


Swiss Sons of Thunder

The story of Jakob and Ulli Ammann



Mike Atnip
with Andrew Ste. Marie

Swiss Sons of Thunder

The story of Jakob and Ulli Ammann

Mike Atnip
with Andrew Ste. Marie

Introduction

About a decade ago—yes, a decade!—Andrew Ste. Marie sent me an email with some exciting news: “I decided today to write a biography of Jakob Ammann!”

My response? “Sorry, you are too late. I started one yesterday!”

Obviously, solving the problem of two simultaneous biographies of the same man was as simple as working together. So we swung a deal: We would co-write a biography, and I would get all digital rights while he would get all hard copy rights.

Now my confession: The reason for the almost decade-long delay in publication lies mostly with me. We both researched and wrote. I do not remember who did the first draft, but when it came my turn to update a draft, sometimes a couple of years would slip by before Andrew saw it again. When I was waiting on him, I would good-naturedly rib him a little about me having to wait now. But the confession is that I had to wait months while he waited years.

Finally, I found a better solution: I would put together a shortened form of the story and have all the rights to it, while he published the full blown version and would retain all rights to that version. I threw him the offer, and he accepted. So here we are ...

Even though this is a shortened version, I am still rushing it through the editing process. Other mission calls and publishing projects ring in my ears. I should be taking at least a week or two to add the graphics and do final editing. I admit that I am only spending the equivalent of a day or two. Expect to find some typos and maybe a misquote or even a wrong date in this version. This shortened version is *meant to tell a story*, **not** *provide you with referenced historical details that you can cite and quote with confidence of fullest accuracy*. That said, you can be assured that the main storyline is correct and based upon the latest information available about the Ammann brothers.

The last couple of decades have produced new information about Jakob and Ulli Ammann, information that has never been compiled in one place before. This story of the Ammann brothers is meant to bring the scattered info into one place and give us a glimpse of two brothers who fought long and hard to return to abundant and original New Testament Christianity. And, yes, they had their failures, but they ultimately came out in a good place ... complete with battle scars.

With these few words of introduction, I commend you to the story of two courageous men of faith. I have called them the “Swiss Sons of Thunder” because of their zeal for God, like the “sons of thunder” brothers James and John, mentioned in Mark 3:17. May their thundering for Christ increase!

~Mike Atnip, August of 2020

This book may be freely distributed for non-commercial purposes.
For free digital copies, visit www.PrimitiveChristianity.org.

To purchase printed copies (sold on donation basis), write me at:
atnips@gmail.com

(Because of a foreseen change of residence, no postal address is given in this edition. Contact Sermon on the Mount Publishing at the address on the last page for my current postal address. ~Mike Atnip)

Chapter 1

Wartime Babies

What are your memories of the 1640 a.d. era?

If you remember anything, you likely remember religious wars! On the continent, the Thirty Years' War is ending. Europe is tired of war, or at least should be. Portions of Germany have lost the majority of their inhabitants, with half of the males now dead. The average drop in population for the German States is between 25-40%.

In England, a middle-aged man is experiencing a bout of depression and finally a religious experience. He becomes stoutly Puritan and sees England as “full of sin” and in serious need of spiritual reform: all residues of Roman Catholicism must be purged! Oliver Cromwell will eventually rise to the highest levels of politics, dragging his bloody sword through the land right alongside his Bible. He is one of the 59 men to sign his name to the execution of King Charles I—using the latter part of Numbers 35:33 as a rationale. But after he dies and Charles II takes the throne, Cromwell's body is dug up—on the 12th anniversary of Charles I's execution—and posthumously executed. The severed head is displayed outside of Westminster Abbey for the next 24 years. Oliver Cromwell's name is enshrined in England to this day, right beside words like “hero,” “able,” and “liberator”—as well as “genocide” and “dictator.”

But now we lift our eyes beyond the clang of sword and boom of gun to the quiet, upper valleys of the Swiss Canton of Bern. It is Monday, February 12, 1644. We can imagine a young married couple emerging from their home above the village of Erlenbach im Simmental with something bundled tightly in a blanket. Two children toddle excitedly in the parent's footsteps through the creaky-cold snow as they make the descent toward the village chapel, about half a mile below their large chalet.

The bundle contains their newest joy, whom they have named Jakob. By Canton law, they must baptize their new child within 14 days of birth. Had they lived in the city, the same law specified eight days. Did they carry little Jakob to the Erlenbach chapel out of duty and fear of Canton law, or out of love for his soul? After all, if Jakob is not baptized, he cannot inherit property. Baptism and citizenship are closely interwoven in 17th-century Switzerland—in fact, inseparable. There are fines for disobeying the baptism law.

Or were Michel and Anna Ammann concerned for the spiritual benefit that the baptism proffered? According to the prevalent teaching of their day, little Jakob had inherited the guilt of Adam's sin and needed to be “washed” from that guilt. To not baptize the child would be equal to risking a chance it could die and spend eternity in hell!



A view of the Emmental, looking west. Jakob Ammann's boyhood home was near dead center of this photo. Stockhorn raises its rounded peak toward the right, the highest point on the ridge. (Photo by Wikipedia User:Hadi—CC-by-A)

We will likely never know the parent's motives, but we do know with certainty that on February 12, 1644, Jakob Ammann¹ was baptized in the Erlenbach Reformed Church. The chapel still stands, the Taufrodel (Baptismal Record) still exists, and little "Yaggi"²—the innocent little recipient of infant baptism that day—still exerts a positive influence on tens of thousands, over three and a half centuries later. Hundreds of thousands have been, and still are being, affected by his decisions. He, like Oliver Cromwell, had a vision for a purified church. But unlike Oliver, Jakob never took upon himself to cleanse the church by political means and a bloody sword.

1 Other spellings encountered in the sources include Jacob Ammen, Jacob Amen, Jacques Aman, Jacob Aman, Jacqui Aman, Jacquy Aman, Jacquy Amand, Yacob Amen, Yacob Ami, Jacqui Amand, Jacob Ami, Jaggi Amman, and Yägi Amen. He usually signed his name "iA" and sometimes "i.AMME." In this book we will consistently use the spelling seen here, except in quotes.

2 German "J" sounds like our English "Y". Thus Jacob sounds like Yacob. The Swiss habitually added an "i" (or, li) to many names as an endearing diminutive. Thus Jacob became Yaggi, equivalent to our Jakie. Jacob Ammann is referred to as Yaggi in some historical documents.

And yet, little Yaggi would gather a reputation as a troublemaker, a cold-hearted cult leader who, it seems—if you read between the lines of some of the histories written of him—probably never smiled much. One almost gets the sense, by reading the callous histories concerning him, that if you smiled at him, he might just excommunicate you!

Jakob Ammann made a few serious mistakes in his life. Who has not? But worse than that, people negative against him wrote most of the history books for many generations. Jakob's mistakes were held in the forefront again and again, until the mention of his name could only conjure negative stereotypes.

We will look at his life outside of the stereotype. After all, Jakob acknowledged his mistakes. He confessed and apologized. He even excommunicated himself—on two occasions—until his antagonists would receive him back. The following chapters are the story of Jakob Ammann, de-stereotyped. However, we must first look at the historical forces that shaped Jakob and his contemporaries.

Chapter 2

From Pagans to Christians to Apostates

The pagan Helveti that inhabited what is now Switzerland at the time of Christ had a form of government that was different than much of the world at that time: their communities were governed by a council of elders rather than a king. In fact, when one of their noblemen, named Orgetorix, planned a campaign to be made king, he was summoned to a trial. If he was found guilty of trying to be king, he would be executed by burning alive. However, he mysteriously died before his hearing.

Missionary in a Cave

Christianity was introduced into what is now Switzerland early in the Christian era and soon eradicated most outward forms of pagan worship. Details are blurred with myth—as oral histories told over hundreds of years tend to be—so the story of Beatus of Lungern is not to be taken 100% seriously, but chances are that the main story line has some truth to it, even if the details are foggy.

Beatus was born in a wealthy family in the British Isles during the first century. When the apostle Barnabas—Paul's co-worker—preached in England, Beatus was converted and baptized by him. Beatus was then chosen to be an apostle³ to Switzerland. Selling all he had—which reputedly was

3 The word “apostle” is a Greek word that is basically equivalent to the Latin-based word “missionary.”



The cave of the early missionary Beatus, as drawn in the 1700s. Lake Thun can be seen in the lower left. Today, unfortunately, the site has become a large “tourist trap.” The story of Beatus and his holy, simple lifestyle is a beloved part of Swiss religious history. (Public domain)

quite a sum—he used the money to ransom prisoners of war. After a time of evangelizing in the Jura Mountains on the northwest side of Switzerland, Beatus settled in a cave above Lake Thun ... less than 10 miles from the birthplace of Jakob Ammann. Little Yagi probably grew up hearing stories of Beatus’ dedicated and simple lifestyle, as well as how he killed a “dragon”⁴ near the cave, and then lived to a ripe old age, dying around the year 112.

But before Jakob was born, the Reformed Church had blocked off Beatus’ cave, since the Catholic Church had built an Augustinian monastery at its mouth. They then built a wooden Reformed Chapel nearby. Today, the site is a tourist attraction, with about one kilometer of the cave open for visitors to wander about and wonder about Beatus, “the Apostle of Switzerland” who made it his home.

This story may not seem to have much to do with Jakob Ammann, but we must remember that Jakob likely grew up hearing about these exploits. After all, he was and still is a local hero ... even if the story has been warped in the telling and retelling!

4 If the story has any veracity to it, and it may, the “dragon” was likely a bear, since the Canton of Bern is notorious for its bears. In fact, Bern means “bears”! As time went on, the story may have gotten enlarged upon. No written sources from the time period exist about the story.

The Great Reverse

Let's park here and ponder something: As the Swiss people told and retold these stories, they spoke of a Christianity that was self-denying, humble, serving, giving, and frugal. Missionaries lived in caves and huts and sold everything they had to help others. As time went on, the official church became domineering, rich, and gluttonous—not to mention outright immoral in too many cases. The common man surely had to wonder what had happened to the self-denying church that had brought the teachings of Christ to their pagan forefathers.

Just what *had* happened? This question probably lurked in the back of many a Swiss mind. Some probably even dared to verbalize it. Here's what had happened, in a nutshell ...

If there is any truth to the story of Beatus—and we will assume for the moment that the basic story is true—then the Christianity that was first introduced into Swiss territories was one of following the teaching and example of Jesus. Holiness toward God, righteousness toward other men, and denying of self were the main tenants. Since this was the first century, the Christianity that Beatus brought would have also been non-resistant. Slowly, but ever so slowly, things changed. The church, once separate from the world even though it was living in the world, became aligned with political power. Church leaders, once the servants of the church, now became the wealthy elite. Faith, once an individual choice, now became a matter of coercion. I mean, does marching an army through a river count as the baptism and conversion of the whole army? And now it is a “Christian” army? Since when?

Yes, one has to ask, even today, “*What happened to the Christianity of Beatus?*” These events set the stage for a reformation of the church, from the bottom up. The top was too rotten at the core, too indulged in gluttonous living and political power, to reform itself. If things were to change, the transformation would have to start at the bottom.

Grassroots Revival

In the midst of these calamities stood a few, even right within the ranks of the official church, who stood true to Jesus. Concerned Christians withdrew from the established church into one of the monastic orders. When one monastic order would turn self-indulgent—rather than the self-denial that they professed to practice—someone would start a new one. Francis of Assisi is an example of this type of revival. Stripped of all the Catholic ornamentation that has been laid upon him, Francis was simply a man aspiring to imitate Jesus. Others are less known, like Gerard Segarelli, who in the late 1200s became the leader of a little band of preachers just over the mountains from where Jakob Ammann was born. Striving to return to the teachings of Jesus, they practiced apostolic poverty, evangelism, and non-resistance to evil deeds done to them.

The Waldensian Connection

Historians have searched for some sort of official Waldensian connection to the Anabaptists ... in vain. While the Waldensians had previously covered Europe with up to 100 congregations in the days of their zenith,⁵ like all revivals they eventually sputtered out and lost their zest ... and purity. By the early 1500s, the number of congregations who still openly identified as Waldensian seems to have been limited to the Piedmont area of Italy.⁶ And, sadly, when these Italian Waldensians met with the Protestant Reformation, the vast majority dropped their former teachings of a life of discipleship and went en masse to Reformed theology. Thus, while Waldensianism was breathing its last breath, Anabaptism was taking its first. Only half a century before Anabaptism took root in Canton Bern, the authorities were dealing with Waldensian “heresy” in Swiss territories. Fifty years equals about two generations, so it is possible that the influence from the Waldensians had become minimal by the time George Blaurock and other Anabaptists came preaching the faith in Canton Bern. On the other hand, it is very possible that even though there were no “official” Waldensian congregations in the canton, remnants of the Waldensian ideal had been kept alive in the hearts of the people.

Did the Anabaptist fervor reignite the old Waldensian coals? We can only surmise ... but the possibility is very real!

Chapter 3

Plague and War

We modern North Americans have no idea what it was like to deal with the Black Death that killed 1/3 of Europe. Neither can we comprehend easily what it is like to suffer from three decades of war that wipes almost half the population away. For thirty years, armies marched across Europe, doing what armies do, both to soldiers and civilians. The Thirty Years’ War is figured as one of the most destructive armed conflicts Europe ever experienced. On average, half of the males in Europe died because of the Thirty Years’ War: some because of fighting, others because of starvation or disease spread by the marauding armies.

5 One report I read mentioned that parts of Austria had at one time been up to something like 20% Waldensian, but I cannot find the source now so only mention this in passing to illustrate that Waldensianism was widespread and in some places quite popular. It was not just a couple of insignificant congregations in the Italian Alps.

