

Ambrosius Spittelmayr

by Mike Atnip

Ambrosius Spittelmayr's life and teachings demonstrate the importance of living out one's faith in practice, and the reward of suffering for the gospel is eternal life.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, John 13:35, Galatians 6:2, James 5:16, 1 Peter 4:16

Topics: "Discipleship", "Martyrdom"

Description

Mike Atnip preaches about the life and methods of a 7/20 Missionary, exemplified by Ambrosius Spittelmayr, who challenged individuals in 16th-century Germany with thought-provoking questions about the essence of the gospel, true discipleship, and relationships with fellow believers. Ambrosius emphasized that being a disciple of Jesus involved more than just receiving forgiveness but required a commitment to imitate Christ, live out His teachings, and make the kingdom of God a reality on earth through self-denial and righteous living. As a 7/20 missionary, Ambrosius spent seven weeks evangelizing and asking probing questions, followed by 20 weeks in jail for his faith, ultimately facing martyrdom for his unwavering commitment to Christ.

Transcript

The life and methods of a 7/20 Missionary

"Does the priest of this town preach the gospel?" Ambrosius Spittelmayr asked the man next to him. They were both seated on the hearth of the large fireplace of a 16th-century tavern--we might call it a "Bed and Breakfast" in our day--warming up after a day's travel in bone-chilling rain in a quaint little village of southeastern Germany.

The question was loaded, which Ambrosius knew very well. His whole point was, after all, to see if his new friend was open to discussing the underlying important topic--just what is "the gospel"? The gospel was a good piece of "news," but just exactly what was that news?

In short, the news was the announcement that the promised Messiah--the Anointed--had come, the man whom God anointed as the Prophet, High Priest, and King for lost humanity. As Prophet, he would speak the Father's word. As High Priest, he would stand as a Union-maker between a holy God and an unholy people ... by making them holy by His own holy life infused into them. And as King, he would re-conquer and liberate the hearts which had been sold as a slave to Satan; yes, he would rescue His people from their sin!

Although his new friend was not aware of it, Ambrosius' probing inquiry was only the first of a series; question number one. Ambrosius had several more questions lined up for the man he chatted with.

After the conversation had ended concerning what "the gospel" was, Ambrosius threw the next question out: "Are you yourself a disciple of Jesus? A true Christian?" Since most people in 16th-century Germany would answer that in the affirmative, Ambrosius was waiting with his next question, to define just exactly what he meant by "disciple."

"How do you relate to your Christian brothers?" Ouch! Mystics and spiritualists, who held that being a Christian consisted basically of a vertical relationship between oneself and God, felt the noose drawing tight. Lutherans, who felt that "accepting Jesus' work on the cross" was the sum total of following Christ, would begin to get edgy. This stranger was getting a bit radical with his Christianity! Did he intend to mean that "believing the gospel" and "being a disciple" had anything to do with how one relates on a horizontal scale with his fellow humans?

Yes, that is exactly what Ambrosius was getting at. He was, after all, a so-called "Anabaptist." His understanding of "salvation" went deeper than merely "receiving Christ's forgiveness," be that by means of saying "Hail, Mary" a dozen times on his knees in the sharp gravel, or be that by means of partaking of the sacraments and "believing on the finished work of Christ" as any nice Lutheran would readily do.

Being a disciple was a commitment: a covenant with God to walk in the footsteps of Jesus ... to imitate Jesus' example and to apply His words to one's own life. Being a disciple meant to make the kingdom of God a reality on earth, to make tangible the righteous character of God within humanity, in the here and now. This "fleshing out" of the Gospel was primarily realized by taking up the cross: killing one's natural desires so that God's will could be accomplished in men and women. After all, it is only natural that if Jesus was on the throne on the inside, that which happened on the outside would reflect the character of Jesus. Ambrosius would say towards the end of his life, "... therefore we must also live, suffer, and die [to our selfish inclinations], just like He--the Head--died for us. Because whoever will not suffer with Him, will not conquer [sin] with Him, will not inherit with Him."

In this way, Ambrosius could divide the sheep from the goats with his simple question: "How is your relationship with your brothers in Christ?" Anyone who would claim a beautiful vertical relationship with God but had to admit to a failing horizontal relationship with his brother, was an imposter. After all, Jesus came to the earth to plant righteous and holy living here once again! Away with self-centeredness! The promised King had now come, who would dethrone Self and reign in men's hearts!

Probing deeper

But the questions became even more penetrating. If the man he was conversing with--and warming their cold bones by the fire together--could say in all honesty that his relationship with his brothers was well, Ambrosius became very direct and open ... no "beating around the bush": "That means then that you share all things--both spiritual and temporal--with your brothers, without reserve?"

Well, that question was hitting quite at home! Like, right in the pocketbook! Did being a Christian really involve getting that practical? For the Anabaptists of the 1500s, the answer was a resounding yes. Some would even be so bold as to say that you cannot go to heaven unless you take your brother with you! None of this going to heaven all by myself! None of this "I have my relationship with God here, and he has his over there; but we don't have any practical, horizontal relationship between us." Indeed, to the

Anabaptists, being a disciple had as much of a horizontal aspect as a vertical one.

