

## *Gelassenheit* and power Some historical reflections<sup>1</sup>

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**F**irst, some caveats and cautions: the early Anabaptists were concerned, above all, with salvation, and not with issues of power and authority. The basic question they asked was, How may we come into a right relationship with God and be saved? not, How should power be exercised among us? But of course, the Anabaptist answer to the first question shaped the Anabaptist answer to the second question. The few lines written here will highlight the role *Gelassenheit* played in the early Anabaptist understanding of

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how human beings are to come into a right relationship with God and with each other. In what way these sixteenth-century reflections might be helpful in the twenty-first century is a question that is best left for readers to answer.

At the very heart of the Anabaptist understanding of salvation was an assessment of the human condition and strong convictions about the path God had provided for a return to grace. The Anabaptist understanding was not articulated in abstract theological

terms but rather provided specific steps to be taken: what was described was a spirituality, a way of living in biblical obedience to God, in a God-pleasing way. Running throughout this spirituality was the defining attitude of *Gelassenheit*: yieldedness, abandonment, resignation, and complete acceptance of what God wills.

The Anabaptist understanding of *Gelassenheit* was part of a larger assessment of humanity's place in this world, in the light of eternity. (Insofar as present-day assessments of the human condition differ from the Anabaptist understanding, the Anabaptist path may not be helpful or relevant.) The Anabaptists were clear that human reality must be described as sinful and fallen, far from

the grace of God. Nothing human beings can do will remedy this situation; in fact, most human beings live in denial and resolutely refuse to acknowledge that there is a fundamental problem. The first step on the path to salvation, the Anabaptists insisted, was to recognise human sinfulness, alienation from God, human powerlessness, and the eternal consequences of remaining in this state.

People who come to see things as they really are undergo several related experiences (the Anabaptist writings do not specify an order). The convicted sinner will recognise the power and sovereignty of God; this attitude is the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10 and many other passages). The sinner will feel remorse and will repent of sin (Mark 1:15 and many other passages). And the sinner will feel an utter despair at being powerless to make things right. In the words of Balthasar Hubmaier, “Such miserable little things are people who ponder and recognise themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Those who thus recognise themselves, and who despair of remedying their situation of fallenness and disobedience, will call to God in their helplessness. They can do so only in a spirit of genuine need and humility. This attitude is directed not just to one’s own person but to everything this side of eternity, to all of creation. True humility (fear of God) recognises that in what really matters—in questions of eternal significance—the creation and the human ability to control aspects of creation can do nothing to help. Creation is not evil of itself but rather becomes evil when it puts itself in the place of God.<sup>3</sup> It is this idolatrous grasping of creation that must be renounced at a fundamental level. This renunciation was expressed well in a hymn composed by Adam Reissner around 1530, preserved in the *Ausbund*:

*No one can come [to heaven]  
Who does not renounce the whole world.  
All creatures on earth  
Must yield themselves entirely to Christ,  
And offer up their bodies and lives to him.*<sup>4</sup>

No one can progress on the path to heaven without first attaining humility regarding his or her “miserable” condition, and humility regarding the real limits of “worldly” power.

Said another way, when the truth has been recognised—the reality of who God is and who we human beings are—the next step on the path is a thoroughgoing spirit of *Gelassenheit*. Being ready to yield one's will and one's life to God's will is an attitude that not only defines true repentance but also needs to shape the entire Christian walk up to the moment of earthly death.

*Gelassenheit* plays a central role in the Anabaptist understanding of sin. The sin that condemns, they were convinced, is not the “original” sin of Adam and Eve but rather the freely chosen sin that all the descendants of Adam and Eve decide to pursue (hence *adult* baptism as a sign of repentance and commitment). Sin is a matter of the will—a will that is predisposed by human nature to sin, to be sure, but that freely chooses to sin nonetheless. Because we freely choose to sin—that is, we choose to carry out our own desires instead of what God wills for us—it follows that our will must also be involved in the remedy for sin. Our habit of insisting on our own way must be reversed. But of course, human beings have no power to provide a remedy for sin. What then can be done?

