

ANABAPTISTS IN THEIR HEARTS?:
Religious Dissidence and the Reformation
in the Landgraviate of Hesse

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CHAPTER I:

Prelude

In 1531 individuals in the northern Hessian village of Altmorschen submitted a series of formal accusations against their pastor, Matthias Bengel. While controversy between pastors and their congregations was no rarity in the early years of the Reformation, these articles and Bengel's answer to them are intriguing. The eighth article asked "whether he has an Anabaptist in his heart." In his answer, Bengel cryptically quoted Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (2:11): "No one knows what is in a person except the spirit which is within him."¹ "However," he added, "words, life[style], and deeds provide proof of what lies in the heart. I call upon those things."²

The question of the pastor's Anabaptist sympathies was not the only issue raised in the articles against him. His sacramental teaching also seems to have been questioned. Against the accusation that his teachings of the sacraments had not been consistent enough (presumably, with the official doctrine³), he replied, "The world creates error; I, however, remain by the truth, which is Christ."⁴ Asked what he

¹ *Quellen* II, no. 222, p. 146: "8. Ob er auch ein widerteufer im herzen habe. -- 1.Cor.2 [v.11] 'Nimand wais, was im menschen ist on der geist des menschen, der im menschen ist'."

² *Quellen* II, no. 222, p. 146: "Doch herzenkundigen beweiset wort, leben, tat. Daruf beruf ich mich."

³ See below, p. 6, footnote 19, and p. 85.

⁴ *Quellen* II, no. 222, p. 146: "6. warumb er nit bestendig sei in der ler des sacraments. -- Die welt macht irtumb, ich aber bleibe bei der warheit, die Christus ist."

believes about “the sacrament” (i.e. communion), Bengel answered simply, “As the words of Christ read.”⁵

On the same day that Bengel responded to these accusations, he also wrote to *Statthalter*⁶ Adolf Rau in Kassel regarding abuses in his congregation. Bengel complained about the excessive celebration that often accompanied infants’ baptisms:

At the baptisms there is such worldly sin and error,
with excessive eating and drinking late into the night,
that it causes both injury to the conscience and to the
body, and thereby this holy sacrament is turned into a
worldly thing and completely abused.⁷

He continued, complaining of low attendance at church services and claiming that during his sermon, loiterers in the churchyard were regularly so boisterous that it “dishonors God and offends the pious.”⁸ He also reported that a new winemaker [*weinmeister*] in Neumorschen had secretly housed some Anabaptists over the summer. This winemaker “remains with his entire household to the present day outside of the

⁵ *Quellen* II, no. 222, p. 145: “4. was er vom sacrament halte -- als die wort Christi lauten.”

⁶ See the front matter for a list of German administrative terms used in the text.

⁷ *Quellen* II, no. 122, p. 144. “Uf den kintteufen solch weltlich sund und misbreuch mit uber essen und trinken bis uber die mitnacht, das sie mit verletzung des gewissen und auch des leibs abschaiden, damit dann das heilig sacrament in ein weltlich ding ganz verkeret und misbraucht wurt.”

⁸ *Quellen* II, no. 122, p. 144-145. “Summa es ist gar noch kein forcht im volk, nemlich so man gottes wort predigt, sthen sie uf dem kirchoff, gott zu unehr und den frommen zum ergernis etc.”

Christian community,” despite his having been called to testify before the officials in Spangenberg.⁹

On its face, the case of Matthias Bengel raises interesting questions about this individual and his place in his community, but it should also direct us to think more profoundly and generally about the issues and problems involved. Although the historical record does not clarify exactly what was going on in Alt- and Neumorschen, it does provide some material for speculation. There is evidence to suggest that Bengel had fallen out with his wife. His most cryptic answer of all is in response to a question regarding her: “Content yourselves with the fact that I never ran away, and participated in no disgrace or vice, for as Satan is our enemy, so I have Satan as mine, but have not acted against God’s order.”¹⁰ Especially if Bengel’s wife were from the area (and it was not atypical in this age for pastors to “marry into” their communities), this might have caused personal frictions that could manifest themselves in complaints about the pastor.

