

Even Unto Death

by John Christian Wenger

The sermon explores the Anabaptist movement, its rapid spread, persecution, and the significance of its martyrs and leaders, highlighting the enduring power of faith and conviction.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, Romans 8:35, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Philippians 1:21, Hebrews 11:35, 1 Peter 4:12, Revelation 2:10, Revelation 6:9

Topics: "Persecution And Martyrdom", "Faith And Courage"

Description

John Christian Wenger preaches about the persecution and martyrdom of the Anabaptists in the 16th century, highlighting their unwavering faith, courage, and commitment to God even in the face of severe trials and death. The Anabaptists spread rapidly, teaching love, faith, and the cross, and faced persecution with humility and patience. Many martyrs, including Balthasar Hübmaier and Eitelhans Langenmantel, endured torture and death for their beliefs. Despite the intense persecution, the Anabaptist movement survived in some areas, leading to the establishment of the Baptist Church in modern times.

Transcript

The sixteenth-century chronicler, Sebastian Franck, wrote in 1531 concerning the Swiss Brethren in Switzerland and South Germany:

The Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered, as it were, the land. They soon gained a large following and baptized many thousands, drawing to themselves many sincere souls who had a zeal for God. For they taught nothing but love, faith, and the cross. They showed themselves humble, patient under much suffering; they brake bread with one another as an evidence of unity and love. They helped each other faithfully, called each other brother, etc. They increased so rapidly that the world feared an up rising by them, though I have learned that this fear had no justification whatsoever. They were persecuted with great tyranny, being imprisoned, branded, tortured, and executed by fire, water, and sword. In a few years very many were put to death. Some have estimated the number of those who were killed to be far above two thousand. They died as martyrs, patiently, and humbly endured all persecution.

This, of course, was written before the Anabaptist movement of the Netherlands was formally established. In the Netherlands another two thousand five hundred martyrs were destined to die for their Anabaptist "heresy."

[Back to Contents](#)

A Man of God Burned

One of the most outstanding Anabaptists in terms of personality, scholarship, and general ability was Balthasar Hübmaier. Born at Friedberg near Augsburg he secured his baccalaureate degree there in 1510. One of his favorite professors was Johann Eck (Luther's Catholic opponent who wrote a five-volume critique of Luther and Lutheranism). When Eck transferred to Ingolstadt, Hübmaier followed him and earned not only the licentiate in theology but also a doctor of theology degree. Hübmaier was at that time a Catholic priest, and a man of great ability as a speaker. Gradually he turned toward the evangelical faith of Zwingli. He took various steps which gave evidence of his weakening in Roman doctrine: he began to conduct his services in German rather than Latin; he opposed the use of images in the church; he married Elizabeth Hübeline. He was forced to move about to avoid arrest. In 1523 he and Zwingli agreed on the desirability of baptizing believing converts rather than infants. But the opposition which Zwingli encountered in Grebel, Manz, and Reublin led him in the end to take a vigorous stand in favor of infant baptism. When Zwingli wrote his booklet on infant baptism, Hübmaier replied with one of the ablest treatises on believer's baptism ever written, *Vom christlichen Tauf der Gläubigen* (Concerning the Christian Baptism of Believers). In 1526, after experiencing considerable difficulty in Zurich for a time, Hübmaier fled to Moravia in Austrian territory, where it is reported that there were soon 12,000 Anabaptists, many of them from various parts of South Germany. Hübmaier was a firm advocate of believer's baptism, and therefore an Anabaptist. But on one point he differed with the Swiss Brethren; he did not hold to the doctrine of nonresistance. His followers were therefore called Schwertler from the German word for sword.

After accomplishing a heroic work as reformer and writer, Hübmaier was arrested and imprisoned in 1527. He made strenuous efforts to avoid the stake, but in vain. On March 10, 1528, at Vienna he was led forth to be executed. When he arrived at the spot he cried out in Swiss German, "O my gracious God, grant me grace in my great suffering!" He then requested the crowd to forgive him if they had anything against him, and he in turn forgave his enemies. As the fire rose he exclaimed, "O my heavenly Father! O my gracious God!" When his hair and beard began to burn he cried, "O Jesus!" Soon he was dead. The spectators thought that during his suffering his face showed more joy than pain. Thus a noble knight of Christ witnessed to the truth. Hübmaier's motto was, "Divine truth is immortal." Present-day Baptists agree with the truth as Hübmaier taught it. Could he have seen the millions of believers who, four centuries after his martyrdom, joyfully hold to the convictions for which he died, how much greater his joy would have been!