We must learn to stop doing. As Pilgram Marpeck wrote, “It does not depend on our willing or running, but rather on the mercy of God and on His grace in and with Christ. He gives the will, He can also do and accomplish it in His own. We must simply in all of our actions stand idle ourselves, as dead in ourselves, if Christ is to live in us, which life and walk alone are pleasing to the Father.”<sup>5</sup> We must “stand idle,” learn to entrust and yield our lives to the living power of God in Christ. *Gelassenheit* is the key to true repentance and overcoming sin. Yielding our will to God's will means removing the greatest impediment to the presence of God in our lives, which lies in our own stubborn hearts. *Gelassenheit* is the doing that, paradoxically, is a surrender of doing, a surrender of control. But *Gelassenheit* extends beyond the moments of repentance for sins committed and speaks to the sin that will continue to tempt us and to which we will succumb out of weakness. All our lives we will have to practice the surrender of our wills to the power of God, so that God will be free to work in and through us, by the power of Christ born in us. The early Anabaptists expected the practice of *Gelassenheit* to be a continuous spiritual discipline and challenge.

*Gelassenheit* also plays a key role in the Anabaptist understanding of how Christ's atonement for sin becomes efficacious for the salvation of sinners. Christ's death on the cross atoned for the sins of all humankind, but only those who *yield* to the living power of God will in fact inherit the merits of Christ's sacrifice. The Anabaptists believed that salvation is granted to those who are personally transformed by the living power of God. Those who recognise how things are with sinful humanity, who repent, despair, and trust in the physician Jesus Christ in a genuine yieldedness of heart, will be led to faith and rebirth by the power of God. Just a few months after the first baptisms in Zurich, Balthasar Hubmaier wrote,

*As much as it is possible for a wounded person he will also surrender to the will of the physician. . . . The physician counsels, helps, and promotes him so that he can follow his Word and commandment. Now before they are believed, all these teachings, which reveal the sickness and point to the physician, are letter and they kill. But by faith the Spirit of God makes them alive so that they start to live, turn green, and bear fruit. . . . Thus Paul confesses publicly that he does not live but Christ lives in him.<sup>6</sup>*

The faith of which the Anabaptists spoke was connected more to genuine trust, rebirth, and regeneration of the person than it was to belief in a historical event. True faith would be preceded by true repentance and yieldedness to the power of God.

The Anabaptists were not impressed by talk that claimed that salvation was by faith alone. True faith, they said, certainly does believe in the truth of the historical work of God in Christ on the cross, which forgives sin into eternity. But this belief is the beginning of the story, not the end. Insofar as it is true, faith also enters into yielded persons (those who have truly trusted in God and have therefore yielded their lives to God) and transforms their hearts and lives with power. Those who have faith do not simply *believe* the gospel message is true, they also *trust* the physician and give themselves into his hands, to be remade in a living process of transformation (John 3:3-8; Gal. 6:15).

To be clear: salvation is a pure gift of grace for the Anabaptists and not the result of any human works. Insofar as human effort is involved in repentance and rebirth, the effort is directed entirely to the cessation of effort, the negation of human glory and pride, and a reliance on God alone. Coming to true faith means that

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God's work is no longer being impeded and that a rebirth has taken place in a real and visible way. The believer lives no more (the old Adam and Eve have now yielded), but rather, Christ now lives in the believer (Gal. 2:20, a verse beloved by the Anabaptists).

Yielding one's will to God's living will thus opens the door to spiritual regeneration, which in turn opens the door to a life of obedient discipleship. Discipleship is not doing the best one can by human power, but rather is the outworking of spiritual regeneration and a continued attitude of *Gelassenheit*.

A life of discipleship reflects the nature of Christ that now lives within. Menno Simons wrote,

*We must spend the remainder of our days not after the lusts of men, but according to the will of God, so that we may say with Paul, I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. For he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.<sup>7</sup>*

Menno's words about living according to the will of God, about living no longer for ourselves but for Christ, should be heard as the Anabaptists heard them, not as a simple call to obey the ethical demands of Jesus, but rather as an appeal to the power of God within. If Christ has not come to dwell within (if one is not yielded and reborn), the call for biblical obedience will produce nothing but outward posturing. Menno says, "[The believer] is clothed with the power from above, baptized with the

Holy Spirit, and so united and mingled with God that he becomes a partaker of the divine nature and is made conformable to the image of His Son.”<sup>8</sup> Obedience is not too much to ask of people who are partakers of the divine nature. At the heart of Anabaptist spiritual life is a continuous, active yielding to the living Spirit of God, to the point that the divine nature becomes our nature, according to the image of the Son of God in the measure that grace provides.