Bengel also complained to Statthalter Rau about the local authorities, whom he claimed were to blame for the deplorable behavior of his congregants. The local clerk [*Schreiber*], Bengel wrote, who should be responsible for maintaining order, was the most egregious offender and lowest of them all, and the pastor had never heard

⁹ *Quellen* IV, no. 18A, p. 49: “Das alles [this man had already appeared before the officials in Spangenberg and denied being an Anabaptist -EYG] nit angesehen, bleibt er und sein ganz hausgesind noch heuts tags von der samlung der christlichen gemein...”

¹⁰ *Quellen* II, no. 122, p. 146: “1. Cor.7. Last euch versonen, dieweil ich nie wege gelaufen noch schand oder laster getriben, dan satan ist unser feind, so habe ich satanam zum feind, aber gottes ordenung nit gebrochen.”

such blasphemy and fury in his life.¹¹ According to Bengel, the clerk was drunk every day, which led to his raging and tearing through his house, and his servants could confirm this.¹² Neither he nor his wife had been to church for some time, and “when God grants that he sets out for church, he ends up standing with his equals in the churchyard.”¹³

Bengel alluded to the possibility of other crimes, about which he did not even want to write, and concluded that the clerk was a frivolous man even without taking his “lying and scandalous tomfoolery” into account.¹⁴ To make matters worse, Bengel collected his salary from the clerk and feared retribution from the clerk’s following should he attempt to resolve the situation.¹⁵ The local officials in

¹¹ *Quellen* IV, no. 222, p. 145: “Solcher laster, sunden und boser unchristlicher sitten im volk ist nit ein geringe cleine ursach der schreiber zu der Haiden, dan er, als anstat der oberkeit wider solch laster und sunden mit leben, wort und strafe fechten solt, ist eben der gebrechenlist und underst under allen; dan dergleichen gotslesterung als von ime und solchen zorn habe ich mein lebenslang nie gehort.”

¹² *Quellen* IV, no. 222, p. 145: “Teglichen vol sein, und dann wuten und rasen ist ime ein gemein teglich ding, davon die sein dienstvolk im hause wol wuste zu sagen.”

¹³ *Quellen* IV, no. 222, p. 145: “Vor vil guten tagen noch er noch sein frau in kein kirchen zu kommen der zeit haben, und so got gibt, das er in die kirchen kommen vornimpt, bleibt er uf dem kirchoff bei seines gleichen sthon.”

¹⁴ SAM-17e-Altmschen: “. . . und in summa, sich ganz einen leycht fertig[en] man beweisende, on das, was da liegen heysset und schantbare narrenteyding etc. Str. her Ich nime Got zu zeug[en] wan[n] das nit alles gruntlich war ist, und nit gelog[en] on das, das ich hie nit schreib[en] wil, noch waiß ich, das, so es vor im kompt muß es alles gelog[en] sein.” Franz does not include the last sentence in his edition.

¹⁵ SAM-17e-Altmschen: “Bittend E. Str. umb christus willen, (dan[n] mir euwer christlich gemut wol bewuste) das ir mein schreib[en] gutter meynung annemen wölt, und solches als ir zum friden genaigt[en] in friden enden, Dan[n] ich mich vor ime entsetze, als er dan[n] ein grossen anhang hatte und ich mein belonung von ime, von unsers g.h. wegen entpfang[en] muß.” Franz’s edition does not include the full text for this citation.