6 Just over the Alps from Jakob Ammann’s home, approximately 75 miles as the crow flies.

Jakob Ammann was born at the tail end of this conflict, and without a doubt it affected his way of life. Although Switzerland was spared from any direct conflict on its soils, many Swiss mercenaries were hired by various other kingdoms. This boosted the Swiss economy, since the money brought home by the mercenaries added to the local economy, and prices for agricultural commodities were up because of the conflict. It was, for Switzerland, a time of economic boom.

But the Thirty Years' War touched Jakob even more directly. By the time the last army had trampled through Alsace and the Palatinate, practically every vestige of civilization had been wiped away in those areas. If the inhabitants had not been killed, they had fled to the nooks and crannies in the woods. Buildings were burned and fields were growing up in brush. It has been said that one could walk for 20-30 miles and not see another human soul.

The lords of those lands were quite eager to find settlers to make the lands productive once again. And, Swiss Anabaptists were being forced into exile. That match was perfect. The hardworking, honest Anabaptists were even given a bit more freedom of religion, although open evangelism was still forbidden. The owners of the lands sometimes even gave Anabaptists special deals because of their good work ethic. A few lords, being influenced by Pietism, were even sympathetic and turned a blind eye to the religious activity of their subjects. Thus, while Jakob Ammann was still a lad, Anabaptists were beginning to trickle north out of Switzerland to the lands devastated by plague and war. Little did the lad realize he would someday follow and make his home in a small Alsatian valley.

Chapter 4

In Stockhorn's Shadow

Jakob Ammann first saw the light of this world among the pine-clad mountains, crystal-clear streams, and lowing cattle of the Simmental Valley just a few miles to the west of Lake Thun, Switzerland. If a man could live off natural beauty, the residents of Erlenbach im Simmental⁷ would be about as long-lived as anyone on this earth! What boy would not want to grow up with

7 "Bach" means creek, "im" means "in the," and "tal" means valley. Thus Erlenbach im Simmental is translated as Erlen Creek in the Simme Valley. Simmental cattle, known for their fast growth, got their name because they originated in the Simme Valley. At the head of the Simme river, just over the pass, lies the Saanen valley, from which Saanen goats received their name. Saanens are some of the biggest and best milking goats. Saanen goats and Simmental cattle give us a glimpse of the agricultural heritage of the area.

7,190-foot Stockhorn Mountain in his backyard? This majestic masterpiece of God's handiwork is such a charming place that today a cable car has been built to access the summit. There, sitting amongst the clouds, one can eat at a restaurant while filling his soul with inspiration from the grandiose views. One has to wonder what young Yagi Ammann would think to see a cable car floating over his home today!⁸

Boys are boys and will always be boys. While we have no information about Jakob's childhood, it is hard to imagine that Jakob did not climb the Stockhorn with his siblings and the local boys. We can imagine Jakob and the neighborhood children clambering up the slopes of the pine-covered hills behind the house—and sliding down them in the winter on sleds of some sort. Wildenbach—Deer Creek⁹—slithers down the hill a few hundred yards away, and hundreds of acres of forest lie just behind the house. A boy's delight!

The Ammann Clan

Jakob's grandparents were Uli and Catherina (Platter¹⁰) Ammann, to whom six children were born in Erlenbach. Jakob's father, Michel, was the fifth child, with a younger brother named Jakob. Grandpa Uli died less than one year after Uncle Jakob was born, with Michel being a lad of but three years of age.

Uncle Jakob had a son named Jakob, as well. Suffice it to say that Jakob Ammann was a common name in those days! "Ammann" is probably derived from the German word *Amptmann*, which was a bailiff or sometimes something similar to a small-town mayor. A bailiff is something akin to a sheriff's deputy, and we can imagine dozens of people serving as bailiff or mayor in medieval Switzerland. When men began to carry a last name, often based upon their occupation—think Miller and Baker and Smith—many different families could have taken on the last name of Amptmann or Ammann. Add this to the fact that Hans, Jakob, and Ulrich were very common first names in those days, and one can understand that family histories can get confusing very quickly!

Michel Ammann is recorded as being baptized—as an infant, of course—into the Reformed Church on August 18, 1615. He married Anna Rupp (baptized March 6, 1614) at Erlenbach on March 5, 1638. The couple's first child, a daughter named Madlena, was baptized on December 16, 1638. A son, Hans, followed in 1642.

Jakob Ammann came on to the scene as the third child and second son in the family. His Reformed Church infant baptism is recorded at the Erlenbach im Simmental chapel on February 12, 1644. Two more daughters entered the

8 While the cable car does not pass exactly over the Ammann home, it would be clearly visible about ½ mile away.

9 "Wilden" could refer to any wild game, but most often refers to deer.

10 Some spell it "Blatter."

That's Too Sumptuous!

It may not surprise you, but in the time of Jakob Ammann a tailor got in trouble for making a pair of pants too sumptuously. What may surprise you is that it was *not* Jakob Ammann who thought that pants with a crease in them was too far out. Yes, it was the *Chorgericht (Morals Court)* of Aeschi—located less than 10 miles from Jakob Ammann's hometown of Erlenbach—that fined a tailor for making creases in pants for his customers.

Known as *sumptuary laws*, such restrictions were in place all across Europe. In an attempt to keep the lower classes from getting too high of an opinion of their own value, fancy clothes were restricted to only the nobility. Why, if a poor farmer put on some sumptuous clothing, he may just begin to think too highly of himself!

While it may seem outrageous to some people today to imagine that the clothes we wear affects our attitude, the reality is that *the clothes we wear will often subtly change our feelings about ourselves*. If you do not believe it, let a teenage boy pull on a pair of fancy cowboy boots, slip a Stetson hat on his head, and attire himself with a big belt buckle of a bucking bronco and see if he will not—even subconsciously—begin to swagger around like a real dude, thumbs hooked in his pockets.

Consider the following moral and sumptuary codes found in the Swiss cantons at one point or another. Keep in mind that the Zürich ordinance of 1628 begins with these words: “Since all mankind ought to seek the Kingdom of God ...” And remember, these are *not* Anabaptist rules, but government laws!

- Jugglers, maskers, jumpers, and such like were forbidden.
- Unmarried girls could not ride on sleighs with any male except their father.
- The sale of playing cards was forbidden.
- Weddings were not permitted to be larger than “six or eight” tables, with recommendation for fewer.
- Boys and girls were not permitted to walk the streets together.
- Clothes were not to be washed on Tuesdays to make sure that residents had plenty of time to attend the Tuesday evening church meeting.
- Public smoking of tobacco was forbidden.
- Lace and gold fringes were forbidden.



The interior of Erlenbach Reformed chapel. Jakob Ammann was probably baptized as a baby in the baptistry in the center of the photo. Note the paintings on the walls. The Reformed Church tried to hide these (seen as almost idolatrous to them) Catholic paintings by plastering over them. When the plaster was removed many decades later, it was found that it had protected the paintings better than if they had been left exposed to the open air! (Photo by Thomas Kaltenreider. Used by permission.)

Michel Ammann family in Erlenbach: Cathrina (1647) and Anna (1651).

In 1655—when Jakob was around 11 years of age—the Michel Ammann family moved to Oberhofen, where the last known son joined the family. Ulrich (Ulli, for short) was born here and baptized on January 12, 1662 in the nearby Hilterfingen church. Jakob was nearly 18 years old when his youngest brother joined the family. Jakob's father and grandfather were both tailors. "Like father like son" applied to Jakob as well, since he also pursued the same vocation, with various historical documents associating him with this trade.

How nice it would be to be able to peek into the thinking of someone from times past! Did Jakob look at his little baby brother and dream that one day they would both be ministers among the Swiss Brethren? Most likely not, since at this time the family appears to not have had any official relationship with the Anabaptists. Like most everyone else around them, they were Reformed Church members, whether serious about their religion or not.

On to Marriage

From all appearances, Jakob began married life in Oberhofen, marrying Verena Stüdler, probably sometime in the 1660s. Verena may have come from the village of Buchholterberg, about 10 miles northeast of Oberhofen, but we simply do not have clear information concerning her family.

By May of 1673, his parents were living back at Thal¹¹ and most of their children had left home. Jakob and Verena stayed on at Oberhofen. Michel and Anna contracted to pay their unmarried daughter Cathrina for taking care of them.¹² Michel was nearly 60 at the time.

All in all, Jakob appears to have everything the world could offer to make him happy in the 1670s—a wife, perhaps children,¹³ a good trade, a house, relative financial stability, and a state-approved religion. But these things cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

At some unknown point, his contact with Anabaptist believers would have begun to draw his attention. How interesting it would be to know how that came about! His oldest sister, Madlena, had married Anthoni Wolff, and their oldest son, Hans, ended up among the Anabaptists in later years. The last names of his maternal grandparents, Hans Rupp and Madlena Frey, were Anabaptist names that were transported to America. Who was the first to convert to Anabaptism? Who influenced who? Dozens of families within a day's walk of Jakob's home would eventually join the Swiss Brethren, abandoning the Reformed Church. The day came when Jakob himself had to choose to follow Christ—even though it meant living as a hated outlaw, a ridiculed Anabaptist, a hunted fugitive, and a fleeing refugee.

Chapter 5

Anabaptist Revival!

It was a revival, indeed! It may have been the strongest influx of fresh converts that the Swiss Anabaptist movement had ever seen since its beginning. How is it that some 200 new family names appear to be added to

11 The old home place, one half mile above Erlenbach im Simmental.

12 Cathrina appears to have married Hans Schallenberg sometime before 1679. Hans is listed as in the Alsace in 1703.

13 The lack, thus far, of locating baptismal records of children born to Jakob and Verena does not indicate that he did not have any. The records could turn up any day now, they could be permanently missing, he could have had them baptized in a different village than thought, or he could have been on his journey toward Anabaptism and thus withheld baptism for his children. A later incident does show that he had at least one daughter.



Did Jakob Ammann live in the above house? The current property owners think so. The house above was torn down a few years ago and replaced with the one below. However, the archival evidence to clearly identify the property as belonging to the Ammanns has not been confirmed.

Top photo: (Assumed) Public domain. Bottom photo: Thomas Kaltenreider. Used by permission.



the Anabaptists in the space of about one generation—and all of them within what would be the size of one large county in the United States? The majority of modern Amish family names can be traced back to the brave souls who left the Reformed Church in Canton Bern in the 1670s-90s. Can we imagine 200 new Amish family names in the next 20 years, and all of them from one county?

Untold stories of faith and valor must have happened in those Alpine foothills. We will probably never know the details, because those who were acting as evangelists had to do so with greatest secrecy lest they be found out and imprisoned, or even killed. Most of what we know about the heroic nighttime meetings, the secret baptisms, and the hard choices to be true to God come from the snippets of information that are still being dug out of the government archives. Peter Roth, Hans Fahrni, and Yost Yoder taken to Bern for imprisonment, and Hans Kropf jailed in Thun for allowing Jakob Kaufman and his wife to stay at his house, are samples.

Jakob Ammann Converts to Anabaptism

Jakob Ammann himself seems to have thrown his lot in with the Swiss Brethren sometime in 1678 or 1679, but it is unknown if and for how long he may have been attracted to the movement beforehand. Whatever may have been his attitude toward religion beforehand, court records show that in 1678 Jakob stopped attending the communion services of the Reformed church. This made it hard for the preacher, who was supposed to inform the Chorgericht of straying church members if he could not get offenders to straighten up. So instead of the church disciplining erring members, the state was called in. Can you imagine a village policeman¹⁴ knocking on your door, wondering why you have not been to church meeting in a while?

In 1679, Jakob began making preparations to leave the area. Anabaptists who were caught by the authorities could have all their possessions confiscated. One of the anti-Anabaptist mandates even made it illegal to buy goods or land from an Anabaptist, and if one did so, the state could take them away from the new owner. Jakob most likely knew all of this. The law of the land was designed to trap them: if they kept their goods, the state could take them away. If they sold their goods, the state could take them from the new owner. In short, the law was really simple: If you become an Anabaptist, you lose everything, one way or the other! The only way out was to recant and turn back to the state church.

On August 2, 1679, the government records show that “Master Jacob Amen the tailor, resident at Oberhofen” sold his house and vineyard to his younger brother Ulrich, who was 18 years old at the time and was living at

14 The Chorgericht were not policemen, as such. But some have dubbed them “the morality police.”

Thal near Erlenbach—probably with his parents.

From all appearances, Jakob was making some slick financial preparations for what he knew was coming: confiscation of his goods if he is found out to be an Anabaptist. Ulli, to whom he sold his house was not yet of legal age (a few months shy of 18), and not known to be Anabaptist yet. If authorities tried to confiscate Jakob's goods, the house would be in his younger brother's name, who was a minor. This would probably cause the authorities to back off from taking it. If they went for Jakob's money, it was all loaned out, even though most of it was to relatives.

Jakob is Found Out

In 1680, the governor of Oberhofen, apparently not knowing what to do with Jakob, wrote to the Chorgericht in Bern for information on how to deal with "Jacob Amman of Erlenbach" who was now "infected with the Anabaptist sect." Anabaptist affairs were usually handled by each locale's Chorgericht, but major cases were referred to the central authorities.

On June 4, 1680, the Council of Bern itself replied to the Oberhofen governor's question. The Council gave the standard orders: Jakob should be summoned for questioning and the local Reformed pastors should try to persuade him to recant. If he refused to recant, he should be escorted to the border of the canton and told to swear an oath to never return to the canton. If he refused to swear, he would be informed that if he returned, he would still be considered a perjurer and flogged. Upon banishment, his property should be confiscated and distributed to his children. However, no record has been found of any further legal action taken against Ammann in Oberhofen.

At some point we know that Jakob was ordained to the ministry, and eventually became a bishop. Who ordained him? An undated letter by a certain David Baumgartner states that Hans Reist ordained Jakob. However, because the letter is undated, we do not know exactly who this Baumgartner was, and if his information is fact or hearsay.

