

Anabaptist Hymn

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The Reformation movement produced much inspired music to which musicologists and historians have given great attention. Many volumes have been written about the Lutheran chorales and the psalm tunes of the Reformed church. However, little consideration has been given to the hymns of the Anabaptists (Greek derivative meaning “one who rebaptizes”).

Several reasons may be offered to explain why these hymns have not found their way into the mainstream of hymnody.

In the first place, their writers generally came from a group of common people who had a deep religious faith but little or no formal education and who were not artistically nor poetically inclined. It is understandable that the intense persecution which they suffered gave them little opportunity for artistic production.¹

In the second place, early Anabaptist historiography was written by those opposing this Reformation movement. Instead of consulting Anabaptist confessional writings and other sources, historians until the nineteenth century generally accepted this distorted record of church history and uncritically identified this group with the Peasant’s War of 1525 and the Munster Incident of 1534-1535. Thus their writings and practices were feared and hated for generations.

Finally, with the general acceptance of the Anabaptist con-

1 Some artistic expressions among the Anabaptists appeared, particularly in the Netherlands. Several of the Anabaptist writers and painters achieved national fame including the students of Rembrandt. Recent investigations indicate that Rembrandt had spiritual and friendship ties with the Mennonites (Anabaptists).

cepts of voluntary church, the separation of church and state, and religious liberty, a reassessment was made by scholars and their opinion of the nature and goals of Anabaptism was reversed. In view of this new understanding of the contribution which the Anabaptist made during the Reformation, it is important that their songs not be ignored.

The Swiss Anabaptist leader Conrad Grabel joined Zwingli in opposing all church music, including singing in the worship service; nevertheless, from the beginning of the movement, hymn singing became a part of Anabaptist worship. The importance they attached to it can be seen in that at least 130 Anabaptist hymn writers can be identified by name with hundreds of hymns being produced in a relatively short period of time. This seems to indicate that the singing and reading of hymns was practiced both in congregational worship services and in private and personal devotions.

While singing often had to be done in secret because of extreme persecution, it became an important factor in Anabaptist evangelism. The Mennonite historian Christian Neff says,

A flood of religious songs poured over the young brotherhood like a vivifying and refreshing stream. The songs became the strongest attractive force for the brotherhood. They sang themselves into the hearts of many, clothed in popular tunes. They were mostly martyr songs, which breathed an atmosphere of readiness to die and a touching depth of faith.²

The historian Lilencron states,

Love is the great and inexhaustible theme of their hymnody; for love is the sole distinguishing mark of the children of God....For the brethren love is the "chief sum" of their being....So these hymns immerse themselves in the concept of the love which is all in all, which takes up its cross with joy, which gives everything in the service of God and

2 Harold S. Bender, *Hymnody of the Anabaptists*, Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. II, 870

the neighbor, which bears all things, and out of which flows all humility and meekness, mercy, and peace.³

It was said of Peter Ehrenpreis of Urbach in 1596, that he attracted many people to his manner of life and won their favor

with his Anabaptist songs which he is accustomed to sing in his vineyard and elsewhere.⁴

There are only a few direct statements made by these early Reformers concerning their views on church music. One of the most typical is by the Moravian Anabaptist Peter Riedemann in his discussion of doctrine and practices called *Rechenschaft unsere Religion* (1545):

The singing of spiritual songs is pleasing to God when it is done at the impulse of the Spirit and attention is given to the words. We permit no other than spiritual songs to be sung among us.⁵

There is evidence that individual hymns were published in the early part of the sixteenth century; however, it was not until the middle of the sixteenth century that Anabaptist hymnals appeared, both in the Dutch and German languages. The most significant of these was the

*Aussbund Etlicher schöner Christlicher Geseng,
wie die in der Gefengness zu Passaw im Schloss
von den Schweitzern,
and auch von andern rechtgläubigen Christen hin
and her gedicht worden.
Allen and jeden Christen,
welcher Religion sie auch seyen,
unparteilich and fast nutzlich zu brauchen.*

(title page of the 1583 edition)⁶

3 Loc. cit.

4 Loc. cit.

5 W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 16

6 "A selected group of fine Christian songs, composed in the prison of

Commonly called the *Ausbund* (meaning “Selection of the Best”), it became a very popular hymnal among the Anabaptists.⁷

Many of the contests were written in the castle of Passau in Bavaria where some of the Swiss leaders were imprisoned between 1535 and 1540.

