Protestants and Radicals—Martin Bucer's Debate with Hessian Anabaptists (1538)

Abstract

The following text recounts a face-to-face disputation between the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and the spokesmen of the Anabaptists in the landgraviate of Hesse. The exchange stands in stark contrast to the Protestant reformers' harsh polemic against the sects. The disputation was staged at the order of Landgrave Philip of Hesse, one of the few princes who felt that the Anabaptist problem called for instruction rather than persecution. The debate led to the proclamation of a new Hessian church ordinance (1539), which introduced the rite of confirmation as a mature declaration of Christian commitment and created the office of the church elder to encourage lay participation in local church affairs. Most native Hessian Anabaptists accepted reintegration into the state church.

Source

I. *Jörg Schnabel:* Church Discipline *(Bann)*. The Church. Usury Baptism. Government. The Humanity of Christ. Absolution. II. Leonhard Fälber of Maastricht: the Ministry. Separation. III. Hermann Bastian: Church Discipline. Government. Baptism. His Recantation. Peter Losse.

Done Wednesday after Sts. Simon and Jude the apostles (Oct. 30) in the year 1538. In the presence of Crafft Bauen, Dr. Eisermann (Montanus), Hartman Schlern, the Rector, Master Adam [Kraft], Dr. Trachen, the Pastor, and other learned men, also the Mayor, Town Council and others among the most important citizens of Marburg.

In the beginning Dr. Eisermann held up the Anabaptists to critical review, [describing] how they had been treated in various ways previously, that they might be brought back to a right understanding of the divine holy Scripture. But because that was fruitless, our gracious Prince and Lord [Landgrave Philipp] had brought God-fearing strangers here who should discuss with them, with the hope that if they previously had acquired rancor or hard feelings these could be eliminated; and one of them should speak up – Jorg Schnabel or Leonhard – and the others keep still, so that the discussion could be carried through and completed in orderly fashion. And then Jorg Schnabel, after he had conferred with Leonhard and Peter Losse, said that one couldn't give the other his proxy; [he hoped] it wouldn't be held against them.

They were asked why they had separated themselves from our church His answer came back, that he was repelled by false doctrine. When he had first heard the Lutheran doctrine he had become a servant of the cash box; he hadn't realized that [pursuing] much commerce was against the Bible. In the first chapter of Amos it is written: "Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish; even the priests thereof shall fall." And in the New Testament it says: "God will judge every man according to his work." Note: "He has not spared the angels in heaven." Now such is written for an example. Note that in Hebrews the same is written. Because of these he entered into discussion with his pastor, for he saw that it was worse with him than with the pope; and especially he explained to him two matters, Usury and Church Discipline. Note: he had read about these matters in Luther, Melanchthon and in (Dr. Eisermann's book which he wrote on the common necessity, that they wrote perversely. And now he hoped that he should give honor to the gentlemen present) his pastor conceded that things were ill in the church; he would do his duty and he, Jorg, was answerable before God that he also look to the

matter. But the pastor lightly let the matter drop. When they were next together, he, Jorg, had said: “Pastor, here is money that I am to contribute, but such is forbidden in the Bible and in the city there are many poor people.” The pastor said: “It is our Lord’s command that the cash box be enlarged.” And, in sum, he declared to pastor, mayor and town council that he wished to separate from them. Note: he had spoken here in the Marburg church office of the same two articles, church discipline and usury – which they maintain improperly. Note: the Marburg pastor had cited him to the authorities, that he wanted to overthrow kings and punish all evil with the sword. In that he had done him an injustice.

Then Martin Butzer began by calling diligently on the Lord God and admonishing that all present should also earnestly beg for grace. Then he told how our honored Prince and Lord followed this matter with earnest care and therefore it was of the greatest import that those in error should be brought again to a right understanding, etc. Now the Anabaptists were being asked what was the reason they had separated themselves from the parish. Thereupon Jorg had pointed out two reasons: one, church discipline, and the other, that the pastor wouldn’t face the issue of usury. Here Butzer asked if they didn’t have other points. Said Jorg: “Yes, but these are the most important.”

(Butzer) He hoped that a repentant life was preached here and that Christ had redeemed us. He hoped that the pastor and the preachers wouldn’t have fellowship with anyone who didn’t do that. But the way church discipline was exercised was plainly set in Matthew 18 (v. 17). And whoever now wasn’t living in great sin and declared to the church as such and then publicly convicted, one couldn’t ban according to the text. For Judas took communion, but was not yet convicted before the church. Now there cannot be a church without church discipline [the #]. And wherever there are whoremongers, usurers, and other sinners among the brethren who after brotherly warning declared according to the gospel will not reform, they shall not be kept in fellowship. The preachers show this beyond all doubt in proclaiming the death of the Old Adam and putting aside of all sins. And because Judas was not convicted before the church, Christ gave him communion like the others. He believed that the preachers gave no one the sacrament who would not stand aside from sins, whom one should let go as an enemy of God. No one can be banned unless he will not listen to the church or has been brought before the church. Christ preached his word; the one to whom it applies has to be held all the more urgently by the ban. And the Anabaptists have no justification from the Scriptures to separate from the church, for St. Paul refers to such in the churches as can be read about in I Cor. (v. 1), that they were puffed up, were immoral to a degree worse even than the heathen. Paul expelled the one who bedded with his stepmother; that was properly done, and one should cite first who is to be expelled.