Chapter 6

The Swiss Brethren

Earlier in the story we alluded to the beginnings of the Swiss Brethren—which the Swiss Anabaptists tended to call themselves—in Zürich in 1525.¹⁵ Very shortly after that initiation of Anabaptism, evangelists from Zürich

15 For a detailed account of the beginnings of Anabaptism, see Andrew V. Ste. Marie and Mike Atnip, *March Forward with the Word: The Life of Conrad Grebel*, 2016, Sermon on the Mount Publishing.

came to Bern, where a reform movement was gathering momentum. At that time, Bern was still Catholic, and only on February 7, 1528, did the Bernese authorities decide to become Protestant. When the first Anabaptist evangelists arrived in Bern, they found a revival already stirring. It does appear, however, that these evangelists were responsible for the first rebaptisms in the canton.

The story from there to Jakob Ammann, 150 years later, is one of suffering. Again and again the authorities would roll out a mandate of persecution, or renew an existing one. The first Anabaptist blood spilt in Bern was only three years after the movement started, in 1528. From that point on, it was a continuous up-down relationship. No, not a love-hate relationship, but a hate-tolerate—even though it was mostly a grudging toleration—relationship.

Several times in the first decades the authorities were “lenient” enough to try to debate with the Anabaptists, rather than just kill or banish them. But the Anabaptists soon tired of the theatrics: It did not matter what they said, they were always declared the losers. They finally quit responding to the invitation to another fruitless debate.

Back in Zürich

About a century had passed since Anabaptism was birthed in Zürich. On September 30, 1614, an old, long-bearded Anabaptist was beheaded in Zürich. Hans Landis, a minister, was respected by many people in the area as a godly man, and the reaction to his execution was enough to stop authorities in the canton from killing any more Anabaptists.

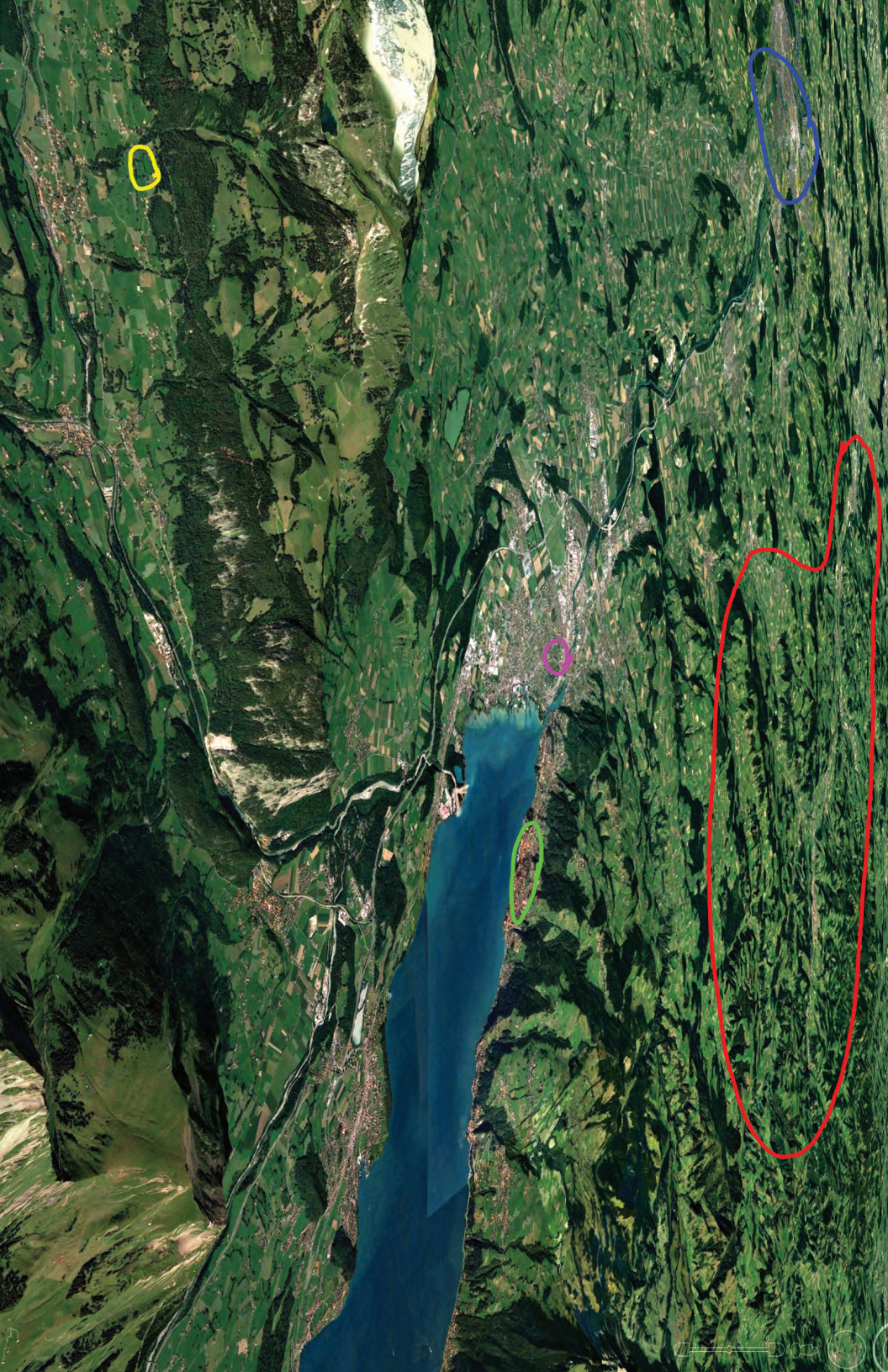
But not all was well among the Swiss Brethren. Several generations had passed since its founding, and, as is common among all religious revivals, some of the zeal had cooled off. Compromises were beginning to dull the once-sharp edge of truth that the Anabaptist revival had dug out and burnished once again from the Bible.

Hans Landis acknowledged several areas where the Swiss Brethren were stalling. However, it needs to be mentioned that Hans did not admit that these were areas that *he* saw need, but we find him acknowledging them in his testimony.

1) The Zurich Anabaptists had ceased to send out evangelists. Ol’ fiery George Blaurock of the first generation of Swiss Brethren would probably “turn over in his grave” to hear that!

2) Hans admitted that some Swiss Brethren were allowing friends and relatives to take Anabaptist babies to the Reformed Church for infant baptism. Now it would be Conrad Grebel’s turn to “turn over in the grave.” Conrad had refused to have his new baby girl baptized, at the risk of being kicked out of the city for refusing to do so. The earliest Anabaptists considered infant baptism to be an “abomination,” something to be avoided at all costs.

3) The Zurich Swiss Brethren were meeting only once every two weeks.



The scene below, taken from Google Earth, gives an overview of the important areas where Jakob lived and traveled. Obviously, in Jakob's day not nearly as many houses would have existed.

The small yellow circle is Thal, where Jakob was born and lived his early childhood. The town of Erlenbach is right below it.

Jakob then lived in the Hiltfingen/Oberhofen area, marked by the green circle. Here Jakob began his married life, and then converted to Anabaptism.

The pink circle is Thun, which was an administrative town under the oversight of Bern, which is the blue circle.

In the background the red circle approximates the Emme Valley, or Emmental. Here was located the main group of original Bernese Anabaptists, and where Jakob would have traveled during his later days and "bonked heads" with the Reistians.

To the right of the photo a couple of miles, on the far shore of the lake, lies the cave where the missionary Beatus is said to have lived in the first century.

To the right and across the lake from Oberhofen is Speiz (unmarked, but on the map), where Jakob had an uncle also named Jakob Ammann.

If a line were drawn on this picture from the top left to the bottom right, most of the Amish families would have originated from this area. A few came from up behind and to the right of Oberhofen.

This reveals a lack of zeal, compared to the first generation. The early Swiss Congregational Order recommended meeting “three or four times” a week.

4) The Züricher Swiss Brethren were weakening in their theology. There was an agreement with the Reformed Church concerning how “works” were looked at. The first generation of Anabaptists in the Swiss cantons and in south Germany had a clear vision that doing good works was part and parcel of Christianity. No, one does not pay for past sins by doing X-amount of good deeds, but good works were necessary and the expected fruit in the life of the believer.

Heinrich Funk

One of the immigrants to the Emmental from Zürich was named Heinrich Funk. The story goes that Heinrich found himself a nice, secluded location and lived for about 20 years in the Emmental/Aargau¹⁶ area. But one day his 18-year-old daughter took her infant child to the Reformed Church to be baptized. This would have been, as we looked at earlier, totally unacceptable in the first generation of Anabaptists. It needs to be noted, however, that it is not known whether the girl claimed to be an Anabaptist. At the same time, it should also be noted that Heinrich Funk had had six children baptized in the local Reformed Church. And it needs to be noted that the local authorities later considered Heinrich an “Anabaptist teacher.”

The *real* problem was that the girl was unmarried, not even by the Anabaptists. At the child’s baptism, she apparently named the father of her child. This, of course, would have been a scandal that would have been referred to the Chorgericht (Morals Courty). When investigated, however, the named father claimed he was *not* the father. Meanwhile, in cloudy circumstances, *another man* was being offered a large sum of money if he would take responsibility for fathering the child!

The whole incident blew over rather quickly, however, when the child died shortly thereafter. The events seemed to have opened the eyes of the authorities that Heinrich Funk was living in their territory. He was captured, taken to the border of the canton, whipped, and branded. As a matter of standard procedure, most likely he was told that he would be killed if they caught him in the canton again.

Poor Heinrich wandered three days before he found someone to bandage his wounds. He ended up in Alsace, a near neighbor of Hans Reist who was living there at the time. Hans Reist shall figure greatly in the story of Jakob Ammann, as we shall soon see.

¹⁶ Aargau joined the lower Emmental, and in reality was a part of the political realm of Bern at that time.

And Liars!

The whole situation with Heinrich's daughter's out-of-wedlock child was, or at least should have been, a real smudge on the testimony of the Bernese Anabaptists. These incidents show us that these men and women were human like the rest of us, not some super-group of people who had no failures among them.

But that was not all the "dark" things happening in the Emmental. One Emmental state church preacher reported that he went to visit a man that he knew—or at least suspected—was an Anabaptist. When he arrived at the man's residence, the man's wife informed him that the man was not at home but had gone to town.

About that time—not knowing that his wife had reported him as gone off to town—the man stepped out of the cellar! He had heard the preacher's voice, and when he realized who it was, he had decided he would like to talk to him.

Oops! Was this an accident, a misunderstanding? Had the wife really thought that her husband had gone to town, not realizing he hadn't left yet or something? That could be the case, but the preacher left the visit with the idea that the woman had simply lied. Lied, plainly and openly.

Again, one may ask how this incident ties in with Jakob Ammann, but in just a few pages we will see that one of the issues that Jakob had against Hans Reist was that a woman who admitted she had told a lie had not been disciplined by the church.

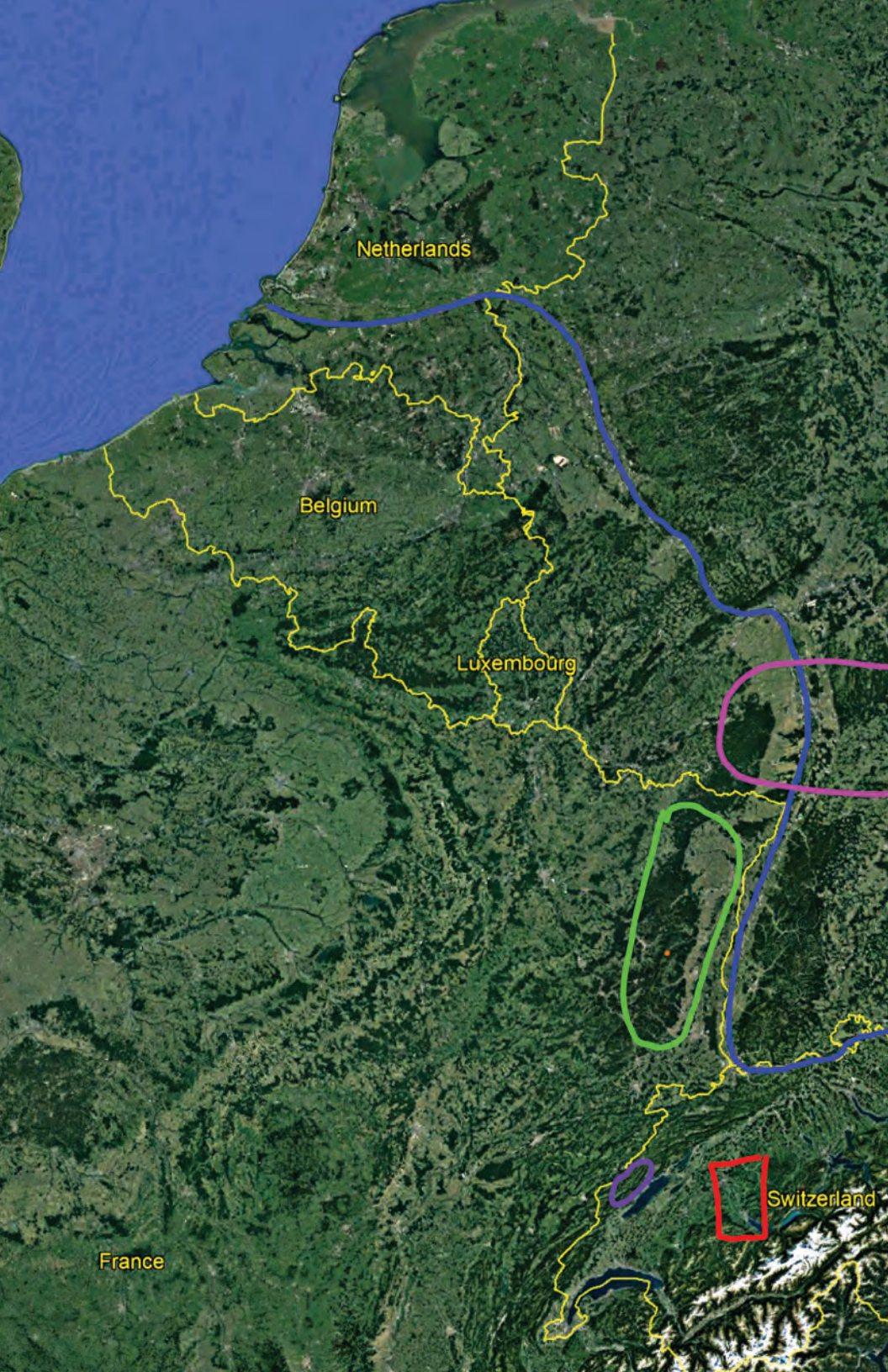
Another clear sign of lukewarmness in the Züricher Anabaptists regards marriage. It is reported that some of Hans Landis' grandchildren, who had moved to Alsace when the Anabaptists were pushed out of Zürich, took spouses from out of the state church. It is not clear whether they still claimed to be Anabaptists, but now they were not only baptizing their children there, but also choosing marriage partners from a church that openly disobeyed the teachings of Jesus on issues like nonresistance and swearing oaths.

