

An Anabaptist Teacher on the Road: Hans Nadler, 1529

Background: In the early years after Anabaptism began in 1525, the Anabaptist message was spread by countless ordinary people going about their daily crafts or business. Some of these, such as cloth-sellers or the needle-sellers traveled in the course of their daily work and shared their message as they traveled. Not all of them were literate, but they often had memorized substantial portions of the Bible which they used as basis for their evangelism.

Requirements: Six persons

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Narrator: Meet Hans Nadler. Hans was a needle-seller; he ran a successful business. Who needed needles? In the time of no sewing machines, everyone who crafted in cloth and leather needed needles. Hans sold his needles throughout South Germany. Though he was unable to read or write, Hans knew his Bible well. In fact he knew much of it by heart. When he was at home, people met in Hans' house for Bible study and prayer. And when he was on the road Hans talked to people about finding new life in Jesus. His fearless conversations about his faith got him into trouble with the authorities. We meet Hans in Erlangen in January 1529 where he has been arrested on charges of being an Anabaptist. He is in prison; the church authorities are questioning him.

Questioner 1: So, Hans Nadler, you've been rebaptized.

Nadler: Yes, God's Word forced me to do it. The Lord Christ clearly says in Mark 16, "Go into all the world, proclaim the gospel of all creatures. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Hans Hut helped me see this. I held off as long as I could because of the weakness of my flesh; I was afraid of suffering, especially torture. But I'm confident that God's Word is true. It's not heresy. As Christ has spoken and commanded, so I have done and taught. Because, look, this is what Christ himself did and had himself baptized in his thirtieth year.

Questioner 2: You've been traveling constantly, all around the country. But you've been doing more than just selling needles. Tell us about it; what else were you up to as you traveled?

Nadler: Yes, I sell needles to earn a living. I went here and there along the Rhine river and other places in the land, dealing with cobblers and tailors, all common folk. And if people came to me I taught them.

Questioner 1: You taught them. You, a teacher? You can't even read or write yourself. So what did you teach them?

Nadler: I said, "My brother or sister, a Christian must suffer much. Are you prepared, for the sake of truth, to suffer persecution, contempt, scorn, the forsaking of house, yard, wife and child, all for the sake of the Lord? If God gives you the grace so that the Word of God is opened to you, you must abstain from all the joys of the world which the flesh desires. If you do not have confidence to do this with the help of God, you can go your way. It is written, the Lord desires no enforced service."

Questioner 2: ... abstain from the joys of the world ... That's a pretty heavy message. But apparently some people were not put off by this.

Nadler: That's right. I told them: "My brother or sister, you must receive the Word of God like a child and must be born anew. You will receive the Word of God and never live according to the pleasure of the world, and will from now on live according to the will of God, giving your body as a willing sacrifice which is good and holy and pleasing to God." I warned them: the world will hate you; and you'll have to suffer this patiently. Then I began teaching.

Questioner 1: So I ask you again, what did you teach them?

Nadler: Well, I started with the Lord's Prayer: Everyone knows the Lord's Prayer. We all know it by heart. So I said to them, "You say, 'Our Father in heaven.' So you must learn, my brother or sister, and consider that you will now be a *child of God* when you say, 'Father.' So you've got to live according to his divine will and do as the Word of God and the Holy Gospel teaches."

I then went on to the second clause: "May your name be made holy." And I proceeded like that, phrase by phrase through the entire Lord's Prayer. For example, I said to them, "You pray 'Forgive us our sins.'" And I reminded them, "In the same way that God forgives us, we also must forgive and pardon all those who act against us. We ordinarily ask vengeance for ourselves. But now the word must become deed." The Lord's Prayer—yes, this is the way I taught people to pray.

Questioner 2: (*disrespectful tone*) So you taught your version of faith by using the Lord's Prayer? You call that teaching?

Nadler: Oh yes, and I also used something else that people know—the Creed. Everyone knows the Creed by heart. I said to them, "We are to believe in one God, creator of heaven and the earth." And I told them, "Now since you believe in a God of heaven and of the earth, you are not to have any other god made for yourself, whether it be of stone, wood, silver or gold, nor of bread or cheese." And I went on to all the articles of the Creed having to do with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the rest. That's how I taught them.

Questioner 1: Humph.... Did you baptize?

Nadler: Oh, no, I didn't baptize. I have not been commanded to do it, nor was I ordained to do it. But I myself was baptized.

Questioner 2: Why on earth? You were already baptized as a child.

Nadler: So my parents told me. I was present. But I don't have knowledge of it for I was a child and had no understanding. Nor did I know of any faith for myself. But the man who was my godfather spoke for me, saying "I believe." It was about 40 years ago that this happened.

(*turns aside*) You know, these days all things are becoming perverse so maybe the women are beginning to bear children who have faith. I don't know. But I think we should first ask the children about it. If they have faith, they will confess it.

(*turns back to the questioner*) People all speak of faith but don't very much do the works of faith. Of course they try to marshal the Scriptures to maintain infant baptism. But there is not a single letter about it in the Bible that I know of. They want to baptize children and do baptize them even though children are pure already and are a creation of God, good and well-made. My godfather won't be *saved* for me, nor will he be *damned* for me. I must be saved or damned for myself. I have examined this in my heart, and I believe that my own infant baptism has never helped me.

Narrator: The church authorities quizzed Hans closely about the sacraments. Hans quoted the Gospels in which “Jesus never said the bread was his body. When Jesus said ‘This is my body’ he was referring to his disciples who ate with him.” Hans insisted, “Jesus never said, ‘My blood is in the cup.’ The cup indicated Jesus’ suffering and that we are to follow him through suffering, too.” The City Councilors considered all of the evidence against Hans Nadler, the prisoner. What should they do with him?

Councilor 1: Well, it’s absolutely clear that Hans Nadler is wrong. He’s wrong about the innocence of children. We heard him. He claims that children don’t have sin because, he says, they are born pure and good. He doesn’t believe in Original Sin.

Councilor 2: Not only that, he’s wrong about the sacraments. He speaks falsely about the body and blood of Christ and he speaks falsely about baptism.

Councilor 1: But aside from these errors, I can’t sense from any of his answers that he and his friends might undertake any evil deeds against the government.

Councilor 2: No, we heard nothing of insurrection. Still, what if such a faction would grow and gather strength? The devil might easily seduce and deceive them.

Councilor 1: What if such factions would disrupt the general peace and make a separation from our common Christendom? Maybe in the future, insurrection might come about under the pretense of destroying the godless.

Councilor 2: Well, I say, since there is no evidence of actual deeds—apart from the penalties about rebaptism—let’s send one or two scholars to the poor prisoner so that they may turn him from error by proper use of the divine Scriptures. He could then most mercifully be allowed to return to his wife and child.

Councilor 1: But what if he persists and does not pay attention to the instruction? What if he does not stop teaching other people in the future and causes them to err? He might poison them with his false teaching.

Councilor 2: We must consider common Christendom and other people to be more important than the person of Hans Nadler.

Councilor 1: Yes, it is clear to all of us that Nadler and people like him should be exiled from the land. And so our gracious lord’s principality can be kept clean of error and mischief.

Source: Hans Nadler, “Declaration of the Needle Merchant Hans at Erlangen and the Refutation of the Articles of the Needle Merchant Hans (1529),” in C. Arnold Snyder, ed., *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 136-154.