Jörg: I spoke of usury. Although this church was to be better than the papist, I have evidence in my heart that led to my separation: for avarice is now double in the church.

Butzer: I spoke of church discipline. We intend to speak with you first about this and later about usury. You don’t have cause enough to separate yourselves, for you shouldn’t be more strict than Christ, who commanded to cut off only those who will not hear the church after adequate warning and conviction, even though they’ve been exposed thoroughly to the proper text Matthew 18.

(Jörg) He had given answer on church discipline and discussed with his pastor the way Matthew 18 stands written. And that the preachers have withheld the sacrament from the open sinners was more of a warning than an improvement.

(Butzer) Jorg didn’t deal with the pastor according to the text Matthew 18, for he didn’t take it to the fellowship and to the church. Thus even the believers didn’t agree with him in condemning the pastor. The church must exercise the ban. If a mayor didn’t use his office and the community suffered, it wasn’t for a single citizen to unseat him. In the same way a solitary citizen in the kingdom of Christ can expel no one. By his separation Jorg had offended the community and done no honor to the Word of God.

(Jörg) He had acted justly according to his understanding. For he had only shown the pastor that he should stand apart from those things which were wrong. Because he wouldn't stand apart, he had justly separated himself.

(Butzer) He would like to see the text: whether the pastor expelled the sinner or whether a single person might separate himself.

(Jörg) He hadn't separated himself from the parish or the people but only shunned the pastor along with his doctrine.

(Butzer) Said he had shunned the community for he had shunned the preaching [service]. For there one is to hear the Word, receive the Sacrament, pray and give alms. And according to the Gospel (Matt. 23, v.) – "they sit on Moses seat," etc. – they are not to pay attention to the person of the preacher. In short, no individual alone is to remove a mayor or pastor or because of them, where they are lazy in their offices, to sunder himself from the civic and Christian community with the other citizens and Christians. Those who belong to Judas have heard the Word of God. He desired again to have the ground and proof text for his separation; for he had not shunned the pastor but the office of pastor.

(Jörg) Repeated the words of Matthew 18; the church hasn't had the strength to live up to it. So he pointed it out to the mayor and town council; and if Butzer wouldn't give it adequate acceptance he would let it stand to his record. But he was certain of it in his heart.

(Butzer) The Lord gave the Key to the church and not to any single individual.

(Jörg) Said the church had shown itself to be incapable of such discipline.

(Butzer) Nevertheless he hadn't acted properly in relation to the church; even if it had been foul in its leadership. Neither he nor any other individual is empowered to expel someone and especially not to appropriate the common service of the church. Expulsion was for two purposes, that the good be not corrupted by the bad and that those cut off may be shamed. He asked again as before, since the church had not expelled the pastor, that Jorg might show the text on the basis of which he had shunned pastor, pastoral office and the whole fellowship before an official expulsion by the church [had taken place].

(Jörg) Said still: He had punished them according to the ordinance (even here in the church office his weakness was demonstrated, but he didn't abandon it). Note and watch him: he did it justly, in separating himself.

(Butzer) Among the Corinthians the church had managed the communion improperly, that is with prophesying by tongues and much more; but the apostles had not therefore expelled the church, and Jorg had no divine command, when he immediately punished the pastor, that he should separate himself.

(Jörg) Said: After Paul showed the Corinthians their crimes they improved themselves and expelled some.

(Butzer) Indeed they expelled those cited, but grew in much other wickedness, as Paul complained in the other epistle to the Corinthians (12:20): "I feared, lest when I came to you ..." etc. But be that as it may, Jorg still hasn't brought a holy text forward which would justify his separation, even though the church may have been neglectful in exercising church discipline.

(Jörg) Repeated his previous argument, that [they] have acknowledged it to be wrong and have indicated as much to them here in the church office. And since they were all at ease in this practice, he hoped he had done justly and stopped with that.

(Butzer) Concluded from it that he had showed no text for his separation; for those only are to be shunned who will not hear the church.

(Jörg?) That's what the church says, but asked if then the one who had a better understanding of the matter shouldn't separate from them when they didn't do what was Christian?

(Butzer) To punish and warn whoever doesn't walk the right path, and to shun all evil, is not forbidden. But to separate oneself, that is wrong.

(Jörg) Paul says (Gal. 5:21): "The wicked shall not inherit the Kingdom of God." And now when they do evil shouldn't he go apart from them, that perhaps there may be some who would improve themselves?

(Butzer) The wicked who harden in it will not inherit, etc. But that all who are of Marburg are wicked, that he can't believe. Said again, he had no proof text.

(Jörg) He had authorization all through the Bible to shun evil.

(Butzer) Conceded, to avoid evil. But when he has admonished someone, he has no proof text that he should separate from him as long as the church doesn't expel them.

(Jörg) He was convinced from the very beginning that the preachers don't have the Word; he has shunned them and evil.

(Butzer) Repeated his request that he be shown the proof text for his shunning.

(Jörg) Said this church was presented to him as a Christian church. Asked if it was still a Christian church after it recognized one's sin and didn't expel them.

