

Too Late for an Apology After 477 Years?

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"An apology after 477 years? It's a bit late isn't it?" Quipped Jean Paul, our Luxemburgese bus driver. His cynical response came in response to the news of an apology to be made by the official church of Zurich for their execution of Felix Manz in 1527.

The Reformed Church of Zurich invited the spiritual heirs of the Anabaptists--Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites--to a "reconciliation" conference, June 26, 2004, to acknowledge the persecution and execution of the radical Anabaptists during the Reformation.

The letter of six Amish leaders in Pennsylvania is much more charitable. "We believe the descendants of the Reformed Church are not responsible for any actions their forefathers took against the Anabaptists. Far be it from us to request reconciliation." Furthermore they speculate, "We wonder if there would be any Amish, Mennonite or Hutterite churches today if there had not been any persecution."

If Anabaptist descendants did not make the request, what motivated the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich to issue the apology? Reformed officials told me a year earlier, when I sat in their offices in Zurich, that it was time for them to acknowledge the shadow side of their history. And so, during the celebration of the birth of one of their leaders, Heinrich Bullinger--a most vicious critic of the Anabaptists--they set aside a day to acknowledge their regret.

And they did not mince words! "We confess that that persecution was, according to our present conviction, a betrayal of the Gospel and that our Reformed forefathers were in error on this issue."

In addition to the confession of their "betrayal of the Gospel," they were ready to "honor the radical approach of the Anabaptist movement to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as a free community of committed believers putting into practice the message of the Sermon on the Mount."

They observed correctly that "The persecuted do not forget their history; the persecutors by contrast would prefer to do so. We--representatives of the Reformed State Church of the Canton of Zurich--acknowledge that our church has largely suppressed the story of the persecution of the Anabaptists."

Not only would they end their suppression of the story, they would revise their own history. "It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue."

Such were the remarkable words spoken that day! Their words and attitudes were also visibly expressed in generous hospitality--food and lodging for all 80 North American guests, who were among the 300 participants. But there remains another visible expression for future generations: a simple granite tablet on a low wall on the west side of the Limmat River, which divides Zurich. Inscribed on this tablet is the Anabaptist story, no longer suppressed by the Reformed but claimed as part of their own revised history:

" From a fishing platform here in the middle of the Limmat, Felix Manz and five other Anabaptists were drowned between 1527 and 1532 during the Reformation. The last Anabaptist to be executed in Zurich was Hans Landis in 1614."

Hans Landis was the elderly farmer pastor of a congregation across Lake Zurich in Hirzel. When the authorities threatened to banish him and confiscate his property, Landis challenged their right to either. After all, the "earth is the Lord's" he quoted stubbornly. After his third arrest, the 70-year-old man was rowed ashore from the stone Wellenberg prison tower in the middle of the Limmat River. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, Landis was taken to the place of execution a few blocks down river and beheaded.

The ringing of church bells marked the beginning of the dedication ceremony for the historical marker late in the afternoon of June 26. Zurich official read an additional "statement of regret". A city council member told the story of a 1952 attempt to place a historical marker that would commemorate the martyrdom of Felix Manz. The council refused to approve the petition. For the memorial dedicated this day in 2004, there were no dissenting votes.

If the Reformed of Zurich are willing to revise their history to include Anabaptist persecution, we Anabaptist descendants need to revise our story to include the recent Zurich confession.

As we stand by the Limmat River, we will still tell the story of the Zurich reformation fueled by Zwingli's preaching in the Grossmünster, the vigorous debates between the impatient radicals and their former mentor in the council hall a few blocks downriver; the first believers baptism on Neustadt Gasse within the shadow of the cathedral; the passionate missionary fervor of the new "evangelicals"; the martyrdom of Felix Manz in the icy waters of the Limmat River; and the stubborn resistance of Hans Landis.

But, now we must say there is a new ending to this story. The Zurich persecutors, who for centuries had wished to forget this story but are now choosing to remember it, placed this marker here. They have acknowledged their "historic sin" and consider the persecution "a betrayal of the gospel." They have asked for our forgiveness.

We have acknowledged the threat our Anabaptist forebears posed to Zurich's ordered society during an era of turbulent changes. We understand that the Zurich reformers believed they were rediscovering the "liberating gospel of Jesus Christ," for which they were also willing "to give up their lives."

Too late for an apology after 477 years? It's not too late! Our histories have caught up with each other, and they have given us--the former persecutors and the former persecuted--a common charge. In a violent world, we are called to work together as God's reconciling ministers "in small things and great ones."