The first publication included fifty-three hymns and appeared in 1564; the first full volume of 130 hymns was published in 1583. It has since gone through approximately eleven European and twenty American editions, the latest being in 1949.⁸

It first served congregations in Switzerland and Germany and eventually was brought to the United States, where it is still used by the Amish Mennonites. The reason this hymnal deserves special attention is that “it is undoubtedly the oldest hymnbook in continuous use in the Christian church anywhere in the world.”⁹

Since the history of the Anabaptists is reflected in their writings, it follows that many of the hymns have martyrological subjects reflecting the themes of oppression, alienation, pain, and an expression of their protest against a sinful world. On the other hand, because of the willingness to be martyred for their faith, their songs also strike a note of triumph and victory. A combination of these two themes is noted in the following verse of a martyr hymn by Felix Manz:

Christians. These are impartial and practical for the use of all Christians, the castle at Passau by the Swiss and also by various other orthodox regardless of religious affiliations.”

7 Other important collections are the two Dutch hymnals *Veelderhande Liederkes* (1554) and *Een nieu Liedeboeck* (1555) and the German hymnal *Ein schon Gesangbuchlein* (published before 1565).

8 The Amish Mennonites call the *Ausbund* the “Dicke Buch” (thick book) because most of the editions are approximately two and one-half inches in thickness, containing about nine hundred pages.

9 Harold S. Bender, *Ausbund*, Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. I, 191

With rapture I will sing,
Grateful to God for breath,
The strong, almighty King
Who saves my soul from death,
The death that has no end.
Thee, too, O Christ, I praise,
Who dost thine own defend.¹⁰

None of the Anabaptist hymnals printed the tunes to which their hymns were sung. However, they did present with each hymn the name of one or more melodies which no doubt were well known to most people. It may have been the added expense of printing together with the inability of most of the common folk to read music that made it impractical to include music in the hymnbooks.

There were four main sources of tunes used in the Anabaptist hymnals:

1. Roman Catholic liturgy;
2. pre-reformation German sacred folksongs;
3. secular folk tunes; and
4. German Protestant hymn tunes.

Secular folk tunes provided their greatest single source.

The style of the Anabaptist hymn was akin to the *Volkslied* (German folk song) of the sixteenth century, which expressed in song, emotions such as love, sorrow, and loneliness. The *Volkslied* also spoke of daily experiences in local and national life, ranging from national events and heroes to local festivals and parties. It was only natural that these folk songs would become an integral part of the life of all people.

It is not strange, then, that members of the Anabaptist group should express their experiences, as well as their innermost feelings, through the medium of the *Volkslied*, and it is consequently this genre, with its acknowledged debt to

¹⁰ William Loyd Hooper, *Church Music in Transition* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1963), 43

the product of the Meistersinger, that one must consider the immediate soil from which the Anabaptist hymn sprang and by which it was nurtured.¹¹

The eight and seven line strophic forms of the folk songs are used most often. Further clear evidence of the close relationship of these hymns with the Volkslied is in the imitation of opening lines. For example, the beginning of the folk song *Der Schlemmer* is:

Wo soll ich mich hinkehren
Ich armes Brüderlein...

While the hymn imitates it with:

Wo soll ich nich hinkehren
Ich tummes Brüderline...

The ballad influence can be seen in many of the concluding stanzas in which the author often directly includes his name or indicates his occupation or station in life such as student or fisherman.

An influence of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic church can be seen in several concluding statements which include the doxology, *Gloria Patri*.

Another highly popular technique which the poets used was writing in acrostic verse, several variations of which can be found.

The Anabaptists had a deep regard and a high interest in the Bible, for they studied it astutely and it served as their guide for daily living. This love for the scriptures is reflected in their hymnody by borrowing phrases directly from the vernacular versions with which they were familiar.

Generally the sixteenth century Anabaptist hymn is much longer than the present day Protestant hymn. Many in the *Ausbund* contain more than twenty verses. This is under-

¹¹ Rosella Reimer Duerksen, *Anabaptist Hymnody of the Sixteenth Century* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, 1956), 12-13

standable since many of the hymns are martyr ballads which tell a long story. The following description is a typical example:

Hymn No. 13 of the *Ausbund*...tells the story of the martyrdom, in Leeuwarden in 1549, of a young woman named Elizabeth. The author is unknown. This particular hymn has no introductory lines, but plunges immediately into a description of the victim as a young girl, both physically and spiritually lovely (stanza 1).

The second stanza gives information concerning the place and time of the events to be narrated.

Then the hymn tells of Elizabeth's capture (stanza 3), and proceeds with an account of the questions and answers of the trial.

When Elizabeth is asked to swear to the truth of her answers, she replies that it is against her convictions to swear, and that she can answer only "yes" or "no" (stanza 4), adding that the individual who wishes to deceive his neighbor will also lie under oath (stanza 5).