(Butzer) Should give proof text for his shunning. Wherever there is a church which gladly hears God's Word, that is a Christian church. And where it doesn't expel the sinner, he has no ground to shun them. Where there are believing people and they have a preacher and other leaders, even if they are found to be negligent to discipline a person for something disruptive, no other individual shall take it on himself to shun or expel them whom such a church hasn't banned.

(Jörg) Believed [the discussion] should have been closed earlier and his answer remained: if it were the church of Christ then it would have gone ahead with such an understanding; since it hasn't done it, it is no believing church and he won't accept it unless he is convinced by the Bible itself.

(Butzer) Spoke to those standing about; they have heard this talk and he will also finish off and have the decision put to the church of Christ.

[…]

On the following Thursday Butzer first recapitulated the doings of the day before. And he asked Jorg if he conceded it to be a church where they believe in the Word of God. Answer: those who commit themselves to the truth and stand obediently in Christ, them he respects as a church.

(Butzer) Here, too, they are agreed that there have always been easy livers and sinners in the church. But when they aren't cited they are not to be banned. Even after the sending of the Holy Spirit the eleven apostles had many shortcomings; yet their heart was loyal to God. And today, too, even among the most saintly, not to speak of the weak and stupid, much error and inadequacy are found in the midst of the true faith and fellowship of the church.

(Jörg) Asked if he thought the church from which he (Jorg) had separated himself was a Christian church.

(Butzer) He would let specific people answer what had to do with specific people; and the church at Aldendorf is to improve whatever is bad. Whoever won't hear the church shall be expelled. And in our church it is to be handled and preached as stated in the confession given the Emperor. But if there is error and shortcoming in doctrine and sacraments, let Jorg point it out.

(Jörg) Would like to know if the church in Aldendorf is the church of which Matthew 18 was written.

(Butzer) Where teaching is Christian, there is a church – here in Marburg, in Aldendorf, and in the whole land of Hessen the same is built up. But if there are tares in the midst, they must be borne with until the harvest unless they become so prominent that they can be rooted out advantageously and without danger to the wheat; all of which must always be done according to the oft-cited ordinance of Christ.

(Jörg) Asked, when the Word is there and not the power, if he still held the church at Aldendorf to be such a church? He would convince them that they have behaved and acted against the Word.

(Butzer) Let us hear that; go ahead and point out the deficiency.

(Jörg) He complained of the leaders, the teachers, as he had said yesterday, on usury and the ban. But what happened to him was like a master swordsman who finds another at his post and his sword and authority are taken from him. Three and a half years ago they took their books away from them and threw them into darkness. But they still have comfort in their hearts. They desired that they be given a Bible, as they should be treated by the church.

(Butzer) Even if their books were taken away, they still didn't have sufficient cause, they have acted unwisely, to separate themselves; if they had cause enough then, then they must still have it and could give reasons. Requested that they point out the inadequacies in doctrine, sacraments, and life.

(Jörg) He found evidence in Scripture how the church should act; and he has come here to show the people when they have done wrong. Since they have been jailed, he would convince them from Scripture.

(Butzer) The honorable gentlemen and all of us desire to hear the ground of his separation. Now he brings forward nothing but the error of certain servants, which he has not yet established and proved to them; and even if he had proved it, he had heard yesterday that that wasn't sufficient basis for his separation; since he wanted to be judged in his own case he did an injustice to the church. Whoever follows the confession given to the Emperor, him they would accept. But whoever had deficiencies, he should be improved.

(Jörg) Yesterday pointed out two articles; would also show their inadequacies. Under the papacy it didn't happen that the poor people were driven out of house and home. But they were driven now, and the authorities said in Wolkstorff that if he followed what he knew they wouldn't sit still but the law would be enforced more severely yet.

Master Adam answered him immediately, said the opposite, and referred to and cited the princely law on the matter.

(Butzer) Whatever church persecuted the innocent did wrong. If the church persecuted them and he wished to condemn it, then he was judging his own case.

(Jörg) Said still they weren't the church; Paul said (Romans 14:17) the kingdom of God was peace and righteousness. They pursue unrighteousness and create disturbance among the citizens of Marburg, so that people flogged and drove them out; and when they asked the council and citizens of Marburg the very people who flogged them said they didn't deserve it and they were acknowledged to be pious

people by them.

(Bützer) No injustice in the church was to be justified. He has not established that the church in Hesse was without righteousness, for he also hasn't established yet that injustice was done him and that he unfairly suffered for peace, etc. Said, the church hadn't cited them and put them in the tower, but the government (*oberkeit)* did it; and it was justly done for they caused unrest; when the church desired to be at one with them, then they despise the whole church, draw away from it whenever they can and unsettle many simple consciences. They want to be pious, and they say they've been done injustice; but they have to demonstrate that they have separated themselves from us and set up serious division and trouble justly; thereby nobody was made pious, but considerably damaged in many ways; in this they are not yet justified by anything in our churches; and that which Jorg cited had no weight, for we approve the ban and disapprove of usury, which were the only two points yet brought forward.

[…]

(Jörg) Declared they have shortcomings in the sacrament. Luther and Zwingli have caused division, and our church misused the sacrament.

