaches that the law's main purpose is to reveal sin and our need for a Savior, not to make us righteous. Citing Romans 8:1-2, he shares how he once lived under guilt until learning that God does not condemn those in Christ. Condemnation distances us from God and conviction lovingly draws us back. The old covenant brought death and condemnation, but the new covenant in Christ brings the Spirit, righteousness, and freedom to live in peace through faith.

October

101 Bible Questions

(Part 9 of 11)

The truth about the Spirit and the church.
By Andrew Farley.

101 Bible Questions

(Part 10 of 11)

The truth about marriage, sex, and gender. By Andrew Farley.

Depression, Despair, and the God of Hope

Haley and Dustin have a thoughtful and compassionate look what depression is, what it isn't, and how we can understand it from both a biblical and whole-person perspective. They explore how people often describe depression, why it's more than just sadness, and how the Bible speaks directly to those who feel overwhelmed, numb, or hopeless.

Four Sources of Condemnation

(part 2 of 2)

According to 1 John 3:20-21, our hearts may condemn us, but God is greater and knows all things, offering forgiveness through repentance and faith in Christ. Condemnation can also come from others, but Romans 1:16 and Isaiah 54:17 remind us to stand firm and not let words become weapons. Message by Duane Sheriff.

November

101 Bible Questions

(Part 11 of 11)

The truth about true and false beliefs. By Andrew Farley.

How Dana K. White Found Hope in Christ

Dana shares her hope story of how the Lord helped her navigate an ongoing struggle with a messy house. They discuss the emotional impact that clutter and disorganization have on so many people and common misconceptions about cleaning and spirituality, such as "cleanliness is next to godliness."

Adam vs Christ

(part 1 of 2)

Adam and Christ are two men whose choices changed the world for everyone. Through Adam's disobedience, sin and death entered humanity. But through Christ's obedience, God offered forgiveness and life to all who believe. One brought condemnation; the other brings salvation. In them, we see the power of choice and the hope of redemption. Message by Duane Sheriff.

The Biblical Case for the Rapture of All Christians

Where does Jesus say He is coming back to rapture all Christians from the earth to meet Him in the air and take them to heaven? (The Ankerman Show)

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Some people have the ability to be annoying or even downright mean. Yep! Other people have to live with that annoyance. King David did.

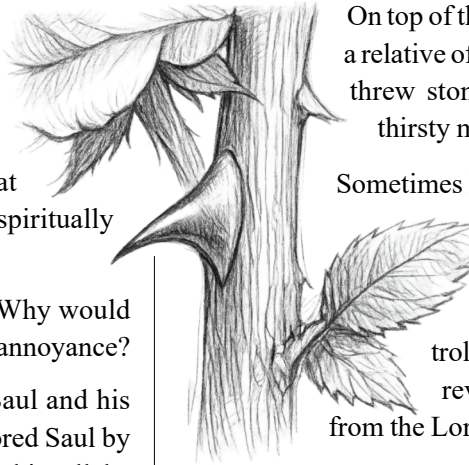
No sooner did young David get the call from caring for sheep and killing the giant Goliath that jealousy settled in King Saul, who, at best, was spiritually carnal and soon hated David.

David lived for many years running for his life. Why would God choose this great man and then allow such an annoyance?

Following Saul's tragic death, David honored Saul and his sons by giving them a proper burial. He also honored Saul by promoting his son Mephibosheth and providing for him all the days of his life.

Did David's kindness and showing honor to Saul's family end the annoyance? NO.

Following Absalom's takeover of the kingdom, when King David was on the run for his life, Mephibosheth sided with Absalom, a rather "slap in the face" to King David. One might ask, "Why did David show him so much honor?"



On top of that, as David was leaving Jerusalem, a relative of Saul named Shimei cursed him and threw stones at him, calling David a blood-thirsty man.

Sometimes kindness comes back to slap you.

David's response to all these slaps was golden. David acknowledged that God was in control. He declared that he would not seek revenge but accept this annoyance as from the Lord (2 Samuel 16: 11-12).

Perhaps God was using Saul as a "thorn in the flesh." Remember the Apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh, an annoyance which he begged God to remove. God's answer to Paul was:

"...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness..." (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Maybe today you have a thorn in your side. I challenge you to identify with King David and the Apostle Paul, accept this thorn from God, and trust Him with it.

Unbelief

- by John Weaver

One of the greatest sins that man can commit is unbelief. It is the one sin that cannot be forgiven as long as it is practiced, or as long as it is walked therein.

It is the only thing that ever stopped Jesus. Persecution did nothing to stop Him. All manner of opposition never slowed Him down. Death? The grave? No, none of these stopped Jesus. But unbelief did. Nothing else could.

Jesus came to His home country after being away. He preached and taught in the synagogues to the point that the people were astonished at His wisdom and mighty works.

Instead of believing and accepting Him as the Son of God, they reasoned, *"...Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?..."* (John 6:42).

The people were offended. They did not want to believe what they were seeing.