The lesson? Lukewarmness can enter any revival movement, even the hottest of them. We dare not relax in the war against it, lest *we* become the next casualty of carelessness!

Chapter 7

Sin in the Camp

We are now arriving at the epoch in Jakob Ammann's life that has defined his reputation as a hot-headed, presumptuous snob. But we have to back up one more time to see the whole picture of what brought on the so-called




Netherlands

Belgium

Luxembourg

France

Switzerland



The Google Earth map to the left shows the significant areas of Jakob and Ulli Ammann's story. The modern boundaries are marked in yellow, but did not exist in those days. Europe was a hodge-podge of little kingdoms and lordships, with constantly changing boundaries. The red area is the approximate view in the previous Google Earth scene, with the Ammann homeplace being in the lower left corner of the red.

The light green area is Alsace. Jakob and Ulli moved here after persecution drove all the Amish out of Swiss territories.

The small orange dot within the green circle is the last known residence of Jakob Ammann.

The pink area is Palatinate, which was the home to other Anabaptists. The Anabaptists in this area were not originally involved in the split between the Amish and the Reistians, but were asked to help heal the division.

The small purple circle is Neuchatel, the area of the last known residence of Ulli Ammann.

The blue line is the Rhine River, which in those days was the equivalent of an interstate highway of transportation.

“Amish Division.” In fact, we have to back up all the way to the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, but this time in the Netherlands, rather than in Zürich.

Of Mennonite Splits and Splinters

Most Anabaptists in the earliest days of the movement believed that God’s church was to be pure, but the Dutch Mennonites stressed church purity further than some other Anabaptists. This strong emphasis on purity is probably one of the reasons why Dutch Anabaptism suffered from serious splits and splinters, from the very first generation. There were long and sharp arguments among the Dutch over small details of theology. Some of the Dutch said that there is only one true church, and that there can only be one particular Confession of Faith that every person must agree with in every fine detail. Those who disagreed were excommunicated.

One major area of dispute among the Dutch Anabaptists was how much to shun, or avoid social contact with, those who had been put out of the church because of sin. Specifically, what did Paul mean when he wrote about an excommunicated person, “with such an one no not to eat” (I Corinthians 5:11b)? The Swiss and South German Anabaptists believed that Paul was referring to the “eating” of Communion, while most of the Dutch Anabaptists said that it meant “to eat common meals.” The Dutch disagreed with each other over how to practice social shunning when one marriage partner had been excommunicated but the other was still part of the church.

Healing Schism

In 1627, some ministers among the divided Dutch Anabaptists met together to seek for a healing of the schisms. Putting their heads and hearts together, they wrote a common Confession of Faith, now referred to as the Olive Branch Confession, which did bring about a merger between a few of the churches. In 1632, another similar attempt was made between the two main groups of Flemish Mennonites. The resulting Confession was signed by 51 Dutch Anabaptist ministers from the two groups. Since the confession was written in the city of Dordrecht, it is usually referred to as the Dordrecht Confession of Faith.

On the issue of shunning, the Dordrecht Confession teaches a complete social shunning, but “moderation and Christian discretion must be used.” No specifics are given as to what that phrase means in practical terms.

The Dordrecht Spreads to the South

For the story of Jakob Ammann, the Dordrecht Confession plays an important note. In 1660, 20 years before Jakob Ammann converted to Anabaptism, the Dordrecht Confession was signed in Ohnenheim, Alsace—the area where Jakob would later live—by six ministers and seven deacons of

the Züricher Swiss Brethren, accepting it “as their own.” However, some of them may have done so either without fully understanding what the confession said about shunning or with mental reservations about what it said. And, it needs to be noted that not all the Swiss Brethren may have been aware of these events. In other words, the acceptance of the Dordrecht Confession by these Swiss Anabaptists was not a brotherhood-wide decision.

Why Does This Matter?

The Dordrecht Confession contained a couple of elements that were new to the Swiss Brethren. While the Swiss had always taught excommunication of unrepentant sinners from their congregations, the issue of how to manage the social shunning seems never to have been practiced uniformly. Some practiced a degree of social shunning, while others did not. The fine details were left up to the discretion of each congregation.

Another teaching of the Dordrecht Confession that was new to the Swiss was the washing of feet. The Swiss Brethren had never held that washing feet was an “ordinance” as such; they would, of course, have held to the idea that Jesus meant to teach a practice of humbly serving others, similar to the way that “taking up the cross” is viewed: Jesus did not mean for cross-bearing as an “ordinance” to be physically observed.¹⁷ With this background in our mind, we now proceed to the early 1690s, to Alsace. Here we find Jakob Ammann, having emigrated out of Bern at an unknown date.

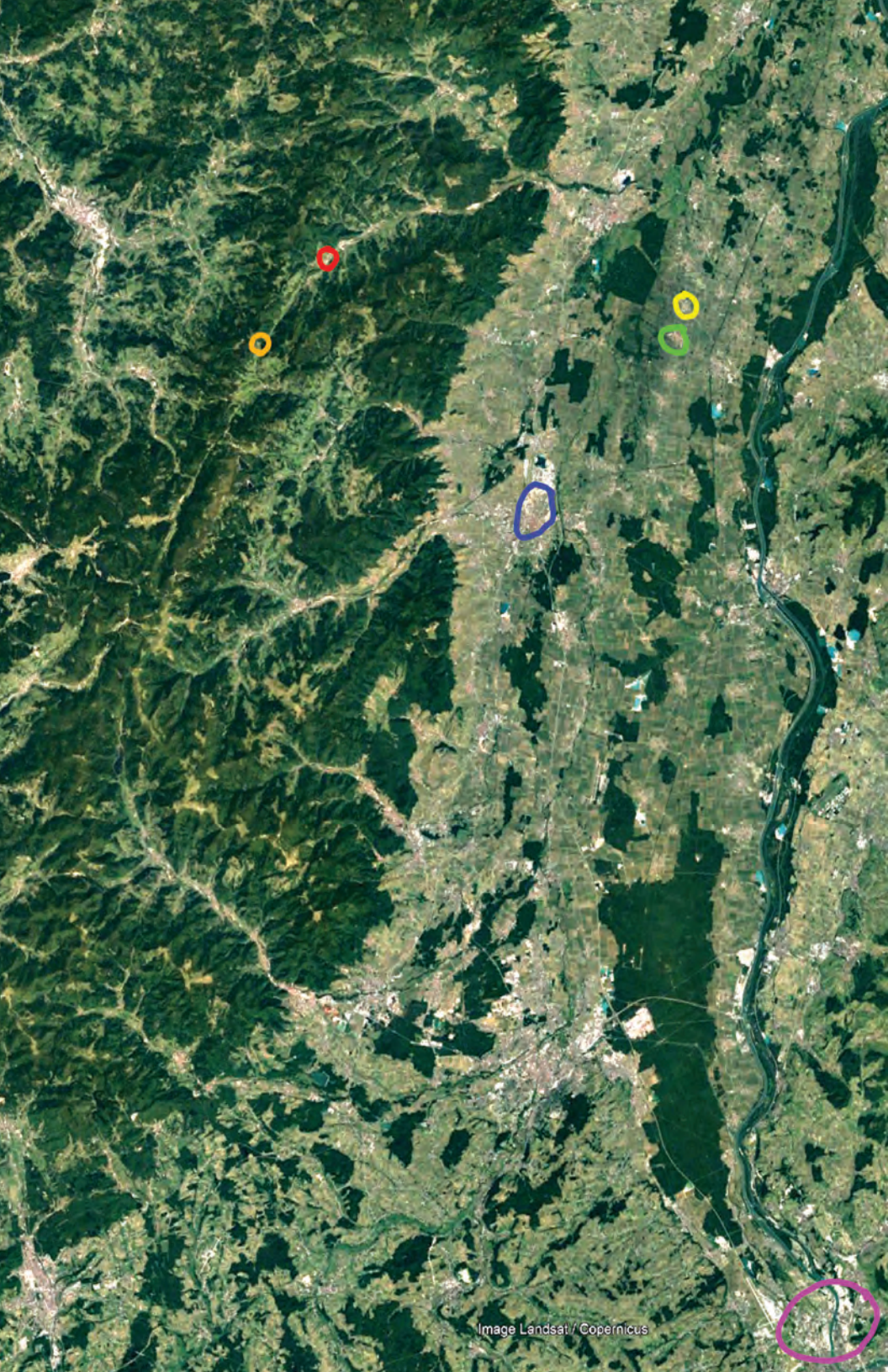
No Compromise Allowed

Once settled in Alsace, Jakob Ammann confronted some of his Anabaptist neighbors about compromise. Living at Markirch (also known as Ste. Marie-aux-Mines) was a group of Swiss Brethren who had been in the area many years before Jakob and his newly-converted Oberlanders¹⁸ arrived as immigrants.

The ministers in this older Anabaptist congregation, Rudolf Hauser and Peter Lehman, were allowing their congregants to attend services in the state churches. This caused the newer converts like Jakob Ammann much concern:

17 The Hutterites have never taken up feetwashing as an ordinance, to this day. It is an interesting study, outside the scope of this book, about where feetwashing as an ordinance began and was practiced, since the early church writings do not indicate that it was considered an “ordinance,” as such, during the first several centuries of church history.

18 Oberlander means “high-lander” and was a term used to identify the brethren who had originated from around Lake Thun, which is higher up in the mountains than the Emmmentalers. In some documents of that time, the “Amish” were called “Oberlanders” since the official division had not yet occurred, yet two diverse groups of Swiss Brethren were evident: the older (and somewhat compromised) lowlanders (from Zürich and the Emmmental) and the newer, recently converted, highlanders.



This Google Earth image shows the area within Alsace where Jakob Ammann was last known to reside, before all Anabaptists were ordered to leave Alsace. The orange circle is the location of his house, at the head of the valley.

The red circle just above that is the town of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines. Around two dozen Anabaptist families lived in this valley.

The light green circle is Ohnenheim, where a failed reconciliation conference between the Amish and the Reistians was held in an Anabaptist-owned mill. Thirty-four years earlier, and 20 years before Jakob Ammann became an Anabaptist, some Swiss Brethren had signed the Dortrecht Confession in this same town, "taking it as their own."

The yellow circle is Heidolsheim, where Jakob and Ulli's father was living when he died.

The blue circle is Colmar (a larger town in the area), and the pink circle in the lower right corner is Basil, with the Rhine River running north out of town along the right side of the picture. Strasbourg, which had long had a history of more toleration of dissent, lies just off the picture to the north (top).

The area shown in the picture had a good number of Anabaptist congregations, of three different flavors, before they were all expelled by a 1712 edict from King Louis XIV. However, some Anabaptists decided to join the state churches rather than face another exile. No one knows where Jakob Ammann moved when he sold his few livestock and joined the forced exodus. Most likely he moved to another area of what is now eastern France.

How could they act as if an apostate church that openly disobeyed Jesus was a good place to be fed spiritually? Jakob visited these lukewarm Anabaptists at least twice and tried to convince them that it was inappropriate to hear the preaching of the Pharisees, the ones who maybe said some good things, but did not do what God said to do. Hauser and Lehman, however, appealed to old custom¹⁹ and said they did not want to deviate from it. With the counsel and approval of the ministers and elders, Ammann excommunicated those who refused to abstain from attendance at the state church.

Rumors from the Homeland

At some point, Jakob and his fellow-ministers began hearing rumors coming out of the Emmental about certain Anabaptist ministers and the purity of the church. First, they heard that every minister practiced what he wished regarding shunning the excommunicated.

*Where there is no
faith, no new birth or
rebirth, no penance
and improvement,
over these Christ
has already passed
judgment.*

~Jakob Ammann

Why the Oberlanders felt that there needed to be exact uniformity in this issue is not specified. As noted earlier, from the beginning of the Swiss Brethren movement no uniform practice had ever been officially established. We can probably safely assume that Dutch ideas of church administration—which demanded that everyone agree in all the fine details—may have been creeping into the mentality of Jakob and his fellow brethren.

Secondly, there were rumors that some of the ministers in the Emmental were consoling the Truehearted and telling them that they were saved. These “truehearted” people were also called “Halbtäufer,” which means half-Anabaptist. These “truehearted” agreed with the Anabaptist teaching and sometimes were known to risk their own safety to support and help the Anabaptists—for example, hiding them from officials sent out to arrest Anabaptists (and some of the Truehearted were themselves government officials)—but they were unwilling to take up Jesus’ cross by being baptized and joining the persecuted brotherhood. After all, open identification with Anabaptism meant possibly losing everything one had, including one’s life.