(Burtzer) Any who want to be at peace can indeed be at peace in their unity. There were two things in the supper, the sign and that which it signified; and they have always heard that the fellowship of the body and blood of Christ is given in it.

(Jörg) Because they are not a Christian church, they also administer the sacrament improperly. That they misuse it, and that in disorderly manner, has been exposed to the light of day; for they use it with drunkards, usurers, and harlots.

(Butzer) The churches of Hesse maintain, according to the confession tendered the Emperor at Augsburg, that the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ are received in the sacrament. In the sacrament we receive the flesh and blood, etc., that feeds and sustains us into salvation. But when Jorg says drunkards, etc., are admitted, if he points one out who has been banned and convicted, who has been given the sacrament, then that will be altered for the better.

(Jörg) The reason this discussion takes place is that the ban remains unused. The papists have kept a better order than we.

(Butzer) The ban was not to be allowed to decline, Matthew 18; I Cor. 5; II Thess. 3:14, say also, the elders shall watch over the church as a housefather over his household. The issue is to be handled with those who loan sinfully; if they will not hear they are to be expelled; however hard the ban is felt, yet Christ drove the meeting even more energetically than banning. But there was no supervisory office that had brought a charge.

(Jörg) Has demonstrated his opinion where shortcomings were to be found. If Butzer wasn't content with it then it would just have to be that way.

(Butzer) Said to the audience, teaching was according to the confession. Whoever didn't do that, he could be cited [for it].

On Usury[1]

(Jörg) He had demonstrated from Scripture that one should not practice usury, neither with gold nor with goods.

(Butzer) They say they wished to justify no usury; and he must give evidence and cite where usury exists. For they condemn usury as he does.

(Jörg) They practice usury, taking of twenty guilders for one. But now for twenty guilders they required a measure of grain; that was two or three and a half guilders. Now in the first place the church took one guilder from twenty; this was forbidden in the Scripture.

(Butzer) Read to him from the 6th chapter of Luke (verses 31, 34), where the Lord said, "Whoever asks of you give to him," and "Lend to those from whom you expect nothing in return," etc.; and demonstrated from it that the Lord himself had given this rule for all such cases: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." According to it, therefore, when the matter has to do with one's neighbor, whatever we justly would wish if we stood in his place, or that we ourselves would take as let or loan, which would mean to us not only no excessive profit but also gave no basis for hope to receive again the loaned amount, that we should do for our neighbor, as we would hope in such a case to happen to us. Where, however, the neighbor has a gain won from use of the gold, or another, who in the meantime is not without a certain disadvantage, then love requires that he also share such profit with his neighbor, whose gold he used. Where now it is managed accordingly, be it with rents or other business, then it has been done in love and no one has a complaint. But wherever the neighbor has been injured, we condemn that also. But now when the common rule in the matter is five out of a hundred, those who use others' money can easily pay with their profit. If then the treasury at Aldendorf has managed according to this rule of justice, Jorg has no complaint against them; for those people have been put in charge of the treasury money, in order to earn more; and thus when one's own goods are sold to the treasury, from them the blessing of God may be expected for the poor. All church money should be divided into three parts and used: the one part is to be assigned for the maintenance of schools and church personnel; the second for the care of all needs in the parish and of special persons; the third is for building churches and for maintenance. But because unfortunately many needs show up in it, and thereby the believers don't give so much to the treasury, it must be looked to that those who hold the treasury also serve the poor. Where now someone serves his own investments with the money of the poor, shouldn't he share from it with the poor people? God forbade the Jews to take usury which damaged the neighbor, and not such a distribution of the profit to which the Lord sends his blessings – from the money of one and the trade or sales of another. Where such a tax is raised, with which the poor tax collector is criticized, injustice is done. But when five guilders are taken from a hundred according to the common rule, with it he can also make his own investments. But where the case is ambiguous, love shall be the master. Such business is a service and a work of love – no usury and also not forbidden by God.

(Jörg) How profitable it has been in love has been demonstrated in fact.

(Butzer) The papists also desire to condemn our people, saying things get worse all the time. Our doctrine is this: work repentance and also good. And it isn't the fault of the teaching that people don't do it. In the Old and New Testament it has always been the nature of God's Word that it always irritated those people who didn't accept it, just as is thoroughly demonstrated in Romans 1. "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 20:16). Those who don't accept the doctrine, after it has been thoroughly explained to them, they sink more deeply daily and give occasion for the saying: "Since the new doctrine has been preached, many people have become worse." Indeed, what has happened is what the prophets – Christ and the prophets have proclaimed – as indeed the histories and other writings show. The gospel washes us of all evil wherever it is rightly accepted. But now only the good seed brings forth fruit, as Christ says.

(Jörg) It has been spoken well, but he has not been rejoined; the actualities must be dealt with.

(Butzer) That we shall do.

On Baptism

(Butzer) Repeated what the argument was about and since Jorg claimed the sacraments were misused

and specifically baptism, he said: we ask of you, since you blame us for abuse, that you point out the abuse to us.

Jörg: You misuse baptism, because the teaching of the gospel is that men are first to be convicted of their sin, afterwards they are incorporated in the fellowship of the holy church; which [ordinance] you let fall when you baptize infants.

