

The Farmer and the Preacher: Jacob Hottinger, 1523

Background: Jacob Hottinger was an “anticlericalist” from the village of Zollikon near Zürich. Like many people in the early 16th century—farmers as well as townspeople—Jacob was critical of the behavior of religious leaders and of the religious, economic and social systems (such as the compulsory tithe) that supported the Roman Catholic Church. Anticlericalism was fueled by the availability of printed versions of the Bible in the vernacular (everyday) languages. Jacob Hottinger, like his daughter Margaret and other members of the Hottinger clan, became an Anabaptist. In 1530 he was beheaded while he was attempting to escape to Moravia.

Requirements: Five persons

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Narrator: Meet Jacob Hottinger, a farmer from Zollikon, just an hour’s walk from central Zürich. The Hottingers around Zollikon are an enormous clan. Many of them are passionate about issues of religious and social reform.

On June 23, 1523, a visiting preacher—none other than Doctor Lorenz, preacher of the Gross Münster in Zürich—came to the village church of Zollikon. Doctor Lorenz preached about the passion of Christ. Afterwards as people clustered around to listen, an old bearded man, Jacob Hottinger, came up to the eminent theologian and accosted him—as the record says—with “sharp, hard and intolerable words.”

Jacob: You, you have lied to this congregation!

Lorenz: Indeed! Never!

Jacob: You, Doctor Lorenz, said that the sacrament of the altar, in the form of *the bread alone*, is the true God, the humanity, blood and flesh. This is not true. You should no longer lie from the pulpit. We want to hear the truth from the pulpit.

Lorenz: Now, my good man, you must understand the teaching of the church regarding this.

Narrator: At that, Dr. Lorenz launched into a long explanation of Catholic teaching on the Mass.

Jacob: (*interrupting*) Look, we don’t want philosophical proofs. You must demonstrate with the Gospel. For Christ took the bread, gave it to his disciples and said, “Take this, this is my body” *after which* he took the cup and said, “Take this, *This is my blood.*” Now I want you to know. I did not receive the sacrament this morning. And I do not intend to do so until I find someone will give me both bread *and* wine, as the Gospel says.

Lorenz: Well, I am not so sure on this point.

Jacob: If you won’t do it, then let *me* do it.”

Narrator: Jacob was a peasant farmer, but he was a literate man. Unusual for a farmer, Jacob read the New Testament in German in private religious gatherings in Zollikon. He could write with a clear and distinctive hand.

Reader 1: Jacob's readiness to argue with Doctor Lorenz concerning the Lord's Supper was the impertinence of an upstart peasant, but it was more than that. It was a demonstration of biblical literacy. He was convinced that his ability to read the "clear Word of God" put him on an equal footing with learned theologians and churchmen. He called them to account before the bar of Scripture.

Reader 2: The atmosphere in the pro-Anabaptist cells must have been electric with Bible reading and discussion, forming the energetic center around which daily life and work continued. It is easy to detect a strong anticlerical current—along with the conviction that before God and the truth of God's Word—social and economic rank are of no account.

Narrator: Jacob, as we might expect, was soon in trouble again. Here is a story about him that quickly made the rounds in the parish and was reported to the authorities by a number of people. One Sunday morning in 1523, Jacob stood up after Mass in the local church.

Jacob: My friends and neighbors, I beg you, stay here for a few minutes. I have something to say to you.

Narrator: Everyone quickly gathered around Jacob.

Jacob: My friends, I must tell you that a woman has come to speak to me. She reports that a rumor is going around about me. This rumor is: "Jacob Hottinger said he would rather see a cow defecate than to take the Mass." Now this rumor is not true. In fact I, Jacob Hottinger, did not say that. But today I wish to say plainly in the hearing of you all: I would rather see a cow defecate than to take the Mass.

Narrator: The authorities were outraged. They threw Jacob into prison and released him only after he had paid a hefty fine. Jacob and his brother Klaus persisted in making earthy remarks against the clergy—always visually striking and highly insulting. A few months after this episode, in the spring of 1524, the authorities once again rebuked and fined Jacob for coarse jokes about the Mass and the priests who administered it.

Source: C. Arnold Snyder, "Margret Hottinger of Zollikon", in Snyder and Huebert Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 43 ff.

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