

## Anabaptist Worship in the Forest: Magister Elias Schad, 1576

*Background:* In the 16th century, Strasbourg was an imperial city which gave it freedom to choose its own Christian tradition. It chose to provide a greater degree of liberty for non-conformist Christians than many other places. But within Strasbourg the Lutheran church was established by law. This meant that only Lutheran worship was allowed in the churches of the city. For this reason, Anabaptists gathered secretly several times a year in the nearby Eckbolsheim [*Ek-bols-hime*] forest. The two readers' voices represent one person, Elias Schad, a prominent Lutheran pastor in Strasbourg.

*Requirements:* Six persons

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**Reader 1:** In 1576, I learned from trustworthy people that Anabaptists from many places were coming here under the pretext of attending the Strasbourg Fair and were going to have their meeting in a forest, as often happened ... So I and several others whom I invited to go with me, 13 in all, dressed in wanderers' clothing and left the town when the gates were about to be closed for the night.

**Reader 2:** One by one we followed some Anabaptists. We came upon two women, who assumed us to be visiting brothers, and helped us find the paths and byways. Their watchwords helped us to pass their guards posted at the entrance of Eckbolsheim Forest. By then it was growing dark especially in the forest, so we continued unhindered until we reached the assembled crowd a good distance within the forest ...

**Reader 1:** There a man stood with a flint and steel and a box of small candles and candlesticks. We lit the candles and assembled in a group like bees when they swarm and settle in one place. The many lighted candles looked like wolves' eyes shining among the trees and bushes on a dark night—and to tell the truth they looked fierce.

**Reader 2:** But we gathered our courage and followed along behind the approximately 200 men and women, mostly men. They had come from various places as we noticed by their conversations. From Switzerland, South Germany, Alsace—and perhaps even from Moravia because I learned later that some apostles of the Anabaptist brood in that land are sent annually to this area and to meetings like this.

**Reader 1:** When the crowd had gathered, the elders or leaders stepped to the center; there were five of them. One of them was Brother Peter, as they called him, an aged leader who by trade was a maker of weavers' looms. He opened the meeting, produced his soiled New Testament in the Swiss translation and print, and read a passage from an epistle.

**Reader 2:** The others did likewise. Although they all put on glasses, they still could not read well in that feeble light so it was a laborious and a not very edifying process. The sermons, each of which lasted about fifteen minutes, seemed to me to have as much power as if chopped straw had been sprinkled over them.

**Reader 1:** Nevertheless, to give some kind of report and the essence of the sermons, they had much to say about the Fall and that our fathers had eaten sour grapes that set the children's teeth on edge [Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2]. They also talked about the suffering of Christ who redeemed them. They emphasized especially that they should thank God for choosing them out of the world since they were not in the world. ... They were truly not in the world but in the forest!

**Reader 2:** They recounted the coarse sins that people commit here and there and thanked God that they were not like that. They sounded just like the pious Pharisee in Luke 18:11. During the preaching, some were standing, some were leaning against trees, many were seated or lay on their sides, some lay face down, some were dozing, and some even sleeping.

**Reader 1:** One man was appointed to walk constantly among them with a candle and shake the sleepers, saying,

**Waker:** Get up, Brother. Wake up, Sister, and hear the Word of the Lord!

**Reader 2:** He came to me too several times and spoke to me because I was pretending to be asleep.

**Reader 1:** After these sermons, which together lasted more than an hour, Brother Peter admonished the brotherhood to prayer, using more or less these words:

**Brother Peter:** Very well, dear brothers and sisters, now that we have heard the Word of God, let us call upon our Heavenly Father for grace, and when you pray let no one look into another's face!

**Reader 1:** Then they scattered. All knelt down—each usually before an oak tree as if he were worshipping it. The prayer lasted at least a good fifteen minutes, perhaps closer to thirty. There was a great audible murmuring as if a nest of hornets were swarming. They waved their arms and beat their breasts almost like priests when they read the mass. And although I managed to get close to some of them and listened intently beside or behind them, I was unable to make out a single word, much less a sentence because they never raised their heads and they sighed and groaned and moaned like a tired old horse pulling a cart or wagon.

**Reader 2:** When the praying was ended they gathered again and began to greet one another, sending greetings to those who were absent such as:

**Sister Elisabeth:** Sister Peternelle from south Germany said I should ask the brothers to excuse her since she is sick. She asks me to greet you all in the Lord.

**Brother Hans:** Let her also be greeted in the Lord!

**Reader 1:** After this greeting the elder called out in a loud voice:

**Brother Peter:** Now dear brothers, you have heard and understood the Word of God and have prayed earnestly. If there is anyone among you who has not quite understood, he should come here and we will instruct him! Or if the Spirit of God reveals anything to someone to edify the brethren, let him come here and we will hear him in a friendly manner.

**Reader 2:** When he said that I thought that my work was cut out for me. If sooner or later they found out that there had been clergymen among them, they might interpret our presence to mean that their doctrine was so praiseworthy and good that we accepted and sanctioned it silently because we said nothing against it. I therefore ventured in the name of God to preach a sermon.

**Reader 1:** Dear brothers and sisters! Although I really did not come here to preach but to listen, I like to be where God's Word is being proclaimed. But because Brother Peter has given me the opportunity I will, in the name of God as he grants me grace, also present something to you that is in accord with God's Word and will be edifying.

**Reader 2:** We continued in a long discussion on doctrine with Brother Peter and the elders, especially on infant baptism and excommunication. The crowd got angry at this and threatened to make a bad end of me and my companions. But Brother Peter urged the people to be peaceful, appealing to the Last Judgment for those who had left the true faith and those who were in error. He gave me and my friends a guide who led us safe and sound through the forest, around two in the morning.

**Source:** Magister Elias Schad, "True Account of an Anabaptist Meeting at Night in a Forest and a Debate Held There with Them," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (1984), 292-94.

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