Jakob Ammann was firmly opposed to consoling the Truehearted with salvation. Remember, he was a convert from the state church. He was surrounded by many who had made the same decision he had—to leave

19 It is unknown what “old custom” to which they were referring. This implies, however, that they had been attending the state church services for years or decades. This attendance may not have been regular, but perhaps enough to keep them out of trouble with the authorities.

everything behind and take up the cross with the Anabaptists. Could there be a less demanding way? Could he give his blessing to those who halted between two opinions? Did the Scriptures teach that those who were unwilling to follow Christ all the way should be consoled in their non-commitment? Jakob wrote:

There is only one faith that is valid before God, there is only one people who are the bride of Christ. Are we not among these people? Do we not have this faith? And if we do not travel along this path, even though it is narrow, then we cannot come to life. May it also be far from us that we want to judge or condemn anyone prematurely, for we know well that Scriptures says: Condemn not, so that you will not be condemned ... in this way we may surely conform to God's Word and say: If a miser does not turn from his selfishness, and a fornicator from his fornication, and a drunkard from his drunkenness, or other immoralities, [they are] thereby separated from the Kingdom of God, and if he does not improve himself through a pious, penitent life, such a person is no Christian and will not inherit the Kingdom of God ... For we know well that God saves no one apart from His Word, for it is truth and there is no lie in it. Where there is no faith, no new birth or rebirth, no penance and improvement, over these Christ has already passed judgment, for He says: If you do not believe that I am the One, then you will die in your sins ...²⁰

It is important to note that Jakob did not teach that the Truehearted were necessarily unsaved; rather, he pointed out that they should not be consoled as "saved" when they had not taken up the cross of Christ, received believers' baptism, and joined the brotherhood. He acknowledged that they may have made a beginning in the Christian life, but they needed to be exhorted to continue—not be comforted in their lack of commitment.

There is a fence, as it were, between death and life. But there are no riders on that fence. Either you are alive in Christ or dead in sins. And instead of seeing how close you can come to the fence and still be alive, God would have us move as far away from it as possible!

To Verify a Rumor

It is never good to accept a rumor at face value. In fact, we need to be extremely suspicious of stories that come through several people, even well-meaning ones. Most likely, the stories coming to the Oberlanders about a stench in the Emmental were from sources that they felt had some validity, because the churches in Alsace decided to send a delegation to check things out. With the blessing and commission of the church, Jakob Ammann set out

20 Jakob Ammann, "Summary & Defense," in Roth, pp. 34-38.

with Niklaus Augsburg and others to find out if the stories were true.²¹

Off to Switzerland

The details of this journey are tedious and not so edifying in some points. Thus, I will summarize what happened. The delegation from the Alsace began their inquiry by asking several ministers in the Emmental if they agreed to social shunning. Most of the ministers there initially agreed that social shunning was biblical. But Hans Reist, one of the oldest bishops, sent a reply—he was not physically present—saying that food going into the mouth does not defile a man.

We can only imagine the response of the Oberlanders when they first heard that reasoning. Perhaps their eyebrows shot up and question marks came out of their eyes. What? They had *never* said nor even insinuated that the reason to avoid eating and drinking with the excommunicated had anything to do with the food itself. It did, however, have *everything* to do with the fact that an unrepentant sinner will likely open his mouth and spew out the uncleanness of his heart. The carnal young girl, for example, who turns back to pretty dresses and flirting with the young men and refuses to repent and thus has to be put away from the flock, will very likely try to convince other young girls to her folly. Yes, that which comes *out* of the mouth defiles, and that is one of the reasons the carnal are to be avoided: They may try to convince others to follow them.

But Reist's answer seemed to charge the Amish of thinking that the problem of eating with the excommunicated was that the meat and barley of the sinner would contaminate the saint. Had he thought through his response, it was he who missed the point: that which comes out defiles, indeed!

Continuing their journey, the delegation received mostly agreeable responses from other Emmentaler ministers.

So Far, So Good. But ...

The investigation tour had gotten off to a good start. Hans Reist was the only one who had opposed them. Now they had a meeting directly with him and he again gave a rabbit trail answer.

Jakob then asked another question: should obvious liars be excommunicated from the congregation? Reist replied in the negative. The investigators knew that Reist practiced what he preached on this point. A woman in an Emmental

21 Here it is to be noted that the charge against Jakob Ammann that he was trying to push his own will through, as some sort of dictator, is simply not true. It *may* be true that he had a large part in convincing the rest of the church and churches to send him, but even that has no historical foundation. All through the painful division, Jakob never acted arbitrarily on his own, but always with others of his church.

When does changing your mind become a lie?

When Jakob and his fellow travelers confronted some of the Emmentalers about their position on shunning, originally most of them agreed with Jakob. However, just a few days later most of them dropped their support for his position, apparently without telling him beforehand that they had changed.

Is that lying? Or is it simply changing one's mind? This was one of the aggravating circumstances of the division: one side saw it as merely changing their mind, while the other saw it as something like playing politics and lying.

What can we do to avoid these situations, on both sides?

Anabaptist congregation had lied, then denied it when questioned. However, sufficient evidence existed that revealed her falsehood, and she finally admitted that she had lied. The case was twice brought before Hans Reist to be addressed, and both times he ruled that she should remain a sister in the congregation.

Hans Reist was apparently disturbed by these unwelcome questionings throughout the Emmental congregations. He apparently took the investigative committee's inquisitiveness quite personally, as if Jakob and those with him were a direct threat to his authority. At the meeting, Reist—seemingly in an effort to silence or at least intimidate Ammann—claimed that he had more authority than Jakob! Jakob ignored that claim since they both were bishops.

The delegation continued their probing, asking Hans later, for the third time, about social shunning. This time Hans simply refused to answer. He apparently had been busy, though, writing a letter with the approval of some other ministers and elders, saying that he refused to accept any command to shun the excommunicated in physical and spiritual meals. And, he wrote, people should not pay much attention to those "younger ministers."

Once again, the delegation sent men to Hans Reist, to ask him to stop consoling the "true-hearted" with salvation. Hans refused to do so.

What to do?

All of the Swiss ministers interviewed by Ammann and his co-ministers had expressed themselves openly in favor of shunning or at least not expressly opposed to it—except Reist. Jakob then decided to get council from the Emmental ministers whom he had been questioning in the previous days. To

this end, he called for a ministers' meeting in Niklaus Moser's barn, inviting Hans Reist.

The day of the meeting came, but Hans Reist was a no-show. In fact, only a few Emmental ministers showed up. All of them—with the possible exception of one—had earlier expressed support for the delegation's view of shunning. Now they found themselves in a very awkward predicament: Hans Reist had definitively opposed social shunning. What were they to do? Abide by their confession to the Oberlanders and fall under the displeasure of Hans Reist? Or, side with Reist and try to convince Ammann to not be so radical? The investigation, which had begun so well, was now in a quandary: The Emmental ministers were being forced to take sides.

When Jakob Ammann arrived at the Moser barn with Niklaus Augsburg and Christian Blank, it did not take him long to notice—probably with some alarm—that the Emmmentalers were wavering in their commitment. Could it be possible that his supporters would turn out to be fair-weather friends?

Turning Back

Jakob then asked the ministers what they thought. Hum-hawing around, they said that they should call together a church-wide conference to discuss the matter.

So it was that the Emmental ministers turned back from supporting the Oberlanders. While not totally rejecting the idea of shunning, they pushed the decision onto the shoulders of a future church council. This put Jakob Ammann on the spot. He had good reasons for wanting to finish his mission and return to his home in tolerant Alsace. An ongoing threat of arrest was continually hanging over his head. On June 28, 1693, an arrest warrant had been issued for “the Anabaptist preachers altogether, but also the preacher Amman in particular.” A *Täuferjäger*²² by the name of Peter Erb had been given the special task of arresting the “chief Anabaptist Jaggi Amman.”

This threat of arrest may have been the motivation to hurry up the next meeting. Jakob suggested it be in eight days. Peter Giger suggested three weeks, but Ammann said that was too long. Niklaus Moser then suggested fourteen days, to which everyone agreed. Jakob mentioned that “a special effort” should be made to have Hans Reist present at the meeting.

The Emmmentaler ministers immediately sent out messengers to invite the other ministers to the second meeting. On the appointed day, many of the Emmmentaler ministers and laity gathered—probably again in Moser's barn. Jakob Ammann and nine of the ministers from his side showed up.

No-Show Reist

The group met at the appointed time and waited for Hans Reist. Meanwhile

22 Anabaptist hunter.

some soft words were exchanged. Then Peter Giger took Jakob up on this offer to be corrected and began quoting Scriptures: “What goes into the mouth does not defile a man, but that which comes out of the mouth defiles a man” (Matthew 15:11).

Here was the same old nonsense that Hans Reist had thrown at them before. Jakob replied that the verse did not apply to the situation, “waving his hand.” We can imagine the frustration of still dealing with the idea that contaminated food was the issue! Giger then quoted Romans 14:3: “He who eats does not judge another who eats.”

More missing the point! This verse had nothing to do with social shunning. Jakob waved his hand, likely with growing frustration by the minute, and replied that “it had nothing to do with the matter.”

Next Giger quoted Galatians 5:15, “When you are biting and devouring among yourselves, watch out that you do not end up consuming each other.” He then added, “Therefore, take heed dear brothers.” While this is a worthy admonition for any dispute among brethren, in and of itself, it missed the issue at hand.

The Emmentalers then pled with Jakob not to create confusion and division. They were likely in distress over their predicament; being caught in the middle of the disagreement between Reist and Ammann was just no fun! Reist’s absence was not helping the situation either. Jakob replied that he couldn’t keep on traveling about and did not want a division. Obviously, tensions were mounting on both sides. Instead of recognition by both sides that the Bible is not explicit as to how social shunning is to be handled in situations such as between marriage partners, they dug in their heels rather than humbly and sincerely seeking to find a balance.

But It’s Harvest Time!

Finally, the ministers decided to find out what was keeping Hans Reist away. Someone was sent to find out why he was not there yet. Shortly a message arrived: Reist said it was the middle of harvest, and a busy time. It was clear now that he had no intentions of coming to the meeting.

Reist’s apparent lack of concern to discuss matters concerning the church—for the second time—was too much for Jakob Ammann. This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Greatly irritated,²³ Jakob then said, “This is the way they act, that they indeed cannot be persuaded to come here ... Hans Reist [is] a rabble-rouser who slandered and shamed God’s Word.”

23 One translator translates “fast verdrieulich” as “almost became enraged” while another argues that it should be translated “became extremely annoyed.” The translation of these two words radically affects how Jakob Ammann is seen, in character. Was he “blowing his top” in anger, or was he “frustrated”? No one really knows, today!

It appears that Jakob probably expected that Reist was not ready to agree with him, for he pulled a ready-made letter out of his pocket containing six charges against Hans Reist.²⁴ After all six charges had been read, Ammann said that Reist “should be excommunicated and banned from the Christian church and the fellowship of God.”

Horror in the House of God

The Emmentaler ministers were horrified that the excommunication did not follow their procedure, which would have included receiving counsel from the entire congregation before excommunicating someone. The Amish side later repented for not having done this to Reist, and adopted the same procedure. However, some Swiss Brethren had previously also operated under the principle that someone could be excommunicated without a full congregational counsel, so Jakob was not entirely out of precedent. In Jakob’s mind, Reist had already received four admonitions—two more than the two required by Scripture (Titus 3:10-11).

But worse horror was yet to come! Jakob asked Moser and Giger if they would support social shunning. When they balked, he then said, “Then you should be excommunicated and banned as liars.” Turning to others, the same scene repeated itself. It needs to be noted that these men had all previously given vocal support for social shunning, but now they were backpadding. Thus came the charge of being liars: saying one thing one day, another thing the next.

The Aftershock

Having excommunicated Hans Reist and six other ministers, the Oberlanders had greatly shocked the lay members present. Some of them begged him to show forbearance; one sister fell on her knees before Jakob and pled with him. But Jakob was not to be moved. He had shown much patience already for weeks, something the lay members may not have realized. The excommunications were not a rash action by a dictator who wanted to control everyone else. Jakob’s companion, Peter Zimmerman, announced, “There you have it.”²⁵ Then Ammann and his ministers left the barn without shaking hands with anyone—not even with those who had not been excommunicated.

Are You Sure?

In response to these latest excommunications, the Emmentalers wrote Jakob Ammann and his companions a note which asked them “whether they wished to acknowledge that they had gone too far with rebuking and banning, and this for the third time.” The Oberlanders replied, “If you do not

24 The text of this letter is currently unknown.

25 What he exactly meant by that statement is not known, but it seemed to indicate a finality to the matter.

wish to confess shunning, then we do not want to have anything to do with you.” To the Oberlanders at this time, the only thing that could bring about a reconciliation was agreement with their position, no holds barred.

After a messenger to the Oberlanders was not received, Peter Giger and Hans Zaugg went personally to visit the Ammann brothers. They begged Jakob and Ulli to call another meeting to which the lay brothers and sisters would be permitted to come. Jakob replied that he “did not want to start any new discussion” with the Emmentalers. Peter Giger begged Jakob three times “for the sake of God,” but Jakob was adamant. However, after the two men had left, Jakob changed his mind and sent a note saying that he wanted to come after all.

Jakob and his fellow ministers came, but without any lay members with them. Perhaps they thought it would have been rather foolhardy to expose a large group to the danger traveling across a canton that was still actively hunting for Anabaptists.

At the beginning of the meeting, a rule was agreed upon: “When someone is speaking, the other should listen.” Jakob spoke while the rest listened. Then Peter Giger stood up to speak—and Jakob stood up to leave! Peter grabbed Jakob by the sleeve and said, “Let me finish what I have to say.” Jakob pulled his arm away and left.

We do not know what was going through Jakob’s mind for this very disrespectful action. He may have thought that since Giger was excommunicated, he had no right to address an assembly of the saints. However, from the other side’s point of view, Jakob’s action was a simple act of arrogance.

