

We Live the Bible, We Pray the Bible: The Anabaptist Concordance, 1540

Background: Ordinary Anabaptists were known for the astonishing knowledge of the Bible they demonstrated when they were interrogated about their faith. How did they learn the Bible? And how did the Anabaptists worship? This imaginative reconstruction of a secret meeting in 1542 may help answer these questions.

Requirements: Eight persons—three male parts, three female parts, and two narrators (male or female)

* * * * *

Narrator 1: It's getting dark here in the barn. The animals on the floor below have settled down for the night. Peter and Elisabeth, standing in the shadow of an inner doorway, hear the creak of the barn door. They feel a draft from the open door as feet come shuffling in. It's Hans and Maria, who've walked half an hour through the forest behind the farm. All is quiet as they sigh with relief and sit down to rest on a hay bale and a stool.

Elisabeth: Where is Jacob? And why hasn't Magda got here yet? They would have to pass through the village, perhaps observed by unfriendly eyes. Magda, a village midwife, would have a good reason to be out at night; one of the farm families might have called for her. But Jacob would have to be careful; he has no pretext or good explanation for a night time walk.

Narrator 1: In 1542 it was not safe for Anabaptists to gather openly here in south Germany. The members of this little cell group were all Catholics, baptized and brought up in the local parish. They had learned the Lord's Prayer and the Creed like all ordinary Christians. But they wanted more. They wanted to learn the Bible, to hear it read, to memorize the verses, and to pray together with others of similar spirit.

Narrator 2: Unlike the others in the group, Jacob could read in German. In their meetings he would always read to them—usually Gospel stories and the teachings of Jesus. Sometimes at Mass the priest used to read from the Bible, but it was in Latin. No one could understand a word of it, and the priest never explained it. Jacob's reading was wonderful! They could almost see and hear Jesus right there with them.

Narrator 1: Ah, here they are ... Magda and Jacob have made it safely. The six people pull up small stools, huddled closely together. Peter is the host so he speaks first:

Peter: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Thanks be to the Lord for bringing us safely together. Thanks be to the Lord for bread and all provision of our lives. Thanks be to the Lord for the words of Jesus. We pray for the safety and peace of our neighbors in this night. Amen

Maria: I'll light the candle for Jacob so he can read.

Jacob: Just wait with the candle, Maria. Last time we met I read from Matthew, the Lord's Beatitudes, and we all learned them by heart. We want to live by these words. Let's start off tonight saying them. I'll begin each time and you can repeat after me. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

All: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jacob: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

All: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Narrator 2: When they finished the Beatitudes, Jacob leaned back with a big smile on his face.

Jacob: May the Lord Jesus make these words live in us, day by day. Now, Maria, light the candle. I've got a great surprise for you. Look at this! (*He pulls a tiny book out of his boot.*) It's called a Concordance of the Bible.

Hans: How can it be a Bible? It's so small.

Maria: Jacob, where did you get it?

Magda: What's it for? Let me see it.

Jacob: Whoa. Hold on. I got this from a brother up Stuttgart way. We did some business and then he pulled this out of his pocket and put it in my hand. It's just a new thing, only two years since it got printed. He said they use it in the group he meets with. It has whole verses from the Bible written out, from all different parts of the Bible. And then references to other verses that you'd have to look up in a big Bible. But who can afford to have a big Bible? How I'd love to get my hands on one. But in the meantime, isn't this a treasure! Let me show you.

Maria: Jacob, let me hold it. I can't read the words, but I want to see it close up. Maybe sometime I can learn to read it, too. Here Magda, see how tiny the writing is!

Magda: Come on, Jacob, read us something out of it. Just open it up. What does it say?

Jacob: Well, here is a page called, "Be not afraid." There are lots of references from the Old Testament: Exodus, Joshua and Chronicles. I'd have to look those up. But here is Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" And see this from Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a help in the great needs that have met us. Therefore we are not afraid."

Narrator 1: Jacob continues to show and explain the Concordance with its multiple references and written-out verses. He flips the little pages to show the sequence of topics. The subjects come in order: repentance, discipleship, rebirth, service of God, faith, baptism

Peter: This is wonderful. The topics show the path of discipleship; don't they? How many are there? Jacob, when does prayer come in? And purity of heart? And humility? Are those in the list?

Jacob: Take it easy, Peter. Yes, those are all in here, and many others besides. There are 66 different topics, and every one of them has lots of verses to memorize. Tell you what, let's begin at the beginning. I'll read out a verse and you can repeat it back. We can learn a few of the verses tonight, and then next time we meet we'll learn some more.

Hans: I heard there's a brother over in Esslingen [*S-lingen*] who actually owns a Bible. We can't afford that, but what a great thing it is, to have this Concordance. We can learn the Bible verses by heart, and then we can teach our children, too.

Maria: Oh, Hans, if only you and I had a little Concordance of our own. We could learn to read, maybe Jacob could teach us. And then we could have the Bible and pray the words every day at home.

Peter: Before we finish our meeting, let's say together: "This is my commandment ..."

All: "This is my commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than that he lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:9)

Peter: May we live the truth of this verse. If we're arrested we won't report on the others; we won't say their names. We will support one another when we get in trouble: with food, money or clothing and with the care of the children. This is what love means in practical ways. Jesus asks us to lay down our lives as he did. What is our reward? If we do what he says, we will be Jesus' friends, just as he said. God our Father, purify our hearts in love, and grant us courage always to tell the truth and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Protect us now as we go out into the night. We give you thanks in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Source: *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001); for comment see C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 119-126.

© *Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, 2011*