Butzer: We say, the ordinance is as he says when the adults are dealt with, but with the children there is another order. In the Old Testament God had his covenant with Abraham and gave him thereby the seal, circumcision, and promised him thereby he would be a gracious God to him and his seed. Now Christ has wrought a covenant for us heathen who believe on Him and God will also be the God of our children and even so will have the sacrament of the rebirth, which baptism is for us, just as circumcision was in the Old (Covenant), confessed in his church.

Jörg: I hold to the text: "Go forth and preach." Now faith comes from hearing; the children can't hear, etc.

(Butzer) Asked if he believed that the children would be saved.

(Jörg) He had the text: "Let the children come unto me," etc. (Matt. 19:14). With that he would let it be settled.

(Butzer) When he acknowledged that the children were saved and yet said the children couldn't hear, he contradicted himself, for they also use the Word at the end of Mark, how the Lord said (Mark 16:15–16): "Preach the gospel to every creature, whoever believes and is baptized, the same shall be saved." For there follows immediately: "Whoever doesn't believe," namely who have heard the gospel, "he will be damned"; because then the children don't hear, as Jörg says, they must then be damned, where this ordinance of the Lord also applies to the children.

Jörg: We find nothing in any apostolic act except that they have acted first in repentance. The children have no understanding; therefore they cannot repent.

Butzer: At the end of Mark Christ established an ordinance, how the adults should be dealt with. But the Lord saves our children also, as Jorg himself acknowledges, and accordingly, as soon as the adults give themselves to him he takes up their children also in his covenant of grace. Like a prince, when he grants someone a patent of nobility, he takes up also the children and all the succession with it. Genesis 17:7, "I will be God to thee and thy seed; thereby He is also the God of our children. For when the adults are accepted the children are also accepted. We must regard the Bible as to what baptism and the covenant of the Lord may be. Now whoever would say there shall be no woman at the sacrament because no woman was there then when the Lord first held it, he would be doing wrong; yet one couldn't display a single clear word by which the Lord declares it or gives an example according to which women should also participate in the holy sacrament. But since one understands the nature of the sacrament, it is easy to see that this sacrament shall also be administered to the women, for they also belong to the community of Christ as believers. Thus God now calls the children to salvation and will have the same publicly demonstrated as by the adults in the sacrament of rebirth; and Christ certainly affords all the gift and the evidence of grace which the adults have had; whoever then understands the manner of the sacrament will not exclude the children; even if one could dispute whether the apostles baptized whole households to the last detail and we had moreover no express command: Baptize children!

Jörg: Since then the ordinance of the apostles isn't to be kept, baptize the children and let it stay that way, teach no repentance and improvement.

Butzer: It was the ordinance of the apostles to baptize according to the ordinance which Jorg cited, but the children according to the ordinance of circumcision; and when the children are grown they are to be

catechized faithfully and taught to maintain everything which the Lord has commanded.

Jörg: It is clearly written to circumcise the children, but not this.

Butzer asked if we should abandon what we have no express command for, such as giving the sacrament to women.

Jörg answered: No, one would do wrong not to administer it to them.

(Butzer) [asked] whether we did wrong to celebrate Sunday.

Jörg: No.

(Butzer) Then he shouldn't condemn the case of infant baptism either, even if there is no clear command so that one has good basis in Scriptures. The apostles proclaimed the services on the Sabbath and sinned not, even though there was a clear word against them: "Thou shalt do no work on the Sabbath day." Thus Christ acknowledged the resurrection of the dead without an express word which proclaimed the resurrection of the dead. When Christ enlarged his covenant of grace with the heathen, how should we then exclude the children? How do we surpass in that the Word of God, how do we go beyond [the rule of] love?

Jörg: I will hold to that, where I'm certain that the apostles have baptized the repentant and let go where I'm uncertain.

Butzer: We'll show you our argument. At the end of Matthew (26:18–20): "to me is given all power," etc. Thus "go forth, and make me disciples of all nations, baptize them and teach them to observe." There we have sufficient command that we must accept the children. If we are to accept the nations, then we must accept them, as the people were added to the Israelites. How so? In this: "He will be God to you and your children." Now I ask if the children don't belong to the people. Then follows after baptism: "Teach them to observe all things their life long, what I have commanded you." According to this interpretation the teaching comes after baptism, although from it one can't tell what order the things follow each other as with some ordinance with a clear declaration. For we have Mark 1:4–5: John came, baptized and they confessed their sins and followed the preaching of John unto baptism; just as people also confessed their sins first, before they were baptized. We have the last of Matthew: "Make me disciples of all nations," and therefore we shouldn't exclude the children. "Let the children come unto me, for they belong in my kingdom," in my church, and "whoever doesn't accept the kingdom of God as the children," etc. (Luke 18:16–17). And that is our foundation: as the Jews were accepted, so are we and our children accepted in the sacrament of rebirth.

Jörg: The first reason, which is from the apostles, pleases me more than yours; and even if it were the way it isn't and can't be proved, there would still be much misuse of it with use of sponsors, eating, and drinking.

