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Johannes Brötli

JOHANNES BRÖTLI¹ was born in the Swiss Graubünden about the year 1494, and began his studies toward the priesthood at the University of Basel in 1517.² Upon the completion of his course he became chaplain in the village of Quarten on the Wallen Lake south-east of Zurich. Influenced by Reformation ideas he married in the spring of 1523. For this he was imprisoned by the authorities and he wrote to the bailiff of Sargans on May 11th defending his action.³ Soon thereafter he was released and banished, and he made his way to Zurich.

Zwingli had been preaching the sufficiency of the Scriptures since his coming to Grossmünster Church as people's priest more than four years before. The Reformation was formally begun by approval of the Zurich Council following a public discussion of the issues in January, 1523. But when Brötli arrived in Zurich with his wife a few months after that, no formal changes had yet been made in the mass, use of images, and other mediaeval forms of worship in the churches. None of the Zurich pastors had dared to marry publicly.

In the nearby village of Wytikon, however, the pastor William Reublin had advanced much further. He had broken fasts, preached against infant baptism, and himself married publicly in the Wytikon church. His radical ideas had found fertile soil in Wytikon and in the adjacent village of Zollikon, and Brötli settled in the latter place. He was often referred to as the priest of Zollikon or the helper in Zollikon, but apparently never held any official position there.⁴

Largely because of agitation by the radicals for positive reform the Council arranged for a public discussion, especially of images and the mass, in October, 1523. Zwingli made it clear on this occasion that he would await action by the Council before instituting any outward changes. The radicals were, of course, dissatisfied with this. Johannes Brötli became a sort of pastor of those in Zollikon, where they were apparently more numerous than elsewhere. He was not supported by them, but worked with his own hands as he wrote later from Hallou.

¹ Many variations in spelling, and the name often appears in its Latin form, Panicellus.

² Oskar Vasella, "Von den Anfängen der bündnerischen Täuferbewegung," *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Geschichte*, XIX, Heft 2, 1939, pp. 175f.

³ Walter Amman, "Die Reformation im Gaster," *Zwingliana*, Band VII, Heft 4 (1940, Nr. 2), p. 224.

⁴ Kaspar Wirz, *Etat des Zürcher Ministeriums von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Zurich, 1890), p. 223.

Three fathers from Zollikon along with two from Wytikon, were summoned before the Council for trial on August 11th, 1524, because they had refused to have their infant baptised although they were as much as six months old. Reublin had told the parents that the children should not be baptized until they came to the age of understanding, and he was imprisoned. Brötli is not named in the records, but Fridli and Stephan Schumacher and Heini Hottinger of Zollikon were surely reflecting his teaching when they declared that according to the Word of God children should not be baptised "until they come to their days, when they could accept the gospel for themselves."⁵

The radical leaders had tried to win Zwingli to their views, but by the end of the summer, 1524 they gave this up as hopeless and began to seek contact with advanced reformers elsewhere. They knew little of Thomas Müntzer but had been impressed by tracts of his on faith and baptism. Conrad Grebel, along with five others, wrote to him on September 5th setting forth the beliefs of the radical group in Zurich. Before the letter was sent reports reached them that Müntzer advocated war against the persecuting princes. A postscript letter was then written to accompany the other one, and Brötli was among the signers of it. This second part of the letter warns against the use of force and exhorts Müntzer to be strong in the face of persecution. It states incidentally that there were less than twenty in and around Zurich "who believe the Word of God," i.e., who belonged to the little group of radicals soon to be known as Anabaptists.⁶

Brötli apparently involved himself in dispute with Pastor Nicolas Billeter in the Zollikon church and the two of them along with three or four representatives of the Zollikon community authorities were ordered to appear before the Zurich Council.⁷ The result is not recorded, but events came rapidly to a head. Fathers who had been ordered to have their children baptised had still not complied, and a public discussion on the question of baptism was arranged for January 17th, 1525. Brötli was present, but Grebel, Manz, and Reublin took the lead in attacking infant baptism. The majority party under Zwingli defending infant baptism was, of course, declared victorious by the Council, which ordered that all children be baptised within eight days under threat of banishment for families that refused to comply.⁸

So numerous and determined had the radicals in Zollikon

⁵ Emil Egli, *Actensammlung zur Geschichte der Zürcher Reformation in den Jahren 1519-1533* (Zurich, 1879), No. 566.

⁶ Translation of part of the letter in Harold S. Bender's *Conrad Grebel . . .* (Goshen, Indiana, 1950), pp. 282-287. Original in Stadtbibliothek, St. Gallen, Switzerland.