If the person chatting with him still had the courage to go deeper yet, Ambrosius had the fifth and final question for him: "Do you practice brotherly discipline with your brothers? When they err, do you admonish them to repentance, and they to you?"

I suppose that if the answer was "yes," Ambrosius would tell him that he was indeed a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, a follower of the Lamb: his brother indeed! If the person "failed" the test, the option of becoming a disciple of Jesus would be laid before him. The Gospel message was then presented: by taking up the cross of self-denial and following the example of Jesus in faith, one could be freed from the sins in which he lay tied like a hog for market! As his fellow Anabaptist missionary Peter Reidemann would write a few years later:

We believe that in Christ we have releasing, or we could say that Christ has loosened us from the authority and ropes with which the devil had held us (He. 2). He has subdued and overcame the devil and taken his authority from him. The cords with which the devil held us are the sins in which we lay bound.

If the new friend was willing to surrender his will to Christ, Ambrosius was willing to baptize him with water into the fellowship of the redeemed, as a sign that he had died to his own will and had accepted the Lordship of Christ.

When Ambrosius had finished his questions and baptisms, he moved on to the next village. He felt in his heart the call to offer peace--both vertically towards God, and horizontally towards fellow men--to each home he entered. Thus he travelled through upper Austria and southern Germany, preaching the cross of Christ. He testified towards the end of his life, "It is my desire to preach and baptize and lead men into the Christian faith; God instituted this [missionary] work by His Son after the resurrection."

Ambrosius hailed from Linz, Austria. Born somewhere around 1497, he appears to have grown up there and entered the local University to study. He studied enough to become conversant in Latin ... but then the Anabaptist preachers came to town.

Telling their listeners that a baptism without any faith and repentance was null and void, these men raised the ire of both the Catholics and the Protestants. After all, telling someone that their baptism was a worthless sprinkling and that they needed to be baptized upon a personal faith and repentance was the same as telling them you are NOT saved, and "you need to do something about it: repent, take up your cross in personal faith, and be baptized as a believer." This was an outward sign that from henceforth you are going to kill all selfish living that tries to arise within you, so that the life of Christ--which He would plant within--could manifest itself in your daily actions.

Such teaching is quite uncomfortable to have around. Suddenly the rug is pulled out from under a comfortable people. Suddenly, a decision must be made--to believe the preaching, or not believe it. Some did believe; most didn't.

Ambrosius believed ...

Acknowledging the reality of his cross-less life, Ambrosius decided to be a follower of Jesus. It is not known exactly when he made that decision, but Hans Hut, the rambunctious Anabaptist preacher, baptized him on July 25, 1527. Of Hut, it has been written:

Very quietly, but indefatigably, he went from place to place in Bavaria, Swabia, Franconia, and Austria, a popular preacher of deepest effectiveness, everywhere proclaiming Anabaptist doctrine, immediately baptizing those he convinced, and sending out individuals as apostles. Especially in the ranks of the artisans he found many adherents.

BaptismAnd was baptized

For Ambrosius, baptism meant a commitment, both horizontal and vertical. Vertically, it meant submitting himself to the righteousness that Jesus had laid out in His teachings. It meant, quite practically, aligning his actions and values to the values that the Teacher had given in the Gospels, and in particular, the Sermon on the Mount. The covenant was a two-way street: If Ambrosius would humble himself to follow the Lamb into doing righteousness, the Lamb would give him the grace to perform it. Yes, if Ambrosius would submit in faith, the grace of Jesus would rescue him from the captivity of his natural impulses!

Horizontally, baptism meant a commitment to serve his brothers and sisters. It meant ... well, I shall let Ambrosius himself speak:

"In summary, a Christian should not consider anything to be his own, but should have all things common with his brother. That is, he should not let his brother suffer need. In other words, I will not work that my house be filled, that my larder be supplied with meat; but rather I will see that my brother has enough, because a Christian looks more to his neighbor than to himself."

Concerning material goods, Ambrosius also summed it up this way: "[A disciple should not say] this house is mine, this field is mine, this money is mine. Rather he should say it is ours, just like we say when we pray 'Our Father ...'"

Thus bound--and blessed!--vertically and horizontally by his covenant, Ambrosius was commissioned as a missionary. He ended up being a 7/20 missionary.

What is a 7/20 missionary?

A 7/20 missionary is one who spends seven weeks as a traveling evangelist, going from restaurant to house to marketplace and village, asking searching questions to any who would give a few moments of their time. The 20 part comes afterward.

Ambrosius began his travels. Arriving at Erlangen, Germany on September 9, 1527, he asked around for a Hans Nadler, saying that he had a letter for him. This aroused suspicion; needle-maker Hans had just recently been forced to flee the area since it became known that he was an Anabaptist. So Ambrosius was detained and questioned: had he been rebaptized?

Ambrosius bravely admitted that he had, and declared that "he had come because of the Word of God, and to declare the truth, regardless of consequences, decapitation, or burning."

The 20 part

Thus began the second part of his 7/20 missionary status: 20 weeks in jail, suffering torture and examination.