(Butzer) Where is the commandment, where is the proof text, etc. Note: as to the misuse of sponsorship, Abraham also held a celebration at the circumcision of his son. And in the Old Testament they ate and drank on festival days. Sponsorship was used by the time of Augustine and arose out of love. Specifically, as John was born the neighbors came together; there, too, men have eaten and drunken. But we condemn misuse.

(Jörg) His reason has been heard and he wanted to let it rest there; and the Bible gives no better than his.

Butzer: This dispute stands to the judgment of God and of the church.

On Civil Government (Von der Oberkeit)

(Butzer) Said that government had been challenged, that the Christians should have no civil government. Repeated then the confession which was given to the Emperor at Augsburg.

(Jörg) Had nothing against it, for the Scripture instructs them that he should be obedient to the government. But when the government doesn't use the sword properly he will not obey it.

(Butzer) The subject is to be obedient to government in everything where it isn't obvious that the subject would act against God if he obeys. And where it isn't quite obvious, the subject is to obey the higher conscience and not set himself to judge the government and its commands. If, however, the subject knows that the government will order him to perform a public wrong, then he should not obey – like Saul's troops, when they were to murder the priests, for they knew that they were publicly innocent (I Sam. 22:17).

On the Humanity of Christ

(Butzer) Explained this article from various texts and concluded that if Christ didn't acquire flesh from Mary, then he was no human, and asked if Jorg also saw shortcomings in that.

Jörg: I hold to the article of faith: his is conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of Mary the virgin.

Butzer: Romans 1:3: "He is a son of David according to the flesh."

(Jörg) Held to the article of faith; what he hasn't understood God will give him in good time. Could not deny that there was a basis [of argument] there, in what Butzer said, but he couldn't speak much against it.

(Butzer) Mary of the house of David was of child by the Holy Ghost; thereby the Bible speaks of a son of David. Note: the Munsterites have said: Christ received no flesh from Mary. Now Elizabeth (Luke 1:42) said: "Blessed be the fruit of thy body"; that must be understood according to the manner of Scripture, what fruit of the body alone is meant; thus receiving from her body blood and flesh, Christ became her natural son, yet the community of mankind was added.

(Butzer) Asked if they had further reason to separate themselves from us.

Absolution

(Jörg) His [list of] shortcomings have been heard in fact, but there is a further deficiency, namely this: the following after was mentioned only in the community of sin; among whom were many unrepentant, etc. Specifically: when wrong doers have denied life, then they were promised the Kingdom of God and that they should not die as a murderer according to the Scriptures.

Butzer: When one says: I repent of my sins, then he is given absolution; but they can't see into his heart. And although everyone should watch that he doesn't escape suffering due to murder and robbery, etc., even if that is the situation with him, he should carry his pain like the thief on the cross and seek grace of the Lord, which he will certainly find, as the thief found it. And Butzer asked Jorg if he had something further.

Jörg: No, but if Master Adam and others found shortcomings in them, they should cite them.

(Butzer) The defect they found in them was that they separated themselves from us without cause. For we do not want to set church discipline aside, nor justify usury; we proclaim a repentant life; we maintain the sacraments according to the meaning of Scripture and according to the confession delivered at

Augsburg. Prayed that they and Jorg should let it be known if they would again join us in all Christian matters.

Jörg answered they would think it over.

There followed the examination of Leonhard of Maastricht. And the same Leonhard said that as his brethren had answered to the articles, in them he saw other deficiencies and will demonstrate it as simply as possible and with evidence from the Bible. First he asked Mr. Butzer from whence came his calling to preach according to the rule of Christ.

(Butzer) Whoever can serve the church, he serves as best he is able. Now the church has called those here who can preach; and Paul commanded Titus to occupy the city with capable people (Titus 1:15). And even so are our preachers provided.

(Leonhard) But he hasn't thereby sufficient evidence as to who sent them.

Butzer: No one can preach except he be sent, Romans 10:15. With whatever one has one should serve the church.

Leonhard: When I see you come with such signs as Christ commanded of them, namely that they should be born again, joined to Christ with the death of sins, then I will believe in you.

Butzer: Him whom they may convict, that he isn't at one with Christ, we will not allow to be a preacher.

Leonhard: Christ said John 3:7, "unless ye be born again," etc. Now I know none who has been resurrected in such a rebirth through falling away of the first life; I find that they take the opposite position, do not gather with Christ but rather scatter.

(Butzer) He should demonstrate in what particular.

(Leonhard) His complaint has been heard, that they won't have the abomination stopped and have become accomplices of the pope through infant baptism; in this [practice] they have abandoned the good in order to build up the abomination.

(Butzer) Infant baptism was given them by God's ordinance, by it the children of God are accepted. Hezekiah, Isaiah, etc., and others too renewed the covenant of God, but nevertheless did not circumcise the people again. In the Old Testament the covenant of the Lord was renewed with the paschal lamb. And our preachers have done the same with the Lord's Supper. And because they confess the faith we must recognize them as Christians even though they haven't renewed the baptism.

Leonhard: I feel that you don't have a living word for which God sent his beloved Son to us; you have a dead word, as evidenced by your fellowship, else you would draw away from the evil.

Butzer: You complain because you aren't highly thought of.

Butzer asked Leonhard whether their elders had an act or a living word.

(Leonhard's answer) They have a living word that can bring the people from evil to good and totally renew them.