[Back to Contents](#)

A Cloud of Witnesses

The Zurich congregation of the Täufer was no sooner organized than persecution began. The leaders especially were imprisoned for varying lengths of terms, only to be brought forth to execution. It is impossible to make anything like a complete list of early Swiss Brethren martyrs, for few records were kept. Among those known to have been put to death for their "heresy" were: George Blaurock, Eberli Bolt, Wolfgang Brandhuber, Hans Brühl, Offrus Griessinger, Thomas Herman, Jakob Huter, Jerome Käls, Johannes Kräsi, Eitelhans Langenmantel, Hans Ludi, Michael Sattler, Leonard Schiemer, Hans Schaffer, Hans Leopold Schneider, Leonard Seiler, Wolfgang Uliman, and George Zauring. Langenmantel's case is fairly typical.

Eitelhans Langenmantel sprang from a patrician family of Augsburg; his own father had served fourteen terms as mayor of the city and was also captain of the Swabian League for many years. In 1527 Langenmantel accepted baptism and was received into the Anabaptist congregation of the city. Before the year was out he was arrested for his "heresy." Because of his prominent connections he got off lightly; he was briefly imprisoned and banished. He seems to have made some sort of promise to withdraw from the Anabaptists and to recognize infant baptism again. But actually he did not in the end abandon his basic convictions. On April 24, 1528, he was seized by a man named Diebold von Stein, captain of the Swabian League, and put in chains. A few weeks later he was beheaded-sitting in his chair for the execution because of the pain of gout! Langenmantel was the author of a number of booklets, including an exposition of the Lord's Prayer, and a treatise on the Lord's Supper, Von Nachtmahl des Herren. His execution took place on May 11, 1528, two months and a day after Hubmaier's.

By the end of 1531, the number of Anabaptist martyrs in the Tirol and Gorizia was estimated to have reached a total of one thousand. In the Tirolese town of Kitzbühl alone, sixty-eight were executed in one year.

[Back to Contents](#)

Legal Procedures Employed

There was a remarkable similarity in dealing with the Anabaptists regardless of time and place. Whether one examines the great tome, *The Martyrs Mirror* of 1660, or the 1957 German monograph of Dr. Horst W. Schraepler, *The Juridical Treatment of the Anabaptists*, the picture is the same. If passing laws and issuing edicts could have stopped the movement, it surely would have come to an end. No less than 222 known mandates were issued against the Anabaptists between 1525 and 1761. Fifty-nine of them appeared within the first five years of the movement. They appeared in Zurich, Saxony, St. Gall, Grisons, Basel, Bamberg, Strasbourg, Augsburg, Salzburg, Upper Austria, Bavaria, Baden, Wurttemberg, Brandenburg, Mainz, the Palatinate; wherever there were Anabaptists the rulers kept issuing new mandates or renewed older ones. These mandates threatened (1) expulsion from the city or land, (2) fines, (3) corporal punishment; (4) capital punishment, (5) confiscation of property, (6) execution without trial, (7) burning at the stake for those not recanting, and (8) beheading for those who do recant. The Imperial Diet of Spire, 1529, representing both Catholic and evangelical rulers, had ordered that every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex should be put to death by fire, sword, or in some other way. This decree seems to have been followed all over the Holy Roman Empire, with two notable exceptions: the city of Strasbourg never executed a single Anabaptist (it imprisoned and banished them), and the Landgrave of Hesse, Philip I, never put any Anabaptists to death. The decision of Philip of Hesse not to kill the Anabaptists caused one Anabaptist to die in jail after a harrowing seventeen years of imprisonment. The man's name was Fritz Erbe. He was arrested in the county of Hausbreitenbach, which was under the joint supervision of Saxony and Hesse. The Elector of Saxony felt strongly that it was imperative to execute Erbe in conformity with the Edict of Spire, while Philip was just as firm that he would not shed blood for matters of faith. He supported his position by referring to the views of the church fathers, Augustine and Chrysostom. Erbe, for part of his imprisonment, was in a tower on the city wall at Eisenach. Some of his Anabaptist brethren used to gather in the dead of night and quietly converse with him. In November 1535, two of these visitors were apprehended. Since this was in Saxon territory Philip had no jurisdiction over their fate. Spire prevailed. They were executed in November 1537.