Finally a verdict was reached. Ambrosius was declared guilty of inciting revolution and engaging in sedition against the established government. More specifically he was found guilty of:

Saying the revolutionary peasants were right, and they would succeed in another overthrow of the government.

Saying God would raise up a people that would annihilate 10,000 men.

Saying no Christian can hold a government office.

Saying no Christian should own any temporal goods.

Saying all castles and fortresses are to be destroyed.

Saying Christ was born in original sin and God is His enemy.

Saying infant baptism is meaningless, since baptism follows after faith.

Saying the Lord's Supper was symbolic, and not a real partaking of Christ's literal body and blood.

Ambrosius denied saying the first six items (although he may have agreed with number three). And although he acknowledged the last two, they had nothing to do with overthrowing the government! While he was interested in expanding the kingdom of God on earth, this kingdom was not political, looking to overthrow civil governments. Rather, it was letting Christ overthrow the rule of Satan, self, and the flesh in the hearts of men ... yes, right in 16th-century Europe!

The reward of his labors

It really didn't matter what Ambrosius said, so it appears. With a serious uprising of the peasantry having just been put down, the government--and legitimately so--had a serious suspicion of anyone preaching another kingdom. And besides that, being rebaptized meant a rejection of the official State Church, which was wed to the civil government.

On February 6, 1528, Ambrosius Spittelmayer was unceremoniously beheaded at Cadolzburg, Germany, somewhere close to 30 years of age. He defended himself so ably that his accusers mistook him for a former priest. But he was just a common man; in fact, he had only been re-baptized for about seven months. It appears that an intense reading of the Bible was his only preparation for his lengthy court trials, of which he passed through several. The following are a few insights pulled from the records of his court hearings:

The true, real Christians who are Christians in Spirit and in truth ... do not require a government, sword, or authority, because they willingly do righteousness. ... But those "Christians" who are "Christians" only with the words "Lord, Lord" need to have the government to move them to piety, otherwise they would put out each other's eyes. A piety that must be enforced does not please God. God wants a voluntary spirit

It is certainly not our intent to betray or surrender country and people or to make an insurrection. May that be far from us! The turmoil that will soon come over all people will come from God because of the sin which is daily piled against God. I say to you, awake! Awake! Rise up from your sins and Christ will become your illuminator. People carry a dead soul in a living body, they should carry a living soul in a dead body.

If we, His members, would occupy the kingdom of heaven on the day of judgment, we will also have to live accordingly--to suffer and die, just like He the Head died for us. For whoever does not suffer with Him will

not inherit with Him. We must drink the cup that He drank. Whoever does not want to suffer here, however, will have to suffer there in the lake of fire.

Let everyone look to himself and present his account books so that he can stand before his Lord. Because everyone must give account for all his words, works, and steps of his feet; for every day and hour, how he has spent them; for every penny, how he has spent it; how he has related to all creation; and how he has eaten his bread.

A true Christian can have no rest here. Righteousness can have no peace here in this kingdom.

We partake of Christ when He is spiritually conceived, born, circumcised, baptized, and preached ... in us!

In the great resurrection, the ungodly will arise to death, for they have lived and lusted here, and the godly will arise to life, because they have been dead here. Some have enjoyed their "kingdom of heaven" here, because they lived in "peace," enjoying the lusts of this world.

Seven weeks on the mission trail. Twenty weeks in prison. Decapitated. A 7/20 missionary. Three days in prison for every one day of preaching. How does that strike you for a ratio?

Cadolzburg Castle

It may have been within the walls of this old castle (Cadolzburg, Germany) that the blood of Ambrosius was spilled for preaching "righteousness, peace, and joy in this present world."

Thus goes the story of Ambrosius Spittelmayer. As one person has said of him, "He was tried, tortured, and executed far from his home, a silent martyr of the cause of nonresistant discipleship, a voluntary church, and religious liberty." He had been offered a release, but with conditions:

Change his ways

Agree to be quiet about rebaptism

Never come again within 30 miles of Cadolzburg

Since Ambrosius could not agree to these conditions, he suffered the consequences. First it was torture, under which it is recorded that he never complained, but only prayed for grace to remain faithful and praised God for the opportunity of suffering for His Word's sake. After the torture, the decree for execution was issued on February 6, 1528.

At the end of his written defense that he presented to the judges, Ambrosius included the following admonition:

Tear your hearts and not your clothes! Learn from the king of Nineveh, who because of one sermon of the prophet Jonah repented, and the whole city with him! If you [referring to the civil authorities] repent, then the people of your land will also be moved. See to it that you do not give offense! Settle your accounts here. If you wait to settle them until over yonder, things will go hard for you! Watch what you do and with whom you deal! Whoever has eyes to see, let them see; whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Stop doing evil; learn to do good.

Like his Teacher, Ambrosius died trying to extend the reign of God on earth. Well done, Ambrosius!
Welcome home to your reward!

The scene at the beginning of the article is the author's imagination, but the five questions that Ambrosius asked are historical fact, taken from Ambrosius' testimony at his court hearings as to how he evangelized among the people.

The following is a list of the primary sources for this article.

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