

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.”- 46th Thesis

A good sermon invites other forms of speech. Ludwig had understood the caution in Vater Karl’s and resented it. These were, as Karl had observed, times of change and if the Catholic church had its say, the evangelicals would as well.

The giant rose from his chair at the central table in the alehouse, where Vater Karl sat across from him and Gretchen to his left. The movement was sudden and every head turned. From where he sat, Vater Karl noticed Otto Schwartz’ hand slip smoothly to precautiously grasp his wooden vise.

“Good citizens of Wolfshausen!” Ludwig thundered. He raised his tankard, which looked like a child’s teacup in his long hand, and held it in front of his chin, saluting the room. “I should have said before now what I will say now. Your hospitality, your Christian hospitality toward me, like the hospitality of Abram and Sarai to other strangers long ago, will surely bring you blessings. And I thank you all!”

Ludwig thrust the tankard out in a generous gesture which made the entire room, but for Gretchen and Vater Karl, duck. “But I will do more than salute you in my gratitude, good people! I will tell you the truth. You heard friend, Karl, tell you today that these are days of change. Some would see the church restored in Rome, some would see the body of Christ risen again, right here in Wolfshausen.

“Joshua told the Israelites after slaying the Canaanites, ‘choose today who will you serve. As for me, I will serve the LORD.’ The Church in Rome tells you that you have no choice but to be Godly with them or heathens without them. Even Martin

Luther says he seeks to improve the Roman Church so the people can pray under appropriate sanction.

“But it was Brudder Thomas Münzer who sent me to this good priest, Vater Karl, a friend to your town always, and still to the Archbishop as well.” Vater Karl knew how to appreciate a back-handed compliment and smiled behind his gray beard, winking at his friend whose speech was growing more liberal. “Thomas Münzer teaches that we are born free, the children of God.

“Up in Marburg, Landraf Philip considers Luther’s teaching. He has appointed various scribes, authorities, dignitaries and experts to determine whether you should remain with the Roman church or whether he will risk your souls as reformist heretics, following Luther.

A few of the drinking Wolfshauseners drained their cups and left. A few stared rapt. None spoke, but the evangelist from Brno thundered louder as the rime on the alehouse windows cracked and sagged. “But Brudder Thomas teaches that as we are born naked, so we are born free. Does the crying babe cry for authority or for milk?”

As if on cue, a baby in the arms of a drunken strumpet burst forth a peal. Between the central, ecumenical table and the back wall, Otto Schwarz and Heinrich Braun sat across from each other. The former’s jaw sagged and his right hand rested limply on the vise he had placed upon the table as a warning. Heinrich slid his eyes toward his friend and whispered “the baby cries for the breast, I believe.” Otto was too stupefied to notice his friend, although Gretchen smiled.

“It is not Wolfshausen, Hessen or the Holy Roman Empire that needs heaven’s nourishment but each and every child of God. And for each of us, Holy Mother Mary is as close to us our mother’s breast when we are babies. God’s authority is as close to each of us as our fathers’ switch when we are boys. Jesus’ love is every moment as deep inside each of us as the distillations that soften our agonies when we are old men.

“Brudder Münzer has revealed a secret from behind the vault of heaven which should have been as clear as the sun on a bright winter day. That we are given our lives by God. Our appetites, our angers and our fear comes from the LORD, not from our lords. So do our succors and our satisfactions. We have no need of princes in castles or princes of the church to pray on our behalf. We have no need

of Landgravs or Bishops to constrain the liberty that was conceived as we were conceived. We have no need of Priests to teach us caution.

Otto finally caught up with the sermon. “That’s what I was saying,” he whispered to Heinrich. “About the Bishops and whatnot.”

“Yes, brother!” Ludwig bellowed, raising his tankard into the rafters and spreading a rain of hard cider. Turning triumphantly to face the entire room, he boomed “Even this stupid wheelwright understands! Does he perceive what you all have missed because he is so learned and perceiving? No! The wheelwright understands because a child understands and this man is nothing but a bearded baby.” Otto’s face turned red as he twisted the vise back and forth in his strong hands.

“Jesus himself said that unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because a child sees the world as it is with God present. He does not look to the soldiers of the castle guard for protection, he looks to his father. He does not look to the priest for indulgence, he looks to his mother. As we grow up, we are taught to perceive the transcendent in the large. We can no longer see the kingdom of heaven behind the bricks of the battlement. We stop listening for God’s word anywhere but in the ringing of the churchbell and the Latin of the priests.

“That churchbell, the clanging gong Paul described as a failure of charity, we nonetheless offer a tenth of our living to maintain. Paul described might without love as nothingness, and we maintain that deficiency with our loyalty as subjects of a Landgrav.

“And yet! At this moment of decision, this priest...” Ludwig pointed a long forefinger at the end of a tremendous arm directly at Vater Karl whose eyes wrinkled collegially, “...tells you that a friend owes his brother what? Doubt? Will doubt liberate the people of Northern Europe? Will caution restore childlike eyes to our weary faces?”

“Wolfshausen, listen to me! Do not let Albrecht from his palace in Mainz choose for you. Do not let Philip in his castle tell you what is proper theology. Do not let Vater Karl tell you what to think. Do not let me stir you to rebellion.

Ludwig raised his tankard toward Jeremiah, in a salure. “This boy hates me and loves his pig. But he seeks no comfort from the church and finds no constraint in the laws of man. Let him choose for you, Wolfshausen. Let a little boy lead you.

Choose, Jeremiah, and be our Joshua. Choose who you will serve. Choose for your town. Choose today.”

Jeremiah turned his face abruptly towards Gretchen who shrugged.