The Bible says, “let not then your good be evil spoken of” (Romans 14:16). Jakob may have meant well by walking off, but when one agrees to a meeting that aims for reconciliation, giving your side of the picture and then walking off will hardly be taken as a spirit of humility and teachableness. The following piece of poetry says it well:

For me t’was not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me so dim,
But when you came to me,
You brought a deeper sense of Him.

And from your eyes He beckoned me,
And from your heart, His love was shed.
“Til I lost sight of you,
And saw the Christ instead.

-Unknown

Summary

We must remember that, as far as we know, all the Oberlander ministers were first-generation Anabaptists. As such, their methods of dealing with sin in the church did not have the years of experience that we may naturally assume for the story. Jakob had been an Anabaptist less than 15 years, and his brother Ulli for perhaps only half that amount. Within a decade, the Oberlanders would express extreme repentance for the way they had handled the matter.

Jakob Ammann's actions were certainly not above reproach. Yet we should recognize that he probably truly meant well: he saw sin in the camp. He was under extreme pressure, both from the state that was hunting his head and from fellow ministers who one day said they supported him, and only days later suddenly said they did not. Unfortunately, for the next 250 years no one could portray Jakob Ammann in a truly positive light—even though, as we shall see, he later humbled himself and admitted he had erred.

What can we learn from this? There are two ditches when it comes to dealing with sin in the camp. One ditch, which the Emmmentalers seemed to have been mired in, was to overlook sin. It is not an easy matter to approach erring brethren and try to correct them! Church discipline is not for wimps!

The Oberlanders probably started out with all good intentions and attitudes. At least we will assume that out of charity and a lack of evidence that would indicate otherwise. Yet the pressure of the situation got the best of them in some instances. This created unnecessary pain and distrust in some who otherwise may have eventually acknowledged the sin in their midst.

As it was, it seems evident that part of the underlying source of stress was that of friction between an older, lukewarm, “established” Anabaptism with a newer, zealous, and revived group of fresh converts. This same story has been seen again and again throughout church history in various movements. The new converts often want purity and consistency, while those who have grown up in the stagnant movement do not like the boat getting rocked. Underlying the whole situation were two visions, two irreconcilable visions: revival and lukewarmness. A group of people cannot travel both north and south at the same time without splitting into two groups!²⁶

Chapter 8

The Rift Deepens

As the schism came to reality in the Emmental, both sides attempted to get the ministers in the Palatinate (southwestern Germany) to side with them. The

26 The general charge of lukewarmness against the “older Anabaptism” does not

Wanted Dead or Alive: Preacher from (Your) Church
\$10,000 reward, paid in cash

Can you imagine how your congregation would function if these signs were posted throughout your community? Under this type of pressure, the Swiss Brethren were dividing. The lesson? Persecution does not bring an end to compromise, lukewarmness, and carnality (even though it may help). Nor does it automatically bring unity among believers (even though it may help).

Emmentalers wrote an account of the confrontation complaining of Jakob's "harsh actions." The Alsations, normally affiliated with Jakob, wrote a letter to the Palatines asking for help with the issues of the division. Jakob himself also wrote to the Palatines, trying to convince them of the truth of shunning.

Letters and visits came and went. Finally, Jakob wrote what has been called "The Warning Letter." Summed up, it gave the undecided churches some time to make a decision if they would support social shunning. If not, they too would be excommunicated.

Considering the tone of this letter, one gets the sense that the old Dutch mentality of "Line up your ducks with us or your out!" may have been at play. This was not a warning against an open sin in the church, but that everyone was expected to apply social shunning uniformly across the board. Ulli Ammann later wrote that they chose this method because "we at that time did not know a better way." The tone of this Warning Letter speaks, as Ulli later confessed, of well-meaning people who have not had the blessing of growing up in a church where proper discipline has been exercised. They were finding their way through the matter, with little experience behind them.

In the meantime, Jakob had to get back to his home in Alsace. He slipped quietly out of Switzerland and back home—probably with his aged father and perhaps his sister. Michael Ammann settled in the Catholic city of Heidolsheim, where he seems to have openly joined an Anabaptist congregation.

Arch-heretic

The government of Bern apparently did not know Jakob had left Bern and issued another warrant for his arrest. On December 14, 1693, an order was made and sent to seven districts ordering that the officials watch for "Jaggi Ammann of Oberhofen, a roving arch-Anabaptist." A reward of 100 Thalers²⁷ was offered for his arrest.

²⁷ The best information I could find is that this would be the equivalent of approximately USD \$10,000 today.

Later that fall, after the Amish side had excommunicated the Emmentaler ministers, Jakob began to write his “Long Letter.” He wrote this to describe the events of the confrontation and division up to that point, and to define and defend his point of view regarding the issues of the division. He wrote with clarity and passion. Toward the end of the letter, however, he began to directly scold the Palatine ministers: “You ignorant Galatians! Consider who has bewitched you so that you do not believe the truth.” The tone of the letter ended up being the same as his earlier “Warning Letter.”

What a mess! The Oberlanders probably meant well in trying to deal with sin in the camp, but, as they later confessed, they did not always do it with the proper attitude. How they later regretted using some of those negative adjectives in their letters!

Church Politics, Stinky, Rotten, and Raw

The Ohnenheim Conference could well be described as church politics at its nasty, rotten worst.

After issuing the “Warning Letter,” the Oberlanders probably anxiously awaited a delegation from at least *some* of the other Anabaptist churches—but apparently no one showed up. Jakob and his fellow-ministers then “judged [them to be] apart from the church” for failing to appear at the stated times and because they “wanted to adhere to the men who had been disciplined.”

Some of the Palatine ministers, however, had an admirable desire for peace—and they were willing to put in the time, effort, and money necessary to help the two sides become reconciled with each other. They were not content to simply ask the sides to be reconciled and then forget about the problem—they were going to expend the effort to make it happen.

With this very admirable goal, they organized a reconciliation conference in the central location of Ohnenheim, a village in the Alsace just a few miles from where Jakob Ammann lived. Here, the Anabaptists had been tolerated for decades. The town’s mill was owned by an Anabaptist who had been legally holding church meetings there for many years. In fact, 34 years earlier, this was the very mill where thirteen Swiss Brethren ministers had signed the Dordrecht Confession of Faith! The date for the conference was set for March 12, 1694. Ten delegates, nine of them ministers, came from Switzerland. Among them were Hans Reist and Peter Giger. Seven Palatine ministers came. An unknown number of Amish ministers came.

At the meeting, the Palatines listened carefully to both the Reistians and the Amish, as they later came to be called.²⁸ After carefully investigating the

28 At this point in the story, we will switch to using these two names for the two parties of the division. Maybe this is not fair, to characterize the division after the two leading personalities when in fact many men were involved, but history has definitely denominated the one side as “Amish.” To make it fair, we

situation, the Palatines begged the Amish to not act too rashly.

Despite the sincere effort, peace could not be made. The Amish brought up the three main issues that concerned them—shunning, the Truehearted, and the excommunication of liars. The Reistians refused to agree with the Amish on any of these points.

The Palatines, however, expressed agreement with the Amish on the excommunication of liars and on not consoling the Truehearted as saved. However, they could not agree with the Amish on making every congregation and individual take on the Amish view of shunning. Having failed to reach any agreement, the meeting ended for the night, and the Amish ministers went home.

The next day, the Reistians met with the Palatine ministers in the mill once again. None of the Amish were present. At this second meeting, the Palatines told the Reistians that if they “did not want to confess the two articles regarding the Truehearted and those who tell lies,” the Palatines “could be just as little satisfied with them as Jakob Ammann was satisfied with them.” On hearing this, all nine of the Reistian ministers suddenly decided to agree with the Palatines on the issues of the excommunication of liars and the Truehearted!

Imagine! One day they say that they do not agree with two issues, then the next day they do a total 180° turn and say they do!

What happened? Did they get their Bibles out and suddenly realize that the Scriptures do indeed teach what they had denied the day before? Did they go to the Amish ministers and humbly say, “Brothers, we are so, so sorry! We have been accusing you of being wrong, and now we suddenly see that we were the ones wrong. Could you forgive us for falsely accusing you of holding false doctrine?”

No! Not a whisper of confession, not a word of contrition.

What was happening? This was nothing less and nothing more than raw, stinking, rotten church politics at its worst. We do not say this in regard to the particular issues at hand, but to the manner in which the Reistians were operating.

We cannot fault the Reistians alone in this. The Palatine ministers, despite their appearance of wanting reconciliation, were just as guilty. When the

*Imagine! One
day they say
that they do not
agree with two
issues, then the
next day they
do a total 180°
turn and say
they do!*

will now call the other side the “Reistians.” However, we need to keep in mind that many other people played important roles, some of them probably even unnamed and unknown.

Reistians suddenly put things in reverse and decided to agree with them, they should have been told by the Palatines that they needed to go confess to the Amish that they had been wrong and ask forgiveness from the Amish. So even though the Palatines were not the ones changing positions without any humility, they were willing to go along with it and then blame the Amish for the entire problem. This shows that something was wrong within their hearts as well.

So, what did they do, now that the Reistians decided suddenly to agree with the Palatines? They now proceeded to draw up a written statement that excommunicated *en masse* all the Amish side—not only the ministers who had been involved in the trouble, but all of them—men, women, and youth alike—with no apparent attempt at admonishing them individually for their supposed errors, contrary to what the Amish had initially done with them by making sure each person had been personally admonished.

Summary

By this point, the Reistians were showing attitudes and actions that were worse than the poor attitudes that the Amish had initially shown. Yes, the Amish had excommunicated several ministers without the counsel of the whole congregation. Guess what the Reistians and Palatines just did? Exactly the same!

Yes, the Amish had acted rashly in trying to get everyone across the brotherhood to practice social shunning just like they did, and when someone disagreed, they were excommunicated after at least two personal warnings. Guess what? Now the Reistians and Palatines were excommunicating people who happened to disagree with *their* view of shunning—not only individuals, but whole congregations, very few of whom they had personally admonished before!

So it is that the Reistians (and the Palatines) showed their true colors. There were hints of this before, with the Emmentaler ministers who changed opinions over the course of a few days, but now it was plainer yet. Something was at work in their midst—something besides the work of the Holy Ghost.

Chapter 9

Home in the Valley

Sometime around 1694 or 1695, Jakob Ammann moved to Ste. Marie-aux-Mines, where a number of members of the Anabaptist congregation from Steffisburg had settled. Jakob ended up living in a remote place near the end of the valley called Petite Leipvre, near Echery. Here he spent many long years in fruitful service to his people. He came to be called—by the government

officials at least—the “Patriarche” of the Anabaptists. This was probably just a term used for a bishop.

Michel Passes On

Meanwhile, back in Heidolsheim, death struck. In the midst of all the responsibilities of moving an entire congregation across international borders and the ongoing controversy with the Reistians, Jakob’s father Michel—who had embraced the faith which his sons were so zealously defending—died in Heidolsheim in April 1695 at the age of 79.

Now there was a problem. The local Catholic church would not allow Michel to be buried in the town. He was finally buried in Baldenheim at the Reformed Church, where a tolerant pastor permitted it.

Shepherd in the Valley

It did not take long for the Anabaptists and their leader to attract some attention. In 1696, the Landrichter (provincial judge) investigated Jakob and wrote that he was obedient and respectful to the civil authorities, along with the others in his church.

Not everyone in the valley who dealt with Jakob was so positive about him. The local Catholic priest, a man named Laforest, was as passionately Catholic as Ammann was passionately Anabaptist. The combination of the two strong characters in one valley was bound to create friction if they clashed. The clash came when the priest realized that he was losing money because the Anabaptists did not pay for his services of performing baptisms, marriages, etc. He wrote, “As for me, I cannot stand them!”

Reclaiming Nonresistance

Early in 1696, Jakob Ammann turned his attention to the issue of nonresistance. It appears that the former Anabaptist inhabitants (and perhaps even some of the members of Ammann’s congregation) had compromised by serving in the militia or in the Heimbürg, a local elected political office mostly responsible for collecting taxes. On February 27, 1696, Jakob “of the Anabaptist religion” appeared before the Provost of Ste. Marie. He came representing all of his fellow co-religionists that had arrived “about two years ago,” and informed the provost that the Amish would not serve as *Heimbürg* or the militia.

Jakob was firm and uncompromising, but he was also reasonable. In exchange for the privilege of exemption, he offered “to pay a few signs of good will each year” for the exemption. The provost granted their request, exempting the Anabaptists on condition that they pay a fee of 55 tournois per year

Tax Troubles

Soon after arriving in the Markirch Valley, Jakob Ammann had worked out the terms of the Anabaptists' military/Heimbург exemption with the government officials. The agreed-upon fee was reassessed every three years. The government authorities apparently tried to make some more money on their conscientious subjects; in addition, they proposed that the Anabaptists "[take] care of the past" by paying an additional 210 pounds.

Representing his community, Jakob Ammann met with the local fiscal officer on February 28, 1701. He complained about the idea of "taking care of the past" with a large sum of money, pointed out the instructions of a higher government official, and threatened to leave the area. In response, the fiscal officer wrote to Counselor Scheid, a counselor to the Prince of Birkenfeld. He pointed out that the Anabaptists had restored the farmland in the area and that they pay their taxes well without bickering or cheating. The Anabaptists seem to have received their request, but it was not to be the end of their tax troubles.

Summary

Jakob Ammann had an active, but little-known, local ministry in the region of Ste. Marie-aux-Mines. The Anabaptists there enjoyed a very unique political situation. Their skills and contributions to the royal treasury through tax revenue and exemption fees made them important inhabitants whom the government was eager to please. Therefore, Jakob could ask for nearly anything and get what he wanted!

Jakob is still remembered in the area. The main road leading into Ste. Marie-aux-Mines, formerly called Petite Lièpvre, has recently been renamed "Rue du Jakob Ammann," which translates into "Jakob Ammann Road."

Chapter 10

Peace at Last?