Elizabeth is then accused of leading many people astray (stanza 6), and asked to name the individuals she has taught (stanza 7).

Her reply is that she can only answer in regard to her own beliefs (stanzas 8 and 9).

The first question thrust at her is in regard to her opinion of the Mass (stanza 9).

The Mass, she states, means nothing to her (stanza 10), but the celebration of the Lord's Supper has deep significance (stanzas 11 and 12).

Because she quotes much scripture to substantiate her answers, Elizabeth is accused of voicing the thought of Satan by perverting the Word of God (stanza 13).

Thereupon Elizabeth indicates that she expects persecution, for Christ had to suffer (stanza 14).

The ensuing discussion centers around the baptism of children, Elizabeth denying its validity and claiming to have been baptized once in accordance with Christ's command (stanza 15-17).

Then follows a question in regard to the priest's ability to forgive sin, with the answer that Christ is the only High Priest (stanzas 18-21).

The account then states that no mercy was shown Elizabeth, and she was soon taken to the torture chamber (stanza 22).

Here she was informed that, while she had hitherto been treated in a kindly manner, she would now receive more severe treatment unless she repented (stanzas 23-24).

Thereupon her fingers were tightly clamped and squeezed until the blood ran from her nails (stanza 26).

While she prayed to God for help and the power to endure (stanza 26), her tormenters chided her by saying that calling to God would be of no avail, only repentance could end the torture (stanza 27).

Elizabeth, however, continued in prayer, and soon reported that the pain began to seem less severe (stanzas 28-29).

More violent torture was enforced (stanza 30), while Elizabeth pled with the men to remember their own wives and children, and their reaction to similar cruelty (stanzas 30-32).

Sinking to the ground, she was given up as dead (stanza 33).

Again she was commanded to repent (stanza 35).

In March of the same year she was sentenced to death (stanza 36) and drowned (stanza 37).

The concluding stanza calls upon the reader never to forget Elizabeth's courageous heart.¹²

The Anabaptist hymns as they are sung today by the Amish Mennonites are ornate, using one to nine tones per syllable. It is difficult to ascertain if the sixteenth century Anabaptists used ornamentation in their singing. Some historians feel that the embellished singing of the Amish Mennonites has its origin in Gregorian Chant or Plain song. American musicologist and folklorist, George Pullen Jackson, offers an

¹² *Ibid.*, 200-201.

alternate explanation of the development of the current ornamented singing of the Amish Mennonites:

Originally there existed simple folk songs which usually contained one tone per syllable. In the course of time, more and more tones were added, until today there may be from one to nine tones per syllable. As this ornamentation increased, the first tone of the root tune tended to become more and more forgotten, until finally the resultant ornamented forms became accepted by the singers as new melodies in their own right.¹³

One moderate attempt has been made by Joseph W. Yoder to transcribe Amish Mennonite hymns.¹⁴ He transcribed thirty-six “slow tunes” and numerous “fast tunes” as they are sung in the Kishacoquillas Valley, Mifflin County, Pennsylvania. The “slow tunes” (*langsam Weis*) are distinguished from the “fast tunes” in that the latter are a lighter type of American origin, such as the gospel song. This collection of *Amische Lieder* was printed to help the Amish settlements continue singing in the original style of their forefathers and to help them to learn the songs quickly.

Possibly the best known Anabaptist hymn is *O Gott Vater, Wir Loben Dich* which is always sung as the second song in the Amish Mennonite worship service.¹⁵ The tune is taken from the chorale *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, which is credited to Martin Luther. This hymn of praise is often called *Lobgesang*.

This type of hymn is sung by the Amish Mennonites responsorially. The *Vorsänger* selects his own pitch and sings

13 Rupert Karl Hohmann, *The Church Music of the Old Order Amish of the United States*, (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1959), 56 [Note: For a discussion of this thesis see *A Lesson from the Ausbund* by Larry Warkentin in the *Journal of Church and of Society* (Fall 1970), 30-34]

14 Joseph W. Yoder, *Amische Lieder* (Huntingdon, Pennsylvania: The Yoder Publishing Company, 1942), 114

15 Hohmann, op. Cit., 1.15

the first syllable of each line, with the congregation joining him in unison on the second syllable. Because a very slow tempo is used, it takes up to twenty minutes to sing one of the “slow tunes.”

The Anabaptist hymns with their simplicity, directness, and lack of pretense nurtured the inner spirit of a godly people who sought honestly, against incredible odds, to be obedient to Christ’s teachings. These hymns document the sincerity of their conviction and their sufferings. Though the Anabaptist hymnody has survived only in a small part of Christendom, it helped to secure those concepts which are now held to be self-evident: The voluntary church, the separation of church and state, and religious liberty.