⁷ Egli, *op. cit.*, No. 604.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Nos. 621f.

become in their opposition to infant baptism that they cast the baptismal font out of the church. The Council ordered that it be put back and that an investigation be conducted to discover who had removed it.⁹

On January 21st the Council warned Grebel and Manz to cease their agitation and four radicals who were not citizens of Zurich, including Reublin and Brötli, were ordered to leave the canton within a week.¹⁰

It was a busy week. The little group of radicals met secretly to decide what their future course should be, for their work had been outlawed by the order of January 21st. They determined to remain faithful to their convictions and boldly set up a new church in effect by instituting adult baptism. A former cleric of Chur by the name of Georg Blaurock, who had recently appeared in Zurich, requested baptism from Conrad Grebel. This was performed (by affusion) and then Blaurock baptised the others who were present.¹¹

There were other secret meetings during the week, with prayer, Bible reading, the baptism of those who were ready for it, and the observance of the Lord's Supper. Blaurock, Brötli, and Manz baptised more than any others. One of the services was in the home of Ruedi Thomann in Zollikon on the evening of January 25th.¹² Brötli and Reublin were there by invitation for supper. Others came later for the meeting. Manz and Blaurock arrived first, then Jacob Hottinger and several others. The ensuing service apparently followed the usual course with prayer, Bible reading, and exhortations to faith. One of the nine men present, Hans Bruggbach, suddenly stood up, "wept and cried out what a great sinner he was." He requested the prayers of his friends and asked for baptism. "Who will forbid that I baptise him," asked Manz. "No one," replied Blaurock. Taking a dipper of water, Manz baptised the convert in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jacob Hottinger then requested and secured baptism, as did Brötli and others. Then the meeting was closed with the distribution of bread and wine and celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Brötli and Reublin left Zurich before their week of grace was past, and made their way to Hallou in the canton of Schaffhausen. Leaving their wives and Brötli's two small

⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 621.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 624.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, No. 636.

¹² *Loc. cit.* See also translation of Professor Fritz Blanke's "An Anabaptist Meeting in Zollikon," *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XIV, No. 2 (April, 1951), pp. 51-55. Original: "Eine Täuferversammlung in Zollikon 1525" in *Hortulus Amicorum Fritz Ernst zum sechszigsten Geburtstag* (Zurich, n.d.), pp. 32-38.

children there, the two men went to the town of Schaffhausen, seven miles distant. Grebel was already there, and they were all invited for an evening meal with Sebastian Hoffmeister, Reformation leader in the area, and his associate Sebastian Meyer. Thus cordially received and heard, the Anabaptists understood that Hoffmeister agreed with them in the matter of baptism. It is almost certain that they had some justification for this conclusion. Hoffmeister denied it later in Zurich, but it is quite likely that he was for some time unsettled on the question of the Scripturalness of infant baptism, as were Zwingli, Oecolampadius and other reformers.

Brötli and Reublin returned the next day to Hallou. Reublin proceeded then to Waldshut and other places in South Germany, but Brötli remained in the village of Hallou, where his preaching was well received by most of the people.

From Hallou Brötli wrote to Fridli Schumacher, in whose home he had lived, and to other brethren in Zollikon.¹³ In a style reminiscent of the apostle Paul the letter begins, "Johannes, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to preach the gospel of Christ, by the will of God the Father, to the saints of Christ and called of God, the Christian congregation in Zollikon, grace and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ." Brötli calls the brethren to mind that he preached the truth among them, though supporting himself by working with his hands that he might not be a burden to them. He exhorts them to remain true to the faith. He has heard that some of the brethren are imprisoned. He would be happy if God should allow him to return among them. He tells of the journey to Hallou and the visit to Schaffhausen. He speaks of his preaching in Hallou, declaring that the field is white unto harvest but the labourers few.

In the same letter Brötli makes several personal requests. Of the things he had left with Fridli Schumacher he asks that the meat, butter, and wine be sent to him, also Carlstadt's booklet (on baptism). His wife wants her knitting wool, skirt, and jacket.

The close of the letter is again in apostolic style: "Dear brethren, remain steadfast in the faith, in love, and in hope. Fear no man. Whoever preaches to you another gospel than that which I have preached to you, he is accursed. If it should be possible, send a brother to me to let me know how it is with you for I am much concerned. Greet one another with the kiss of peace! Keep yourselves from any brother who walks disorderly and not

¹³ The letter, along with a second soon to be mentioned, in Egli, *op. cit.*, No. 674; Johann Conrad Füsslin. *Beyträge zur Erläuterung der Kirchen-Reformations-Geschichten des Schweizer-Landes* (Zurich, 1741), Erster Theil, pp. 201-227; Jakob Wipf, *Reformationsgeschichte der Stadt und Landschaft Schaffhausen* (Zurich, 1929), pp. 188-190.

according to that which both he and you have learned. Beware of the false prophets who preach for gain. Flee them! Exhort one another and remain in the teaching which you have received. The peace of God be with you all. Amen. Johannes Brötli, your servant in Christ, now living in Hallou."