Butzer: Would God that Münster and all of them had a living word that could kill the Old Adam in us all! Pour out your living word on all of us here and all men, that we might be pious indeed. And since now you can't do that and think nevertheless that you have a living word, then permit the word of Christ, of the apostles and that now preached, which is a word, a living word indeed, whether they are

immediately improved in a special way when called to life or not.

Leonhard: I find no one who has been converted from his previous stained life. And thereby he cannot see that they have a living word.

(Butzer) That is no logical sequence. The word has been preached for a long time; if there is no improvement there, then it is no word of God. At the end of the 4th book of Kings (II Chron. 36:15): "I have ever sent prophets and they worked among you." And when he says he has not yet found one, etc., then he should reflect that he should not judge; he has known without doubt many people, and many have sealed their confession with their blood, and he could not know what each does for good in another land. Therefore it is very frivolous of him when he says that he hasn't found one.

Leonhard: As to the charge that I let fall a judgment that I shouldn't. I say: What God's word judges, that we do not judge, yet we use the word according to his command. Therefore when one judges it is not a judicial sentence.

(Butzer) Asked if it is a good line of reasoning [to say] the people are not converted by the word, therefore it is not God's word.

(Leonhard) He wished to hold to the clear evidence. Christ doesn't let himself be found in the higher schools.

(Butzer) Said, Leonhard won't give God the praise, that the line of reasoning wasn't sound. Then he turned to the audience and said, Christ did preach in the higher schools, for he was in the synagogues and preached to all creatures. But the little common folk have come to hold it against the word – [an attitude] one finds among princes and peasants and in other places; and they know within them and not from the Word of God – that the specialists, from them the teaching of Christ is hidden; to them, moreover, the lowest people are equal.

Leonhard: Christ says: "The tree is known by its fruit," Matthew 12:33, 34. *The mouth flows over with what the heart is full;* that one can then judge. Therefore they cannot establish that they are sent, for they show no good fruit.

Butzer: How can such a logical line be sound: It is a bad tree for I have seen no good fruit from it! What then if the tree were in Calcutta and I am here and see no good fruit on the tree, does that mean therefore it doesn't have any? He, Leonhard, has not seen anyone. Therefore, he judges frivolously. He prayed that they should judge what they see and not then act as though they were equal to God. For it was for that that God cast the angels from heaven.

(Leonhard) They have heard from his brother that they wanted to do that good which they recognize and acknowledge. But the preachers were the first to cite his brother before the government and have claimed he was rebellious. He never read that of any apostles or prophets, for God was a God of peace.

(Butzer) He should have held his judgment that no fruit appears in our church, for he lied when he said that he had kept it a secret. We grant: whatever preacher persecutes a good man doesn't do right. But now the Anabaptists are prosecuted not because they aren't pious but because they cause the church great mischief and damage. The one who damages his neighbor isn't pious; yet more impious is he who would withdraw from him the doctrine of God and the sacraments, as you and yours do, which causes the people the most severe damage, namely, in religion; these are the most impious of all, even if they even drink no wine, eat no flesh, love all austerity, always prayed and make use of everything that seems spiritual. This is also Satan's style and usage, that he introduces false religion with pretended austerity of life, as also happened with the false prophets about whom Paul complained in Colossians 2:16 ff. This was also evidenced by the Manichees and others who ravaged the holy religion most severely. The

preachers call no one unjustly to prosecution. But they preach, as Paul taught them (Romans 13:4), that the government doesn't carry the sword for nothing but brings fear to all who do evil and therefore the greatest fear to those who do the most grievous wrong, to damage holy religion. And if the Anabaptists suffer as wrong doers, God will have no wrong so severely punished as blasphemy. And they haven't yet given evidence that our church or preachers are a bad tree. Christ drove the people out of the temple who damaged religion.

Leonhard: You must admit that from the beginning the pious have never persecuted the impious.

Butzer: That I deny, for who drove Lucifer from heaven except Piety in heaven. Note: Paul strongly drove the false apostles.

Leonhard asked: Did Paul persecute the others?

Butzer: Yes, and that with true Godly fervor, for the false apostles persecuted them with a false, devilish fervor.

(Leonhard) Where did Jacob persecute his brother Esau? But Cain persecuted his brother Abel for the sake of the sacrifice and Esau, Jacob. And so it is yet today, etc.

Butzer: That the wicked persecute the good, we admit; but that the pious also have driven the wicked, all Scriptures shows. What die Christ do in the temple, what die Peter do with Ananias (Acts 5)?

On the Following Friday

Leonhard: Yesterday I put questions, as you have heard. Now I can't criticize your talk; and if they also are ready to apply it in practice, then it pleases him indeed; but it isn't sufficient until they set to work to build the temple, for he and his co-believers want to help with it. And they have given proper cause to have separated from us and they pray that patience may be shown them; let the light shine and don't chop down the tree because it stands in blood.