Spangenberg were also not helping matters, because they were in a power struggle with the clerk. As a result, good went unrewarded and bad unpunished.¹⁶

In light of all the other conflicts at play here, could the accusations of Anabaptist sympathies against Pastor Bengel have been unfounded? The fact that Bengel reported the Anabaptist winemaker in Neumorschen to the Statthalter in Kassel along with his claim to have previously reported the Anabaptist activity to authorities in Spangenberg suggest at least that he was not actively supporting the Anabaptists or participating in their meetings.¹⁷ On the other hand, he seems only to have reported the activity as part of his defense against the accusations leveled against him. He claimed that the winemaker's house was on the edge of the village, which meant that no one had known about the Anabaptist gatherings all summer. While no direct evidence contradicts his claim, it seems counterintuitive given what historians do know about the typical early modern village.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Quellen* IV, no. 222, p. 145: "Es sein auch die amptleut zu Spangenberg und er under sich uneins und zwispaltig, denn je ein partei die oberkeit haben wil, und also das gut ungefurdert, das bose ungestraft bleibt."

¹⁷ See above, p. 2-3. A footnote to the section of the report printed in the *Wiedertäuferakten* reveals that when this winemaker is summoned to appear in Kassel for interrogation, he is unable to appear, because he is currently, on assignment for the Landgrave, picking up wine in Franconia. *Quellen* IV, no. 18a, p.49, footnote 1.

¹⁸ See for example, the village as portrayed in the following studies: Thomas Robisheaux, *Rural society and the search for order in early modern Germany* (New York: Cambridge, 1989). David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular culture & village discourse in early modern Germany* (New York: Cambridge, 1984). Peter Blickle, *Communal Reformation: The Quest for Salvation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, trans. by Thomas Dunlap (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities, 1992). Tom Scott, *Society and Economy in Germany, 1300-1600* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

A certain ambivalence towards Anabaptism is suggested by the coincidence of Pastor Bengel's sharp criticism of the abuses of infant baptism and the general state of discipline in his congregation. His evasiveness in answering the question regarding Anabaptism and the suggestion in the other articles that he adhered to a symbolic rather than real presence interpretation of the Lord's Supper lend credence to the theory that he may, in fact, have harbored Anabaptist sympathies.¹⁹ An insistence on a *symbolic* presence of Christ in the elements of communion was one of the most consistent claims of Hessian Anabaptists in interrogations.²⁰ On the other hand, he can hardly be considered an Anabaptist on those grounds alone!

¹⁹ Martin Luther revised the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation which relied on a medieval scholastic philosophy differentiating between the accidents and elements of the bread and wine. Luther rejected the need for the scholastic explanation, but he resolutely held that the body and blood of Christ were present in the bread and wine of communion. He wrote in his treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* of 1521, "But why could not Christ include His body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? The two substances of fire and iron are so mingled in the heated iron that every part is both iron and fire. Why could not much rather Christ's body be thus contained in every part of the substance of the bread?" The doctrine developed in the Lutheran tradition is called consubstantiation.

Ulrich Zwingli, who led the Reformation in Zurich, understood the communion service to be a purely commemorative act using normal bread and wine to recreate Christ's Last Supper with the apostles. Only later would an element of Christ's presence be reintroduced into the Reformed (Zwinglian/Calvinist) tradition by Calvin's doctrine that the true believer received Christ in communion despite the absence of Christ in the elements of communion themselves. As the analysis of contemporary hearings will display below, this issue was a major point of contention in Hesse and throughout central Europe during the early phases of the Reformation. See especially below, p. 37, p. 87 and p. 204. Quotation above from: Martin Luther, "A Prelude by Martin Luther on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church," trans. by Albert T.W. Steinhauser, in *Works of Martin Luther with Introductions and Notes* (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 1915), 167-293; available online at www.ctsfw.edu/etext/luther/babylonian/babylonian.htm#NB; Internet; accessed 14 May 2008.

²⁰ And at times this issue seemed to be the predominant concern for the authorities.

To classify Bengel as an Anabaptist would be to make undue inferences, but it seems legitimate to consider him potentially sympathetic to the movement. At any rate, he withstood this attack and may have remained pastor in Heydau until 1549.²¹ We cannot, as Bengel reminded his accusers, know whether there was “an Anabaptist in his heart.” We can, however, use the sources left behind in his case (and the numerous other cases of religious dissidence in this era) to glean as much information as possible about the social and religious conditions in northern Hesse in the early years of the Reformation.