As he received no reply to this letter Brötli wrote another two weeks later: "Dear brethren, I know not what I should write to you—nor whether you are still in the faith . . . nor whether you received my letter. If you did, surely there is little of the love of God in you. If not, I can well understand. . . . What shall I say? My heart is afflicted and troubled for your sake in Christ. I have heard, and it displeases me greatly, that certain of you are fallen from the holy faith and from the Word of God which you had accepted and in which you were baptised . . . Oh, the woe of those earthly goods which hinder you. Christ has shown it in the holy gospel."

There follows a repetition of the earlier requests that the things be sent to him, as he does not know whether the previous letter arrived. In this second one, however, Brötli does not mention the Carlstadt booklet; instead he asks for his Bible. He has preached four times in Hallou. "The people are eager to hear the Word of God, but the pastor (Hans Ziegler) is half and half. He is a covetous man and a fornicator . . . I pray you, if you are Christians, remain steadfast. . . . Write me again, what your belief is, and how it is with the brethren."

"Be sure to send me the Bible," Brötli writes again near the close of the letter. "Stand in the faith. Let no man frighten you, and God who is strong will strengthen you! Oh, how strong, I hear, is my brother Manz, and Georg (Blaurock), but especially Felix Manz. God be praised! Conrad Grebel is afflicted, but in the Lord. William (Reublin) was with me recently. I admonish you to remain in the Word and the faith which you once received. If you so remain in it, send a faithful brother to me and also the things I have requested. If you did not receive my message, write me and I shall get it to you. Greet one another with the kiss of peace. May God and his peace be with you. Hans Brötli, your brother in Christ, has written this with his own hand."

The friends in Zollikon apparently responded to Brötli's request and the community leaders also sent three men to Hallou to testify to his good record in Zollikon. The Zurich Council heard of this and wrote to the Schaffhausen Council on April 4th, 1525, warning them against him.¹⁴ They accuse Brötli of stirring up

¹⁴ C. A. Cornelius, *Geschichte des Münsterischen Aufbruchs in drei Büchern. Zweites Buch: "Die Wiedertaufe"* (Leipzig, 1860), pp. 249f. Original in Cantonsarchiv, Schaffhausen.

disorder and disobedience in Zollikon by his agitation against infant baptism and by his baptising of adults. For this he had been banished and the Council obliged to adopt strong measures to stamp out the Anabaptist movement among the poor people who had been misled by him and others. It is in this letter that we learn about the men sent by the Zollikon community to testify to the leasers in Hallou that Brötli had conducted himself honourably during his stay among them. This was done "behind our backs," writes the offended Zurich Council, which now directs this warning to Schaffhausen lest Brötli cause as much disturbance and disobedience of authorities in Hallou as he had in Zollikon.

The Schaffhausen Council was glad to receive the warning and sent armed men at once to Hallou to arrest the Anabaptist. The people of the village resented this, however, and made a show of force, so that the arrest could not be consummated.¹⁵

Brötli remained in Hallou for several months at least. Almost all the community was won for Anabaptism, and the adults were baptised on profession of faith. Hans Ziegler left during the year 1525 and Brötli was in effect the village pastor. Involvement in the Peasant Revolt hastened the suppression of Anabaptism in the area, and Brötli and some of his supporters may have fled late in 1525. For a number of years, however, we read of trials of Anabaptists from Hallou. Johannes Brötli must have been a man of attractive qualities. He won followers quickly and in large numbers, and the forces of persecution had a long and difficult time destroying his work.

We know nothing further of Brötli except the brief account of his death (1528) as recorded in the *Martyr's Mirror*, which appeared in Holland early in the seventeenth century and was compiled from earlier martyrologies published as early as 1539. "Pretle" is probably the Dutch spelling for the form of the name which was common among the Swabians of South Germany,¹⁶ which may suggest the field of Brötli's later labours. The account is as follows: "After this, Hans Pretle, who had been a preacher, and then became a servant of the church of Christ, after he had for a long time exercised his office, and led many to the knowledge of the gospel, was likewise burned, for the testimony of Jesus Christ."¹⁷

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¹⁵ C. A. Bächtold, *Die Schaffhauser Wiedertäufer in der Reformationszeit* (Schaffhausen, 1900), p. 12.

¹⁶ Alex. Nüesch und Heinr. Bruppacher, *Das Alte Zollikon . . .* (Zurich, 1899), p. 58.

¹⁷ Edward Bean Underhill, *A Martyrology of the Churches of Christ commonly called Baptists during the Era of the Reformation* (London, 1850), Vol. I, p. 58.