Although the Amish ministers were initially zealous to see the church cleansed of error and sin, they—particularly Ulli Ammann—later became zealous to see the broken peace restored. They initiated several attempts to bring about a reconciliation between the two groups. The Ohnenheim reconciliation conference had not ended the controversy between the two sides: Playing church politics does not heal church divisions; it makes them worse.

Several letters were exchanged between the various parties, defending the divergent points of view. In particular, the Reistians defended their views regarding shunning and attacked Jakob Ammann personally. The Amish had used words like "liar, apostate, heretic, and trouble-maker," and now it was



Jakob walked here! This house near Ste-Marie-aux-Mines is the last known residence of Jakob Ammann. The yellow part of the house is the original. Imagine seeing Jakob staring out the window as he meditates on the goodness of God to the children of men. Photo by Dean Taylor. Used by permission.

their turn to get some of the same back—with compound interest. Jakob was a liar, gossip, ranter, Diotrephes (who John warned about in his 3rd Epistle), and even one of the hideous creatures found in the Revelation of John! He was a fallen star and demon-possessed. Jakob just wanted a big following, one Reistian claimed, while another said he promised salvation to anyone who would agree with him.

Not only was Jakob an evil character, he was accused of making social shunning to be the source of salvation, rather than salvation by “the merit of Christ.” Social shunning was becoming a “source of serious idolatry,” since supposedly Jakob said one could not be saved without it; he was making it to be “the abomination in the holy place.”

In these wild allegations we are seeing from the Reistian side accusations that are going from bad to hideous. Since the church politics game had started back at Ohnenheim, it seems that attitudes were growing nastier with each move.

Concern for Peace

Despite continued controversy, some men on both sides were eager to work towards a reconciliation. They did not want to think that the division would

be permanent. In the meantime, two of the Palatine ministers who had signed the Ohnenheim agreement—Hans Gut and Christian Holly—examined the controversy more closely and realized with remorse what they had helped to do at Ohnenheim. In acknowledgement of their church politics-playing sin, they excommunicated themselves from the church and later began to support the Amish.

It can hardly be understated the importance of this move by these two humble men. The importance is *not* which side they left or joined, but that they simply had the humility to say something no one in the division had said until now: **“We were wrong, and we are sorry. Please forgive us!”**

Hallelujah! How the angels must have rejoiced to see men willing to admit mistakes! Maybe peace was possible after all!

More Humility!

If there is one obscured point in the Amish story that I wish we could bring to light, it would be to find out how the Amish side became convinced to humble themselves as a whole. We have seen already that two of the Palatine ministers (who were not initially involved in the controversy, but were later dragged into it) did so, and perhaps their example stirred the Amish hearts. Incredibly, the story of humility and repentance did not end with the two Palatine ministers; it spread. At some unknown time and place, the Amish ministers met together and discussed the problem of reconciliation. They began to realize that they—in spite of their good intentions—*had simply failed to manifest a Christian attitude in the matter*. Maybe the names that they were being called helped them to realize the carnality of the name-calling that they had been involved in. They agreed on the following points:

1. They should have asked brotherhood approval before excommunicating the Emmental ministers.
2. They had acted too rashly and should have had more patience.
3. They still believed their doctrinal points were true and that the Emmental ministers had merited discipline, but they acknowledged that they did not carry out the excommunication procedure as blamelessly as they should have.
4. Even though the others had given cause for it, they should not have called the Emmental ministers “liars, quarrelers, apostates, and rabble-rousers” since these terms served more to offend than enlighten.



The head of the Petite Liepvre valley, looking north. Jakob's house lies just below the closest treeline. Ste-Marie-aux-Mines is at the end of the valley in the photo, after the valley turns right. Photo by Dean Taylor. Used by permission.

Ulli Ammann wrote that even though they may have had some basis for using the words like “liars” (for those who said one thing, then later changed their mind), some people would consider such terms “to be more repulsive and to serve as a hindrance rather than a way of correcting others, we have now recognized and believe that it would have been better to avoid these and to use other, more moderate words.”²⁹

Oh, how the angels must have struck their harps in joy once again! Finally! After several years of biting and devouring, some of those involved were willing to say those difficult words: **“We were wrong.”**

Having agreed on these points, the Amish ministers agreed to lift the ban they had placed on the Reistians. They furthermore confessed, in writing, the errors of both sides to the Reistians and asked for Christian forbearance. To demonstrate and lead out in repentance, the Amish ministers then excommunicated themselves!

Ulli Ammann later wrote about the reaction of the Reistians to this method:

When that had happened, those on their side became very happy and, as one says, fluffed up their manes and shouted out all over saying: ‘Now one can see who was right and who was wrong.’ They let themselves believe that they were excused of all mistakes and that all responsibility for the dispute was now to be found on our side alone, whereas the poor people should have been struck by the method we used on ourselves which no one else wanted to do.³⁰

29 Ulli Ammann, “Summary & Defense,” in Roth, p. 93.

30 Ulli Ammann, “Summary & Defense,” in Roth, p. 94.

Ulli's words can possibly be read as a one-sided accusation against the other side. However, the whole spirit of Ulli in his letters is one of sadness, simply trying to state what had happened. Here, he laments that the Reistians gloated over the Amish humbling themselves, rather than joining them in humility and weeping before God.

But no peace ...

After being excommunicated from the church for a time, the Amish ministers approached the Reistians and asked to be reinstated. The Reistians said in writing that "regarding the matter of the quarrel, they would gladly allow and be satisfied if we would be accepted into the fellowship again, and they thought we should have ourselves reinstated by them," as Ulli later wrote.

The Amish agreed to be reinstated by the Reistians—but they asked two things of the Reistians: 1) confess the disputed articles of faith and 2) repent of their own rash attitudes and words. The Reistians refused and the effort for peace failed. However, the Amish ministers were reinstated into the church by ministers who had not been involved in the controversy.

Many more peace meetings followed, and the two sides finally agreed on the disputed articles, with the exception of social shunning. As it finally came to be clear, the Reistians did not agree among themselves about shunning. Ulli Ammann wrote later that some Reistians wanted no social shunning, some wanted a little, and others wanted full social shunning.

Reconciliation seemed possible, even without agreement on shunning. Some on the Reistian side acknowledged the repentance and improvement of the Amish. Unfortunately, once it finally came down to this, the Reistians argued that reconciliation was still impossible because the Amish practiced footwashing, while they did not! They thus dragged out another matter, which up until that time had not been an issue. The Amish begged for peace and reconciliation, but the Reistians said that they *were* at ease on their side, and if the Amish were not, they should go back home where they came from.

Even so, the Amish were not content to leave the matter there. On February 7, 1700, Amish ministers Jakob Ammann, Isaac Bachman, and Niklaus Augsburgur met together to discuss again the issue of their mistakes. They together wrote a "Letter of Confession" which stated:

We, Jakob Ammann, Isaac Bachman and Niklaus Augsburgur, confess that in this controversial matter and in the harsh ban which we have used against you in Switzerland we have grievously erred ... We confess that the ban also applies to us, and for this reason we do not stand apart from the church without guilt, and we desire to be reconciled with God and man as much as is possible. Thus, we are asking you for forbearance, that you indeed would be willing to show us forbearance and to pray from



Local officials have named the road running out of Ste-Marie-aux-Mines as “Rue Jacob Amann,” which means Jakob Ammann Road. Now it needs some people living out the gospel of the kingdom along the road once again!

Photo by Dean Taylor. Used by permission.

your hearts to the Lord on our behalf that He might grant us all this through grace. For because of our error it is a matter of heartfelt concern to us that we atone for our sins while we are still living and healthy. And therefore, we are asking you once again from our hearts for forbearance, for this indeed did not happen intentionally on our part. I hope that you can believe us. Therefore, do have patience and grant us that which you are able to grant, and pray indeed to our loving God for us that He might indeed grant us all this through grace.

Other Amish ministers added their own confessions and signatures to the confession, including Ulli Ammann, Christian Blank, and others. They agreed to lift the ban from the Reistians and—once again—excommunicate themselves.

Here was Jakob Ammann, the man whom the Reistians had vilified with terrible accusations, coming to them humbly, admitting his sins and errors, and begging for forgiveness—a level of humility and repentance that is a sign of amazing grace working in his heart!

Reconciliation Refused

Unfortunately, it seems that the Reistian side did not respond to these

confessions. Nevertheless, Ulli Ammann did not give up trying for peace! Nearly eleven years after this special confession by Jakob Ammann, on January 21, 1711, several Amish ministers including Ulli Ammann, Hans Anken, Jost Joder, and Hans Gut met with the Reistian ministers of Heidolsheim.³¹ They asked for peace on the condition that both sides forgive each other of their errors and both left each other to their own views on shunning and footwashing. The Heidolsheim ministers did not say yes or no, but wrote to Switzerland for advice.

It appears that in response to this plea for advice, several ministers and lay members from Switzerland and elsewhere traveled to Alsace to give a negative answer. By this time, however, the Reistian Heidolsheim ministers had already made up their minds. With rough words, they ordered the unforgiving Emmmental delegation out of the room and reinstated Ulli Ammann and Hans Gerber to the ministry.

So it was that a partial reunification was finally brought to pass.

Why?

One has to ask himself a long, hard “Why?” for the rejection of this offer of reconciliation by some of the Emmmental Reistians. The Amish side had done all they could do. They finally even came to the place of saying, “Let’s forget all the past; you can practice social shunning and foot-washing as you see best, and we will do as we see best.” Earlier, they had wanted the Reistians to admit to wrong attitudes and that the Reistians take up social shunning. But now the Amish were willing to extend the hand of fellowship even without any admission of guilt on the Reistian side, and without demanding the Reistians practice social shunning like the Amish did.

But some still said no. What can we conclude? While we are 300 years removed from the events, and going on limited source materials, it seems as if we can safely conclude that, in the end, the lasting division was the fault of the Reistians.

Yes, the Amish started it. Yes, the Amish—Jakob Ammann in particular—said many things they should not have said, in an un-Christ-like spirit.

But when a man confesses and asks forgiveness, even to the extent of excommunicating himself from the church on two occasions until the other side is satisfied with him, what can we say?

Perhaps the best thing to say is, “Lord, have mercy on us all!”

31 This was the Alsatian village where Jakob and Ulli’s father had died in 1695. Why Jakob was not involved in this reconciliation attempt is unknown, but he was approaching 70 years of age. It has been suggested that he was getting too old, but we simply do not know why his involvement in inter-church relationships seems to have phased out after his plea for forgiveness. Ulli seems to have become the more prominent leader.

Chapter 11

Expelled from Alsace!

On September 9, 1712, the provincial bailiffs of Alsace were informed of the orders of King Louis XIV: “to make leave from Alsace, with no exceptions, all the Anabaptists who established themselves there, even the oldest who had been there for a long time.”

The Anabaptists—and their sympathizers in the Alsatian government—had no choice. Prince Christian III ordered that the departing Anabaptists be given Certificates of Good Conduct. The Anabaptists began to sell their properties as quickly as possible at bargain prices. Unfortunately, some Anabaptists from the local Reistians and from Hauser’s congregation decided that their farms were worth more than their faith and joined the Reformed church, which was still tolerated in Alsace. Here we see the wisdom of Jakob Ammann’s positions on the Truehearted and attendance of state church services. Some of his opponents ended up joining a church which taught that it was right to baptize babies, kill in war, swear oaths, etc.

Jakob Ammann joined those selling their possessions in order to leave Alsace. On October 25, he sold his only livestock—two cows and three goats—for 45 pounds. He also sold his garden plot the same day. He apparently owned no house of his own, but only leased one.

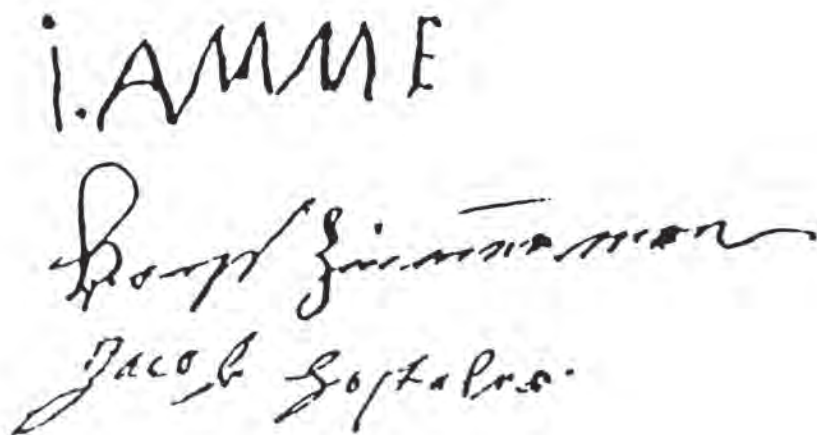
What happened to Jakob after this?

The only clue we have is in the form of an entry in the *Journal of the Anabaptist Chamber* back in Bern. On Wednesday, April 12, 1730, an entry was recorded regarding “a daughter of the late Anabaptist minister Jacob Ammen from Erlenbach, who died outside the country.” From this we learn that Jakob died before April 1730 somewhere outside of Bern. Unfortunately, the report does not give Jakob’s daughter’s name. The daughter was requesting baptism from the state church. The order was that she be allowed to be baptized.

We do not know why Jakob’s daughter attempted to join the Reformed church; there is no evidence that she ever actually did join them. No record of her baptism has been found, and no record of the payment has been discovered. It has been speculated that she wanted Bernese citizenship, but when she found that it would be necessary to receive Reformed baptism, she gave up that idea.

What about Ulrich Ammann? About 1720, he wrote a beautiful letter to the congregation in Markirch giving advice about how to handle problems and disagreements. He was still living in Canton Neuchatel as of 1733. But we do not know how and where his journey through this world ended.

Poor Jakob Ammann has suffered abuse through the years—actually, centuries now—from historians who have not taken the time to fully



I. AMME
Hans Zimmerman
Jacob Hochstetler

Was Jakob Ammann illiterate?