(Butzer) One should understand how Christ, the apostles and prophets managed – at the beginning had enough to do in witness, in love waited upon the work; if they weren't initiated, they treated them according to the ordinance of Christ. Note: as Peter did the first preaching he took into the church those who made public confession. Because they will take from us the practice and doctrine, they are indebted [for them]. He must also realize that the church has many members; but the preacher should give diligent attention to his office, heal what is hurt, strengthen what is weak. That some are a bad sort among them mustn't be counted against the good sheep. He says, the tree shouldn't be chopped down, etc. Said Butzer: Our prince is of the intention that his people should not be distracted and the Anabaptists not burned. But when he sees that the word is despised and especially by them, the Anabaptists, it is his duty to deal with it, and to see that the best is done with them that they improve themselves. He must hold the church dearer than his father, brother, and mother, 5th Book of Moses 13:7.

(Leonhard) When he was cited for punishment, in that he and his brethren were represented as guilty, he said No to it; for he had done his best to build the temple of God and he wished to demonstrate it with his brethren. Since they now saw that ours were joined to false doctrine and sins, they have best turned away from us. And where we now recognize that, they wish to treat us well also as obedient children of God. They hoped, too, that no one had cause from them to punish them as evil-doers. What they see bad in their neighbor they would judge and defer to no one, according to the Scripture (Matt. 10:32): "Whoever therefore shall confess me," etc. Specially, the Scripture is in all respects on their side. For Paul says (II Cor. 6:17): One shall come out from among the evil ones. But that they should show evil for good to us, that he wished not to do and rather suffer for it what he should. Specifically, one cannot belong

simultaneously to the table of the Lord and of the devil. And we should look about us as to where we stand in order that we don't stand where we should not stand. We should leave the ungodly and follow the godly. If they had sensed that in us they would have remained with us. And now their separation should not be misunderstood; hoped that the prince and the audience would reflect that they have suffered with patience as well-doers and not as evildoers, so that we might see what they have at heart.

(Butzer) Prayed that it would be taken for true what he brings up, that evil must be abandoned, that one could not serve both the table of Christ and of the devil. Now our elders lead in no other way than this. The Bible is against the Anabaptists, for they are joined to works, in the sense Paul said to the Galatians (1:8): heresy. The Christian doctrine which we confessed before the Emperor we know to be grounded in the divine Word; and all the children of God owe it to have fellowship with us in such doctrine, regardless if at the same time some are found of evil life. And as long as the doctrine is proclaimed and the sacrament is used, all men owe it to stay by us. Now they have not only broken this same teaching but also defamed it (he hoped however through lack of understanding) and thereby many people pass away ruined into eternity. And if they had a faith to remove mountains and to give their body to be burned, as Paul announces in I Cor. 13:2 ff., but have not love and throw us out of the kingdom of Christ, they are without Christ and in the worst wickedness. Galatians 6. There is the work of the flesh, not alone the rough outer but also the spiritual inner factions and sects. Now if they had fled all vice, all worldly gain, but each one taught and kindly improved his neighbor and nearest and in the meantime with the true believers kept the holy fellowship of doctrine, sacraments, prayer, and giving of alms, then they would have rightly followed the teaching of Christ and the apostles. But now, because they have shattered the good because of the bad and fled the holy service in His church, defamed it and – among many of them – cast it down, they have done nothing else but corrupt many souls inwardly, despised the word of Christ, thereby introduced among the common herd a crazy ungodly life. What could they have undertaken that would have been more disturbing and damaging to the Christian church? No one may represent our confession to be unrighteous or blasphemous. Now we still teach it (the confession) and maintain the sacred rites and yet these people blame us as if all the horror of the Antichrist ruled in all the doctrine and practices of our church. Besides we admit, too, that there are unfortunately all too few true Christians; Paul commonly complained of that, too, in all his epistles about his churches. If one is overpowered by vice, then those who are spiritual should rebuild with the spirit of gentleness and each bear the other's burden (Gal. 6:2). Now when I have done my [duty], then I am excused before God and God will perhaps give his grace. And we do not admit in your case either that you have suffered as innocents, but as those who have the greatest guilt and have done the worst things. Wishes to bring it to an end. You say you have not found the work of the Spirit among us and therefore you have justly separated from us. That we do not concede.

(Leonhard) Requested that he be given the confession which was given to the Emperor so that they might reflect for a day or two upon it.

Butzer: That will be done.

Peter Losse said: Since the prince and lords have written them and all their brethren who lay prisoners with them in Wolchkstorff, as soon as his brethren were at hand they would talk with them and then give answers.

[…]

NOTES

[1] Under "usury" the Anabaptists included both avarice in business and the church tax system. This quotation is actually a paraphrase of Hosea 4:3. [Footnote taken from: "What Butzer Debated with the Anabaptists at Marburg: A Document of 1538," edited and translated by Franklin H. Littell,

Mennonite Quarterly Review 36 (July 1962), pp. 256–76.]

Source of original German text: *Urkundliche Quellen zur hessischen Reformationsgeschichte*, Volume 4: *Wiedertäuferakten 1527–1626*, edited by Günther Franz. Marburg, 1951, pp. 213–34.

Source of English translation: “What Butzer Debated with the Anabaptists at Marburg: A Document of 1538,” edited and translated by Franklin H. Littell, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (July 1962), pp. 256–76.

Recommended Citation: Protestants and Radicals—Martin Bucer’s Debate with Hessian Anabaptists (1538), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4320> [November 18, 2026].