Jesus quit doing mighty works because of their unbelief (Matthew 13:58). It has always astonished me that unbelief (often called a lack of faith) could stop Jesus.

Unbelief is exactly the opposite of faith. And there is nothing that is as important to God as faith. Without faith (which is another way of saying unbelief), it is impossible to please God. Jesus asked this question one time:

"...Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18: 9).

Faith in God will bring obedience. Unbelief will take away the power to obey and to walk with God.

Jesus marveled at some people's faith.

He also marveled at some people's unbelief, meaning He was greatly disappointed at their unbelief.

Unbelief has no place in a believer's life. The very word I used (believer) will bear witness to that. We cannot be a believer and then not believe. We *"...must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6).

Diligently seek Him. Yes, there is the secret to faith. Seek God with all your heart. And believe Him. We cannot understand God at times, but there is no time when we cannot believe Him.

Have faith in God. Believe Him. Trust Him. Be as Job. *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him..."* (Job 13:15).

And never, ever give room for the UNBELIEVABLE SIN OF UNBELIEF.

My story is not unique. Many people are victims. Some have experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, or both. But my struggle has always been different.

What if you are not a victim in any obvious sense? What if the only abuse you can remotely point to is spiritual abuse—the constant emphasis on works, the pressure to earn God’s favor, the endless reminders of what you must do?

After I understood the gospel and came to faith in Christ, one of the most difficult realizations I faced was recognizing that my family did not possess saving faith. It took me a long time to be certain of that conclusion. I did not arrive there quickly or willingly.

Perhaps that is why this loss has been so difficult to process. I was not leaving behind people who had no value to me. I was not escaping cruelty. Much of what I left behind was good. Much of it helped shape me into the person I am today.

That is what makes the loss so painful.

Like the Apostle Paul, I have had to learn that something can hold great value in my life and still not be the foundation of my faith. Paul wrote:

“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ” (Philippians 3:7).

Paul was not denying the significance of his past. He was simply recognizing that even good things must take second place to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

That distinction has been one of the hardest lessons of my life.

“But what things were gain to me (even very good things), those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things

but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:7–8).

There is a part of me that wants my parents to be recognized and seen for who they were to my siblings and me. They lived what they taught. They did not simply hand us a set of beliefs and expectations; they modeled them. Their lives matched their words.

I also know that my desire to hold onto that can become a form of pride. It is the same pride that our family, and perhaps our entire community, struggled with for so long. We believed we were the people who had our priorities straight, the people who had our ducks in a row. We saw ourselves as a uniquely obedient people.

Yet there is another side to this struggle.

Part of me believes that my parents deserve honor for the role they played in shaping me. The instrumental value they instilled in me led me toward moral value. I want to honor them for being instruments in God’s hands, much like the Word of God itself is an instrument that points us to something greater. But I do not want to elevate them above what I have in Christ.

That is where the tension lies.

When Paul spoke of his lineage, his heritage, and all the things that once gave him confidence, he said he counted them as loss—indeed, as dung—compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. That is what I want to do. Not because those things had no value, but because they cannot hold ultimate value.

This is where the distinction between instrumental value and moral value becomes meaningful to me.

The things my dad taught me—a healthy fear of God, a love for truth, a respect for righteousness—were gifts. In spite of the fact that I now believe he was a lost man, God used him. By being the man he was and by living consistently with what he taught, he became a means to an end. God used those qualities to cultivate in me a love for truth and a desire for righteousness.

God also used my father’s stability to shape my understanding of His character.

Many people struggle to believe that God loves them because of the pain, neglect, or abuse they experienced growing up. Their view of their earthly father becomes the lens through which they see their heavenly Father. Because of that, they find it difficult to trust God’s love.

I do not carry that particular struggle.

I never doubted that God loved me. My father’s steady presence, his consistency, and his commitment to what he believed gave me a framework through which I could understand God’s faithfulness. In many ways, my understanding of God was first shaped by the man my father was.

For that, I am deeply grateful.

Yet gratitude can become idolatry when it is allowed to compete with Christ.

That has been my struggle.

The things I received from my family were good gifts, but they were never meant to become the treasure itself. They were signposts pointing beyond themselves. God used them to lead me toward Him, but they cannot take His place.

I have had to wrestle with that truth in the Word of God. I have had to learn how to honor what was good without worshipping it, how to be thankful for what shaped me without allowing it to define me.

As I have read through 2 Timothy 2:5–12, I have found myself returning again and again to the same conclusion. The Christian life is not about preserving everything we once treasured. It is about enduring, remaining faithful, and keeping our eyes fixed on Christ.

That is what I want to do.

I want to honor the good that God gave me through my parents. I want to acknowledge the value of what they taught me. But above all, I want to count every earthly treasure—no matter how precious—as secondary to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Good Gifts, Greater Truth.

God uses many things to bring us to truth. Sometimes, He uses suffering.

Sometimes, He uses blessings. Sometimes, He uses faithful parents, a strong family, good examples, and a home where love and stability are present.

