

A Kitchen Evangelist: Margaret Hellwart, 1610

Background: Margaret Hellwart lived in Beutelsbach [*boy-tuls-bock*], a small village in southwest Germany in the early 1600s. By this time the authorities in the area no longer executed the Anabaptists but restricted their activities and subjected them to various forms of discrimination. If the Anabaptists did not speak about their faith to others, the authorities generally left them alone. But at times the Anabaptists refused to be silent.

Requirements: Three persons, optional—something to use as chains

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(Loud knocking at the door)

Margaret: Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, my. *(Mutters to herself)* Quick. Hurry. *(Puts on the chains)*

Constable: Open up. Now! Open up. We know you're in there.

(Margaret keeps working with the chains, stands up straight, opens the door.)

Constable: *(enters with an assistant)* So! Margaret Hellwart, we have come to check on you. Here, you, look at those chains. Are they strong? Are they locked up properly? I am suspicious of you, Margaret. You were so slow in opening the door and we heard the chain rattling. Tell us, now the truth. Did you pull the chains off? Did you just put them back on again when you heard us at the door? Well? Well?

Margaret: *(silent)*

Constable: Two years it's been. Two years. We've warned you repeatedly about missing church. You know the law. You have to attend the mass. You are so stiff-necked. You have refused to conform to the Lutheran faith. Why? Why?

Margaret: *(silent)*

Constable: So, you don't go to Mass. And now we hear reports that you've been running around the countryside, village to village, infecting all the women folk with your crazy ideas. *(makes noise of contempt)* You have been warned not to receive any visitors in this house. But we know you have paid no attention to that order. You have had a steady stream of women coming here. What are you talking about to them? Eh? *(sarcastic)* More of your "good news"? Eh?

Margaret: *(silent)*

Constable: Now about this chain. That's a good chain; I saw it properly fixed into the floor here last year. How are you getting it open? Eh? Oh, yes. I know! It's George, your husband. He's helping you.

Margaret: *(shakes head vigorously - it's not the husband)*

Constable: Well, who is it then? Some of those women who come here to listen to you? Are they helping you get out of this chain? Eh? No answer? Right, then. We'll strengthen the chain again, fix a better lock. And no more tampering with it! Do you hear me? Eh? Stupid woman!

Constable departs.

Narrator: Margaret was first chained to her kitchen floor in 1610. She seemed to slip out almost as quickly as the authorities had secured her. Margaret just carried on with her evangelizing among local women, persuading them of Anabaptist understandings of the Christian faith.

Margaret stands up, steps forward, speaks directly to the audience.

Margaret: God has called me to tell the good news to my neighbors. Nothing can stop me from doing that. You see, people should learn to love one another with God's love. The true church is made up of people who live lovingly, righteously. As I understand the Scripture, people can hear the Word of God at home when someone reads it out. We don't need to go to the village church.

Narrator: During the next 11 years the authorities had to chain her up in her kitchen 21 times. Fearless, Margaret compared her release from confinement to Peter's escape from prison in Acts 12:1-19.

Margaret: (*speaking to the audience again*) I finally told the authorities to give up. Look, I'm an old woman. I'm over 50 so I can't possibly learn anything new. Why don't they just leave me alone? I don't know any way other than what God has taught me, and I'd rather obey God than the authorities. All I want is to live according to God's will, do good and avoid evil. There's just no point trying to make me change my mind. I intend to remain an Anabaptist to my life's end.

Narrator: The last official reference to "stiff-necked" Margaret was when she was 53 years old. And now Margaret lies somewhere near her village of Beutelsbach, in an ordinary burial site unblest by the state church.

Sources: Text by Eleanor Kreider, drawing on Walter Klaassen, "Margaret Hellwart of Beutelsbach," in C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds. *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*. Studies in Women and Religion/Études sur les femmes et la religion, 3. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996, 64-67; Gustav Bossert, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Wiedertäufer*, I, *Herzogtum Württemberg*. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1971, 887.

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