A Catholic sentence of 1571 at Amsterdam will illustrate the common attitude toward the Anabaptists:
[Back to Contents](#)

Sentence of Death of Anneken Heyndricks, Surnamed De Viaster

Whereas, Anna Heyndricks daughter, alias, Anna de Vlaster, formerly [a] citizeness of this city, at present a prisoner here, unmindful of her soul's salvation, and the obedience which she owed to our mother, the holy church, and to his royal majesty, as her natural lord and prince, rejecting the ordinances of the holy church, has neither been to confession, nor to the holy, worthy sacrament, for six or seven years since, [but has dared] to go into the assembly of the reprobated sect of the Mennonists, or Anabaptists, and has also held conventicles or meetings at her house; and has further, about three years ago, forsaking and renouncing the baptism received in her infancy from the holy church, been rebaptized, and then received the breaking of bread according to the manner of the Mennonist sect, and was also married to her present husband in Mennonist manner, by night, in a country house; and though she, the prisoner, has, by my lords of the court, as well as by divers ecclesiastical persons, been urged and repeatedly admonished, to leave the afore-mentioned reprobated sect, she nevertheless refuses to do it, persisting in her obstinacy and stubbornness, so that she, the prisoner, according to what has been mentioned, has committed crime against divine and human majesty, as by said sect disturbing the common peace and welfare of the land, according to the import of the decrees of his majesty, existing in regard to this; which misdemeanors, for an example unto others, ought not to go unpunished; therefore, my lord of the court, having heard the demand of my lord the bailiff, seen the confession of the prisoner, and having had regard to her obstinacy and stubbornness, have condemned her, and condemn her by these presents, to be, according to the decrees of his royal majesty, executed with fire, and declare all her property confiscated for the benefit of his majesty aforesaid. Done in court, on the 10th of November, in the year 1571, in presence of the judges, by the advice of all the burgomasters, in my knowledge, as secretary, and as was subscribed: W. Pieterss.[1]

[Back to Contents](#)

A Martyr Epistle

The martyrs frequently found it possible to smuggle letters from prison to their relatives and fellow believers. Here is a sample letter:

Know, my beloved wife, that yesterday about three o'clock I had written you a letter, which I now send you. I could not send it then, for soon afterwards the margrave came here to torture us; hence I was not able to send the letter, for then all four of us were one after another severely tortured, so that we have now but little inclination to write; however, we cannot forbear; we must write to you.

Cornelis the shoemaker was the first; then came Hans Symons, with whom also the captain went down into the torture chamber. Then thought I: "We shall have a hard time of it; to satisfy him." My turn came next-you may think how I felt. When I came to the rack, where were the lords, the order was: "Strip yourself, or tell where you live." I looked distressed, as may be imagined. I then said: "Will you ask me nothing further then?" They were silent.

Then thought I: "I see well enough what it means, it would not exempt me from the torture," hence I undressed, and fully resigned myself to the Lord, to die. Then they racked me dreadfully, twisting off two cords, I believe, on my thighs and shins; they stretched me out, and poured much water into my body and

my nose, and also on my heart. Then they released me, and asked: "Will you not yet tell it?" They entreated me, and again they spoke harshly to me; but I did not open my mouth, so firmly had God closed it.

Then they said: "Go at him again, and this with a vengeance." This they also did, and cried: "Go on, go on, stretch him another foot." Then thought I: "You can only kill me." And thus stretched out, with cords twisted around my head, chin, thighs, and shins, they left me lie, and said: "Tell, tell."

They then talked with one another of my account which J. T. had written, of the linen, which amounted to six hundred and fifty-five pounds; and that it was so much cash and rebate. Then the margrave said: "He understands the French well"; and I lay there in pain. Again I was asked: "Will you not tell it?" I did not open my mouth. Then they said: "Tell us where you live; your wife and children, at all events, are all gone away." In short, I said not a word. "What a dreadful thing," they said. Thus the Lord kept my lips, so that I did not open them; and they released me, when they had long tried to make me speak.

By me, your weak husband, Christian Langedul, in prison at Antwerp, the 12th of August 1567. I have not fully recovered yet from the torture, as may be imagined; but I trust it is all well; do not grieve too much about it. If J. T. could bring along my account book, I should be glad; I should show him everything, or write it down for him. Bring us something to seal letters with.[2]

[Back to Contents](#)

Two Lovers Die for Jesus

Some of the cases were especially moving. In 1573 a young Anabaptist and his wife, John and Janneken van Munstorp by name, were arrested in a meeting of Dutch Anabaptists and imprisoned at Antwerp. From his prison cell Jan addressed a loving letter to his bride of less than a year:

An affectionate greeting to you, my beloved wife, whom I love from the heart and greatly cherish above every other creature, and must now forsake for the truth, for the sake of which we must count all things loss and love Him above all. I hope though men separate us here that the Lord will again join us together in His eternal kingdom where no one will be able to part us and we shall reign forever in the heavenly abode. . .