I am grateful for the things my parents gave me. My father taught me a healthy fear of God, a love for truth, and respect for righteousness. By his example, God planted seeds that would later help me recognize the gospel when I heard it. Those gifts had tremendous value.

But they were never meant to become my identity.

The same God who uses hardship to draw people to Himself can also use good gifts. Yet whether our story is marked by pain or by blessing, we face the same danger: making those things ultimate.

For some, wounds become their identity. For others, family heritage, traditions, accomplishments, or moral upbringing become their identity. Both can distract us from who God says we are.

The gifts God gives are meant to point us to Him, not replace Him.

The Apostle Paul understood this. He did not deny the value of his heritage, his upbringing, or his accomplishments. Yet he counted them all as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

That is the balance I continue to seek.

I want to honor the good God gave me through my family. I want to be thankful for the ways He used them in my life. But I do not want to build my identity on those things. The moment I place them above Christ, gratitude becomes idolatry.

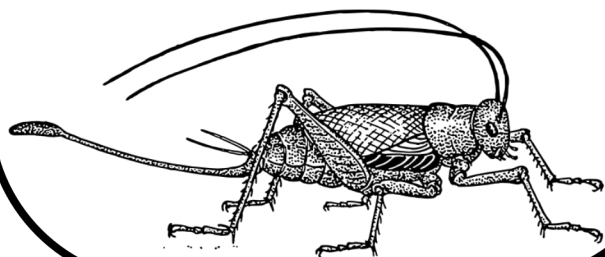
My story is not ultimately about my family, my upbringing, my losses, or even my blessings.

My story is about Christ.

The greatest gift God has given me is not a heritage to preserve, but a Savior to follow.

Did You Know?

Crickets do not have ears! They use their legs to BOTH hear and to make sound! Tiny organs in their front legs pick up sound waves and cause them to vibrate, helping the cricket to locate what is making the sound. Most crickets chirp by rubbing their forewings together, but some females can also make noise by rubbing their legs together! God's design is always so amazing!



Phone Sermon Series Distracted: Galatians

series by Andrew Farley - <https://andrewfarley.org>

Paul wrote Galatians warning churches not to turn away from the true gospel of Jesus Christ. False teachers were convincing them they needed to keep the Old Testament law to be right with God, but Paul firmly taught that salvation comes only by God's grace through faith in Jesus. Galatians makes it clear that the Christian life is about faith working through love, not about keeping a list of rules. Available through 2026.



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Why Are You Still Carrying Those Potatoes?

- by Joe Keim

An Amish man was walking down a country road with a heavy sack of potatoes on his back. The load was pressing hard on his shoulders, and each step was slow and tiring. As he walked, an English farmer came along in a pickup truck and stopped beside him.

The farmer rolled down his window and said, "Sir, would you like a ride?" The Amish man was thankful and gladly accepted. He climbed into the back of the truck. But instead of setting the sack down, he kept the potatoes on his shoulders the whole time.

After driving a short distance, the farmer looked back and asked, "Why don't you set that sack of potatoes down on the truck bed?"

The Amish man replied, "You have already been kind enough to give me a ride. I didn't want you to have to carry my potatoes too."

How often do we do the very same thing with God? We ask Him to save us, help us, and carry us, but we keep holding on to our burdens. We climb into the truck, but we never set the load down. We keep carrying our worries, our guilt, our fears, and our past, even though God has already offered to carry it all.

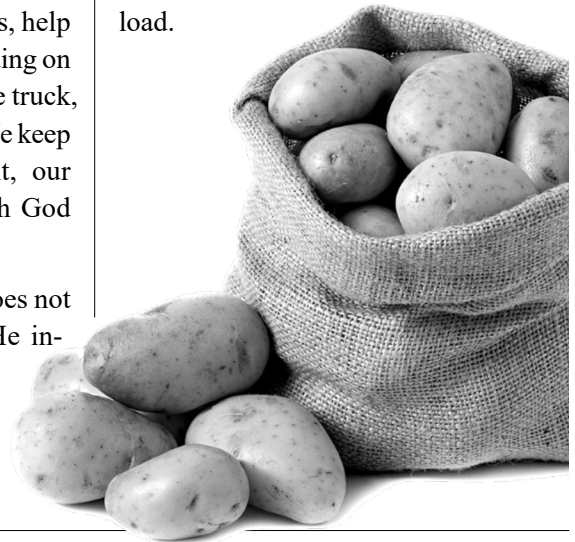
The Bible reminds us that God does not just want to help us partway. He invites us to give Him everything.

*"Casting all your care upon
him; for he careth for you"*
(1 Peter 5:7).

Jesus also said:

*"Come unto me, all ye that labour
and are heavy laden, and I will
give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28).

Rest only comes when we let go of the load.



SAVE
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Mark your calendar and plan to join us as we soak in the encouragement of 20 people, each relating their personal story of stepping out of the boat and following hard after their Savior, regardless of the cost.