Bengel’s cryptic answer highlights a basic problem for historians of religious sensibilities.²² These are nonetheless questions which historians of Anabaptism have

²¹ Franz’s index dates Bengel’s career in Heydau as having lasted from 1527 until 1549. *Quellen* III, p. 527. There is a reference, however, in a report in 1534, that: “*Der Prädikant zu Heyda soll nach Schwaben verzogen sein.*” *Quellen* II, no. 287, p. 201. [Italics reflect Franz’s paraphrasing.] Franz clearly took this to be a reference to Bengel. Apparently, Franz presumed (or had evidence) that Bengel returned after an absence, though I find no later reference to him. Hütteroth’s summary of Bengel’s career also gives 1527-1549 as his tenure in Heydau. Hütteroth further gives Bengel’s adversary in Altmorschen the title of *Vogt*, though the original clearly states *Schreiber*. [See front matter for explanation of German administrative terms.] *AHP*, p. 21.

²² Rosi Fuhrmann has alluded to this problem in her studies of pre-Reformation village piety. She writes: “Die Schwierigkeiten bei der Suche nach Maßstäben für eine christliche Gesinnung rechtfertigen die an sich banale Bemerkung, daß man den Glauben eines Menschen nicht einfach feststellen oder gar messen kann, sondern darauf angewiesen bleibt, seine innere Haltung aus seinem äußeren Verhalten zu erschließen. . . . Zum äußeren Verhalten gehört aber nicht nur die Verbalisierung von Meinung und Absicht in Wort und Schrift – wie es von denen, die flüssig reden und schreiben und gehört und gelesen werden, allzu leicht angenommen wird –, sondern auch das Handeln; vielleicht sogar gerade das Handeln.” Rosi Fuhrmann, “Dorfgemeinde und Pfründstiftung vor der Reformation: Kommunale Selbstbestimmungschancen zwischen Religion und Recht,” in Peter Blickle and Johannes Kunisch, eds., *Kommunalisierung und Christianisierung: Voraussetzungen und Folgen der Reformation, 1400-1600, Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, Beiheft 9* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1989), 77-112.

been unaccustomed to pose.²³ Who among us is able to look into the heart of our historical subjects and appraise the depth of their convictions or consistency of their devotion? What, after all, makes an individual an “Anabaptist”? Is it something intangible in his heart, is it the outward sign of believers’ baptism, or is it, in Bengel’s formulation, more generally his “words, lifestyle, and deeds”? What do we make of the countless individuals who were suspected of Anabaptist sympathies who nevertheless denied or renounced those sympathies when interrogated by officials? How well integrated into an “Anabaptist” network must an individual be before we reckon him a member of the movement?

We cannot, unfortunately, look into the hearts of our historical subjects. When dealing with something like the reception of the Reformation among common people, we too seldom know even their names. In the Anabaptist records, however, we have at least a perfunctory recording of some of their “words, lifestyles, and deeds.” We cannot look into their hearts, but we can, as Pastor Bengel suggested the officials in Kassel should do, appraise the accounts of their words, lifestyle, and deeds as evidence of their heartfelt convictions. To dismiss these sources for such study is to miss an opportunity.

²³ There are indications, however, that this will change within the next few years, as I have met young scholars from several European countries working on dissertations on the Anabaptists that are similar to my study in their methods and social historical influences. A transatlantic conference in Göttingen in 2006 on Anabaptism and a recent international workshop in Saarbrücken on the radical Reformation are further evidence of growing interest in the field.