Adieu and farewell, my lamb, my love; adieu and farewell to all that fear God; adieu and farewell until the marriage of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem. Be valiant and of good cheer; cast the troubles that assail you upon the Lord and He will not forsake you; cleave to Him and you will not fall. Love God above all; have love and truth; love your salvation and keep your promises to the Lord.

John was executed first, by burning at the stake. Janneken was spared to bear her child. Soon after his martyrdom she gave birth to a little daughter to whom she gave her own name. Before her death, also at the stake, Janneken wrote a moving letter to her little child. The letter set forth the familiar sixteenth-century Anabaptist belief in the cross of the Christian disciple. After reporting how her parents had died, and entreating her not to be ashamed of her executed parents, she continued her letter thus:

Hence, my young lamb for whose sake I still have and have had great sorrow, seek when you have attained your understanding this narrow way though there is sometimes much danger in it according to the flesh, as we may see and read if we diligently examine and read the Scriptures, that much is said concerning the cross of Christ. And there are many in this world who are enemies of the cross, who seek

to be free from it among the world and to escape it. But, my dear child if we would with Christ seek and inherit salvation we must also help bear His cross. And this is the cross which He would have us bear: to follow His footsteps and to help bear His reproach, for Christ Himself says: "Ye shall be persecuted, killed, and dispersed for my name's sake." Yea, He Himself went before us in this way of reproach, and left us an example that we should follow His steps; for, for His sake all must be forsaken, father, mother, sister, brother, husband, child, yea, one's own life. . .

And, my dear child, this is my request of you. since you are still very little and young-I wrote this when you were but one month old-as I am soon now to offer up my sacrifice by the help of the Lord I leave you this: "That you fulfill my request, always uniting with them that fear God; and do not regard the pomp and boasting of the world, nor the great multitude whose way leads to the abyss of hell, but look at the little flock of Israelites who have no freedom any where and must always flee from one land to the other as Abraham did, that you may hereafter obtain your fatherland. For if you seek your salvation it is easy to perceive which is the way that leads to life, or the way that leads into hell. . . ."

I leave you here. Oh, that it had pleased the Lord that I might have brought you up! I should so gladly have done my best with respect to it; but it seems that it is not the Lord's will. And though it had not come thus, and I had remained with you for a time, the Lord could still take me from you; and then, too, you should have to be without me-even as it has now gone with your father and myself: that we could live together but so short a time when we were so well joined; since the Lord had so well mated us that we would not have forsaken each other for the whole world. And yet we had to leave each other for the Lord's sake. So I must also leave you here, my dearest lamb; the Lord that created and made you now takes me from you: it is His holy will. I must now pass through this narrow way which the prophets and martyrs of Christ passed through and many thou sands who put off the mortal clothing, who died here for Christ, and now they wait under the altar till their number shall be fulfilled, of which number your dear father is one. And I am now on the point of following him. . . .

I herewith commend you to the Lord and to the com forting Word of His grace, and bid you adieu once more. I hope to wait for you; follow me, my dearest child.

Once more adieu, my dearest upon earth; adieu and nothing more; adieu, follow me; adieu and farewell . .
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[Back to Contents](#)

Survival and Renewal

The results of the program to crush the Anabaptist movement were generally successful except in three areas: (1) In Bern, Switzerland, a weak minority managed to survive until full religious freedom came in 1874; (2) in Austrian Moravia the Hutterian Brethren, who held to "community of goods," living communally, held out until their removal to Russia in the latter eighteenth century (where they remained for a hundred years and then settled near what is now Marion, South Dakota); (3) in Holland the followers of Obbe and Dirk Philips, and later of Menno Simons and others, survived a bloody seventy-five years, until William of Orange brought toleration to that land. The Dutch Mennonites became rich and prosperous in the eighteenth century but lost their earlier spiritual dynamic, and their membership fell sharply (from 160,000 in 1700 to 27,000 in 1809). But all over Europe the Anabaptists were otherwise largely annihilated. The present-day Mennonites of South Germany are descendants of the Swiss Brethren. (The Swiss historically called themselves Taufgesinntten, i.e., Baptism-minded.) The Anabaptists of the

Rhineland, North Germany, and Danzig were of Dutch Anabaptist background. (The Dutch Anabaptists call themselves Doopsgezinden, the exact equivalent of the Swiss Taufgesinnten.) In the United States most of the Mennonites east of the Mississippi are of Swiss background, while those of the prairie states-Minnesota, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas-are half Swiss and half Dutch by ancestry. The baptized Mennonites of North America total a scant quarter million, and those in Europe and Russia number about a hundred thousand.