The top signature is Jakob's, assumedly from his own hand. In most legal documents someone else signed for Jakob or he only printed his initials. The first-grade level writing skill and the fact that historical sources mentions letters being read to him have made some historians question whether Jakob was literate, or possibly barely so.

To our modern minds, it seems almost scandalous for a bishop to be illiterate, but the first apostles were "unlearned and ignorant," most likely meaning that they were illiterate. Up until just the last couple of centuries reading material was sparse, with little need (or opportunity) for the common man to read. In some so-called "3rd-world" countries today, many people are still illiterate or barely literate. That in no way prohibits them from becoming a child of God and even leading a flock of Christians, although being able to read the Bible is a great asset for any Christian.

The middle signature is Hans Zimmerman and the bottom is Jacob Hochstetler, fellow Amish ministers. This Jacob Hochstetler is possibly the father or grandfather of the Jacob Hochstetler that suffered the Indian attack on his homestead on the Northkill Creek, in what is now Berks County, Pennsylvania.

investigate what happened in that dark decade starting in 1693. But the tide is turning, and many are beginning to realize that Jakob Ammann made a humble attempt to clear up the mess that he helped to create. We cannot know, of course, just how sincere he was. But Christian charity compels us to accept his plea for forgiveness in the face of a total lack of evidence that would indicate insincerity on his part.³²

Jakob was bold. He stood up to a bishop who was tolerating open sin in the camp. Are you that brave? Are you willing to face the bombardment of your character and your failures? Be assured that most of the time an attempt to purify a lukewarm church of her sin will not fly well.

You can make your own decision after you read the story, but I consider Jakob Ammann a hero of the faith, a man who zealously fought against the powerful tides of compromise. And in no way should we forget the humble labors of Jakob's younger brother Ulli. His humility, kindness, and patience in the latter days—Jakob was getting fairly old by then, perhaps too old to continue leading—is praiseworthy as an example of the character of Jesus infused into a man.

So goes the story of the Swiss Sons of Thunder.

32 You can be sure that if there was any sense at all of insincerity in Jakob's repentance, some on the Reistian side would have exploited it. Yet no one charged him with hypocrisy in his two self-excommunications.

So?

So, what do we make of this story? What can we learn? To read history without learning from it is a waste of precious time. Many lessons can be drawn from Jakob and Ulli's story, but the following are a few points that come to my mind. What others come to yours?

Revival is possible!

Consider 200 new family names added to the Anabaptist movement, with all of the families coming from an area with a radius of approximately 50 miles. Could it happen again? What were the circumstances for this move of the Spirit? Who were the men (and women) that God found as available vessels?

Oh, that the history books were not silent on those details!

The lesson is that God is still God, and God can still pull many families out of the fire, so that—if time lasts that long—five centuries from now those families would have many descendants still practicing the Sermon on the Mount and living godly, humble lives.

Good men sometimes make bad mistakes

Jakob Ammann ends up in a good place, a place of humbly confessing and making right his wrongs. In one sense, it is a greater show of grace to fail and humbly make it right, than to never fail (that is a debatable statement; take it for what it is meant in this situation).

Jakob joins men like Menno Simons, King David, Noah, Moses, and John Wesley who made some serious slips in their walk with God. Good men may fail; the difference is that a good man will rise up and make things right. A bad man, like King Saul, will continue to make excuses and try to hide his sin.

Church divisions usually have fault on both sides

While not always so, most divisions have strong-headed men on both sides who do not always handle the situation the best.

Church divisions usually have most people in the middle

The history books often portray church divisions as black and white, and everyone ended up on the black side or the white side. Personal experiences and thousands of pages of church history have taught me that the reality is that most church divisions have the majority in the middle. This middle group is then forced to take sides, even if they do not really want to do so.

In the Amish/Reistian division, there were entire congregations of Swiss Brethren that were neutral in the beginning. Where these congregations ended up is not clear, but some did try to help those who were quarrelling.

History books focus on church issues, rather than good stories

This one kind of irks me, because as you read this story of Jakob and Ulli

Ammann, you could easily walk away thinking that their lives were wrapped around the division. We can be sure that this was a major event in their lives, but did it really consume several decades of their lives? Or, did they live mostly “normal” lives—like the rest of us—for most of their time on earth?

We know the answer to those questions, but the history books focus on the major events of famous people. We can easily be deluded into thinking that Jakob and Ulli had no families to raise, no jobs to work at six days a week, and no beautiful relationships with other Christians and neighbors. We can begin to think that Jakob Ammann (and Hans Reist) never had joyous family devotions, moving personal times alone with God, quiet walks in the woods enjoying God’s creation, hymn sings, or enjoyed hearing visiting preachers talk about heaven.

The wrong side still has good points

In this booklet, the final blame for the division has been shifted mostly to the Reistian side. But we do not want to count them as all villains. The Reistians were noted, by outsiders, as still living better moral lives than the average Swiss Reformed Church member.

Questions about Jakob and Ulli Ammann

How did Jakob and Ulli Ammann dress?

This question is fairly easy to answer, although it should be made clear that no description exists for either man. The artwork for their time period is consistent in showing a general style for Anabaptists, which was basically the common working class way of dressing for the day. Rather than explain it, consider the following artwork of three Anabaptists, made in the 18th and or early 19th century. You will probably notice the short pants, most of all.



When did the Amish start wearing long pants?

Sometime in the early 1800s, the Amish in America began to wear long pants. This change was noted in a letter written by an Amish lady during that time, where she writes that the long pants were coming into the Amish, influenced by the British Army that had worn them!

Did Jakob Ammann shave his beard?

Jakob wrote against the shaving of the beard after the ways of the world as being sin. The wearing of a full beard was a teaching among the Swiss Brethren that went back long before Jakob Ammann became an Anabaptist. The Reistian side of the split only began to accept shaving in America in the mid to late 1800s.

Did Jakob Ammann shave his mustache?

The facial hair style of shaving only the mustache also came about a century after Jakob lived (about the same time as long pants). The so-called “chin strap” beard style (shaved mustache) was a stylish facial hair fad that began in central Europe beginning in the late 1700s. By the early 1800s it arrived in America, with thousands of photographs and paintings showing men (such as Abraham Lincoln) adopting the fad. The Amish picked up the style at some point and have held on to it, along with long pants. There is no historical evidence that the shaving of the mustache had anything to do with a protest against the French military (as some have claimed).

Did Jakob Ammann smoke tobacco?

The Anabaptists in Europe spoke strongly against tobacco use long before Jakob Ammann came on the scene. There is no reason to believe that Jakob would have taken up the practice. Some Amish learned to smoke tobacco on the frontiers of America.

Did Jakob Ammann approve of “bundling”?

Bundling, or bed courtship, is another practice that some Amish learned from their American frontier neighbors. No historical evidence places it as happening in European Anabaptism.

Did the Ammann brothers participate in politics?

Freedom for the common man to participate in the politics of this world was hardly known in Europe before the democratic experiment of the American colonies. Thus Jakob and Ulli probably never gave political involvement much thought. Local men were required in some places to provide guard duty and/or other low grade civic duties in some locales. Jakob was opposed to the participation in these (probably mostly due to the use of force required to carry out these duties). His uncompromising stance on these issues would give us an indication that he would avoid political involvement as being the

affairs of the kingdoms of this world and not the kingdom of Christ.

What would Jakob Ammann think of public schooling?

When an instance arose in which an Amish child in his community was threatened with being removed from the community by authorities, Jakob responded with a “threat” of all the Amish simply moving away to another area. Since they were good workers and paid their taxes, this “threat” was enough for the authorities to back off. This would indicate that Jakob placed an extremely high importance on children being raised and taught within the context of the family/church.

What type of Amish would Jakob and Ulli be today?

Obviously, we do not know. Jakob and Ulli were strict, but they were not “conservative” in the true sense of the word. “Conservative” means to hold on to (conserve) what was in the past. Jakob wrote (or had someone write for him, as mentioned above about his lack of writing ability!) quite plainly that he did not put weight on old customs and practices. In fact, Jakob was an innovator who was trying to bring in new practices that overthrew past practices that were over a century old, based upon his understanding of the Bible. Jakob and Ulli were strict biblicists, not strict traditionalists. This did not mean, of course, that they threw out all tradition. It only means that when the Bible and tradition clashed, the Bible won.

Would Jakob Ammann drive a buggy today?

This is an impossible question to answer. In Jakob and Ulli’s time technological issues were not issues of big concern among Anabaptists. We simply have no indication of how Jakob and Ulli viewed the use of modern technology. On the other hand, their strict lifestyle would indicate that they would probably be reluctant to accept technological advances without some good scrutiny as to how that technology would affect their community and their personal walk with God. Myself, it is hard to picture Jakob and Ulli sporting the latest model of smartphones or driving a shining new F-250!

Do Jakob and Ulli have any direct descendents today?

This is unknown, but no Anabaptist families today carry the last name of Ammann.

Did Jakob Ammann end up in North Carolina?

One historian proposed the idea a few decades ago, but there is absolutely zero evidence that it occurred. On the other hand, there is no evidence that it did not. After the expulsion from Alsace in 1712, Jakob disappears from all currently known historical records. A few Anabaptists did emigrate to what is now North Carolina very early, but no record indicates that Jakob Ammann went along with them.

How many Amish lived in (what is now) France during the time of Jakob and Ulli's time there?

This is another unknown, but one historian suggests that at some point over 10,000 Amish lived in what is now France. We do not normally think of France as being Amish country, but it has an important—and little known—place in Amish history.

What happened to the Amish in France?

About 300 Amish emigrated to America in the mid-1700s. With the coming of the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812, most emigration to North America stopped. But after the War of 1812, the flow started again and an estimated 3,000 Amish arrived in the U.S. in the mid to late 1800s. Many of these were young men, most likely emigrating to escape imminent danger of being forced into the military. So it is that the more conscientious part of the Amish tended to leave, which left the less conscientious members in Europe. In that condition, the remaining Amish quickly assimilated into the Mennonites or dropped Anabaptism altogether, and disappeared from Europe, with the last Amish congregation in Europe joining the Mennonites in 1937. The Mennonites, at the same time, were assimilating into mainstream culture.

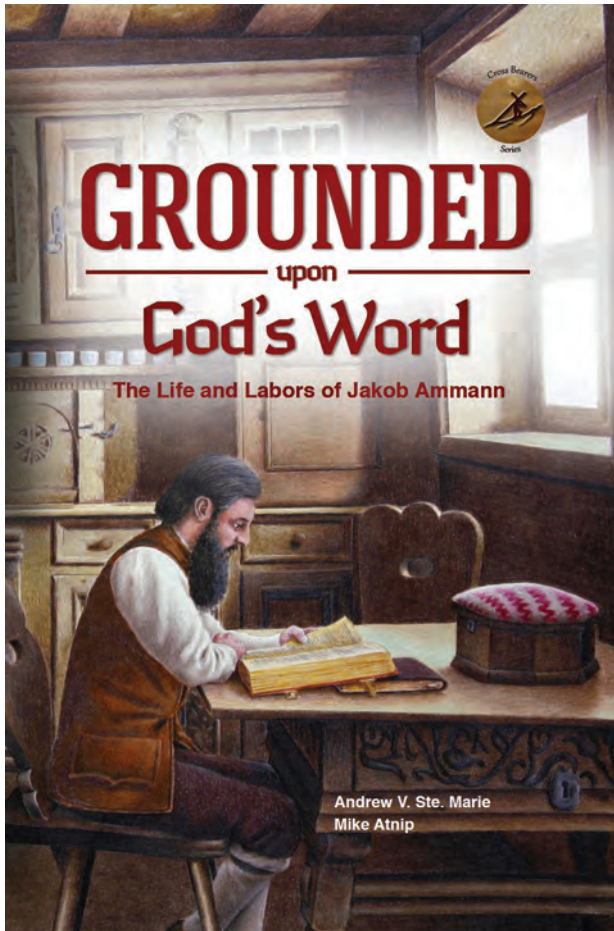
What happened to the Reistians?

The Swiss Brethren who stayed in the Emmental eventually took the name Mennonite (despite the fact that the Amish were the ones who tried to introduce Dutch Mennonite ideas, and were resisted!). In the mid-1800s a Swiss man by the name of Samuel Fröhlich preached spiritual renewal in Emmental. Some Mennonites joined this new movement, which was very similar to original Anabaptism. In Europe they came to be called Nazarenes, while in America they are now called The Apostolic Christian Church. In America, a good number of Amish and Mennonites also joined the Apostolics in the 1800s.

With the drawing away of some of the more serious-minded believers, the remaining Emmmentalers drifted into becoming a nominal church movement that differs little from typical modern Protestant Christianity ... even though it still uses the name Mennonite. Don't expect to find a strong emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount, or women wearing a headcovering, among Emmmental Mennonites today.

Where is the bibliography for this book, so I can learn more?

This booklet is a shortened version of the Ammann brothers' life story. For the complete story that includes source footnotes and a full bibliography, see the ad on the following page.



For pricing of the full version, shown above, contact:

Sermon on the Mount Publishing

P.O. Box 246

Manchester, MI 48158

the-witness@sbcglobal.net

www.kingdomreading.com

Jesus called the brothers James and John, "the sons of thunder." We are not told why He chose that name, but it appears that He knew that they would be bold in their witness for Him, as thunders echoing across mountain valleys.

Many centuries later, two other brothers would rise to resonate the gospel of the kingdom across Swiss valleys and mountains.

These Swiss Sons of Thunder made some awful mistakes while proclaiming the message of the God who "thundereth marvellously with his voice; great things doeth he, which we cannot comprehend." But when the brothers repented of their carnal attitudes, God was able to bless their labors.

This book is the story of their fall and rising again, like the echoes of distant thunders riding across the high ridges of history. Three centuries later the fruit of their labors continues to bless the earth.