The spiritual process described so far involves individuals in their inward struggles coming to terms with the reality of life in a fallen world and the challenge of trusting their all to the great physician, Jesus Christ. With baptism (which early Anabaptists

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often described as a threefold baptism of spirit, water, and blood), the inward process of *Gelassenheit* merges with the outward yielding that must take place within the body of Christ. Leonhard Schiemer beautifully described the baptism of the Spirit in terms of *Gelassenheit*: “The first baptism is that of the Spirit to which one submits in obedience as Christ was obedient to his Father, even unto death on the cross, Phil. 1[:29-30]. . . . In this baptism one surrenders to God with life and limb, but flesh and blood cannot surrender in that way without the Holy Spirit. Therefore a

certain witness that one has the Holy Spirit is this complete surrender to God.”<sup>9</sup> Baptism is first and foremost a profound spiritual surrender to God, which is then proclaimed outwardly in water.<sup>10</sup>

Baptism with water not only publicly affirms the reality of spiritual baptism (dying and rising in Christ), it is at the same time a visible covenant made with like-minded believers. The commitment made at baptism is no less than a promise of yieldedness by members to one another. In his definitive baptism book, Balthasar Hubmaier wrote that “the one who is baptized testifies publicly that he has pledged himself henceforth to live according to the Rule of Christ. By virtue of this pledge *he has submitted himself to sisters, brothers, and to the church.*”<sup>11</sup> This understanding continued in the tradition. The submission of brothers and sisters to one

another was formally instituted in Anabaptist communities as the practice of mutual admonition, or the ban (Matt. 18:15-18), practised above all prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

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The early Anabaptists insisted that inner transformation must precede and inform outer obedience, and further, that spiritual regeneration and living discipleship must honestly mirror one another. The integration of inner, spiritual reality with the outward life of discipleship and obedience is undoubtedly the greatest strength and appeal of Anabaptist spirituality. If history is any measure, however, integrating the spiritual and communal lives is also a point of vulnerability.

A community of people who are yielded to the living Spirit of God will, ideally, find their way through issues of power and authority in a spirit of prayer, humility, openness, and flexibility. The history of Anabaptist descendants shows a different reality, already in the sixteenth century. The Swiss Brethren (according to Marpeck) were so zealous in disciplining their leaders that they could scarcely find any. Menno Simons provided direction for Mennonite congregations by admonishing pastors to crucify themselves, seek only God's honor, and live blamelessly—after which they were to teach, administer the sacraments, and exclude “all impenitent and apostate sinners and brethren, proclaiming grace to those that repent.”<sup>12</sup> Schisms were immediate. Historical examples abound of powerful leaders in communities requiring a humility of members that they themselves seemed to lack, or conversely (and more recently), of members requiring a humility of leaders that they themselves were loathe to exemplify.

Assessing such a situation is not an exact science, and readers will proceed according to their best lights. In my view, the fundamental Anabaptist analysis—drawing as it did on centuries of spiritual experience—was sound, but its application was deficient. If history is any judge, yielding to the living Spirit of Christ requires a lifetime of serious spiritual discipline. If cultivating the presence of the living Christ within were in fact our individual

and communal focus, would we find answers to questions of power and authority? I believe we would.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the themes and issues outlined here are more fully explored in C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004; distributed in North America by Orbis Books).

<sup>2</sup> H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 5 (Kitchener, Ont., and Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 84. Translation modified slightly. For relevant scripture passages used by the Anabaptists, and the Anabaptists' reflections on these texts, see C. Arnold Snyder and Galen A. Peters, eds., *Reading the Anabaptist Bible* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> "By 'the world' [the Anabaptists] did not mean the creation as such which, they affirmed with biblical backing, God had originally created good and could still be used for good. They meant to indicate by the phrase, that part of the good creation that had 'fallen' with Adam and Eve's disobedience, under Lucifer's prompting. 'The world' is all that pleases Satan and a fallen humanity, and displeases God; the world is all that has been corrupted by fallen, disobedient human nature; the world is the 'broad path' which will most certainly lead to perdition. The world and the flesh are the locus of self-will, pleasure, self-seeking, and sin." Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps*, 37–38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ausbund*, hymn 51, stanza 4; translation, with some modifications, taken from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1 (Millersburg, Ohio: Ohio Amish Library, 1999), 104.

<sup>5</sup> William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 2 (Kitchener, Ont., and Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 510.

<sup>6</sup> *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 85. Dirk Philips wrote: "For what is the new birth other than the transforming and renewing of the person which God works in him through faith in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit? . . . Where this takes place and is in process as a pregnancy, there is the genuine new birth; there is the new creature in Christ Jesus, John 3:3; Gal. 6[:15]." Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and Alvin J. Beachy, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 6 (Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Verduin, trans., and J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>10</sup> "We believe and confess that there is a Christian baptism which must take place internally and externally, internally with the Holy Spirit and with fire . . . but externally with water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Matt. 28:19" (*Writings of Dirk Philips*, 72).

<sup>11</sup> *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 127; my italics.

<sup>12</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 444–45.

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