In the early seventeenth century Anabaptism revived in England under the influence of such men of God as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. Out of this movement came the great Baptist Church of modern times, with twenty million members in the United States alone. Baptists do not follow their Anabaptist forbears in every detail, but they are crystal clear on such major biblical truths as the free church, believer's baptism, liberty of conscience, and a brotherhood type of church.

[Back to Contents](#)

An Ancient Chronicler's Summary

One of the finest accounts of the persecution of the Anabaptists is that given by one of the chroniclers of the Hutterian Brethren, excerpts of which follow:

. . . Many were dealt with in wonderful ways, rare and unheard-of, often by day and by night, with great craftiness and roguery; also with many sweet and smooth words, by monks and priests, by doctors of theology, with much false teaching and testimony, with many threats and menaces, with insults and abuse, yea, with lies and dreadful slanders, but they did not [succeed in making] them despondent.

As some of them lay in grievous imprisonment they sang hymns of praise to God, as those who are in great joy. Some did likewise as they were being led out to death and the place of execution; as those going to meet the bridegroom at a wedding they sang out joyfully with uplifted voice that rang out loudly. Many maidens, when they were to go to the place of execution, adorned themselves, dressing up and making themselves attractive, with the delight of a day of rejoicing, as those who have experienced a heavenly joy-yea, as those who are to pass through the gates of everlasting joy. Others stepped up with a smile on their lips, praising God that they were accounted worthy of dying the death of sincere and Christian heroes, and would not have wished to die [a natural death] in bed. Others exhorted the spectators most earnestly to repentance and amendment of life. Others were cut short and had not received water baptism [but] hastened nevertheless to the baptism of blood, to be baptized therewith for the sake of God's truth, on their living faith- some whom we could name, but of that there is no need. Yea, many who never came to the congregation, and never saw it, but who had merely heard the truth and understood and believed it, remained steadfast therein, so that they were taken away. They did not allow themselves to be terrified or moved by fire, water, sword, or executioner. No human being and nothing on earth could take anything from their hearts, such zealous lovers of God were they. The fire of God burned within them. They preferred to die the bitterest death, yea ten deaths, rather than forsake the truth they had come to know. They would accept nothing as the price of their faith in Christ, no glory, no principality, no kingdom, yea not all the pleasure and wealth of the world, for they had a foundation and an assurance in their faith.

From the shedding of this innocent blood arose Christians everywhere, and fellow believers in all those places here and there; it was not without fruit. Many were moved thereby to serious thought, and to order their life, their thinking and striving, in preparation for the future. Finally the executions were carried on in

many places at night, as in the county of the Tirol. The executions were done in secret and and at night, so that not many people would see, hear, or know of them. They were also done elsewhere than at the customary places of execution because they killed them illegally, condemning the innocent, sometimes murderously with out a sentence.

In some places they filled the prisons and jails with them, as did the Count Palatine on the Rhine, supposing that they could dampen and extinguish the fire of God. But in prison they sang and were joyful. Nothing was of any avail. The enemies outside, who thought that the prisoners in jail should be fearful, themselves became much more afraid, and did not know what to do with them. For they became aware, for the most part, of their innocence. Many lay in jails and prisons, some for a shorter and some for a longer time, some for many years. They endured all sorts of torture and pain. Some had holes burned through their cheeks after which they were released. A portion of them got out in an upright manner through the help of God, some through wonderful and special means and providences of God, and thereafter persevered in the faith unwaveringly until God took them.

Everywhere much slander and evil was spoken of them, that they had goats-feet and ox-hoofs, and that when they gave people to drink out of a little flask, thereafter they had to do like they. They also lied about them that they had their wives in common - - - that they slew and ate their children. . . .

But when our Lord Jesus Christ will come in flaming fire, with many thousands of angels, to hold the judgment on his great Day, everything will again come forth. The earth will bring out the blood which it drank in, and will not hide its slain. The sea shall give up its dead which are therein, which have been burned to dust and ashes, and they shall arise and come forth. That will be a different judgment from that which the world now holds. . . .

But the holy martyrs of God who are now in every distress will enter upon and receive a beautiful crown, a glorious kingdom, a great joy, a heavenly rest, an eternal life, an everlasting salvation, an eternal and immeasurably weighty and excellent glory. The suffering of this present time is not worthy of that glory which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into any human heart, nor is any tongue so eloquent as to be able to speak what God has prepared for those who love Him. This blessedness and glory shall have no temporal place and no end, but shall endure from eternity to eternity for ever and ever.[4]

Soli Deo Gloria!

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