At another level, the story of Matthias Bengel is also illustrative of a deep problem in the historiography of the Reformation. Pastor Bengel's letter to Statthalter Rau, which offers the reader such a vivid—if fleeting—glimpse into this northern Hessian village, has been edited and published in the series of source material for the Hessian Reformation.²⁴ However, because that series separated “Anabaptist” from “Reformation” sources, Bengel's letter appears in neither volume in its entirety. Rather, the introductory section, in which Bengel described how the Anabaptists had been meeting in the winemaker's house in Neumorschen, appears in the Anabaptist volume, while most of the rest of the letter is to be found in the volume of general Reformation sources.²⁵ For similar reasons, the “Order for Servants of the Church” [*Kirchendienerordnung*] from 1531 is incomplete in both volumes. In the general volume, point seven of the order is omitted, and the reader is referred to the companion volume of sources on the Anabaptists.²⁶ There the missing text is published under the title “Landgrave Philip, An Ordinance Concerning the Anabaptists,” and only the fine print mentions that this text is, in fact, an excerpt from a more general decree, the bulk of which appears in the other volume.²⁷

²⁴ The edition for the series *Urkundliche Quellen zur hessischen Reformation* was begun by Walter Köhler, Walter Sohm, Theodor Sippell, and Friedrich Wilhelm Schäfer and published after World War II by Günther Franz.

²⁵ Franz did leave out or summarize a few sentences. There is in each case a note to the reader referring him to the corresponding document in the other volume.

²⁶ *Quellen* II, no. 206, p. 132-135.

²⁷ *Quellen* IV, no. 15, p. 37-38.

The editor of the series, Günther Franz, attempted to justify his system in the introduction to the first band of general Reformation source material,²⁸ which actually appeared in print after the Anabaptist sources.²⁹ The North American Mennonites had funded the publication of the Anabaptist sources, which explains in part how the division came about.³⁰ However, Franz attempted to provide a historical foundation for the dichotomy, writing: “They [the Anabaptists] formed such a closed group that their separation is also objectively justified.”³¹ The examples of Pastor Bengel’s letter and the 1531 order cited above are only the most obvious evidence that this conclusion is false.

Though in this particular case, practical reasons may explain the exclusion of the “Anabaptist” sources from the “Reformation” sources, this is in fact indicative of a broader problematic trend in the historiography. Anabaptism has far too often

²⁸ Volume II in the series, which began with an introductory monograph by Walther Sohm. *Quellen* II, p. ix-xvii.

²⁹ Volume (*Quellen*) IV in the series.

³⁰ Though somewhat less problematic in my opinion, this matter of funding may have further influenced the content of the Anabaptist volume. Franz excluded the bulk of the source material, for example, on the “Blutsfreunde” – an Anabaptist group with an eccentric rite of initiation including sexual intercourse with multiple members of the group. Franz alluded to these documents and their publication in Wappler’s edition of source material about the Anabaptists in Thuringia (Wappler II). In many other cases, however, Franz did not hesitate to duplicate material included in Wappler, which suggests that the nature of this testimony was grounds for its being treated differently. I accept Franz’s judgement that this sect was tangential to the Hessian Anabaptist movement, but its exclusion from the volume of sources nevertheless creates a problem of sorts, for such extreme manifestations influenced the perception of Anabaptism both among the common people and especially among the authorities. *Quellen* IV, no. 137, p. 324-327. See also Wappler II, no. 62, p. 480-494.

³¹ *Quellen* IV, p. xv: “Sie bilden in der Tat eine so geschlossene Gruppe, daß ihre Vorwegnahme auch sachlich gerechtfertigt ist.”

been treated as a movement distinct from or parallel to the Reformation-at-large. Much like the early modern polemicists who saw in the Anabaptists the descendents of the Donatists or Waldensians, academic historians have been inclined by their nature to trace the evolution of groups and ideas over time. This instinct has especially negative consequences in the field of church history, in which historians' confessional sympathies have frequently blinded them to the influence of those not clearly in the lineage of their respective groups. Thus, Lutheran historians have written mostly about the grand intellectual tradition passed down from the theological giants of the Reformation, while Mennonite historians have sought to emphasize the fortitude and resolve of their dissident ancestors. It is time to consider the story from a different angle.