

CASPER SCHWENCKFELD

Taken from:

Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Rufus Jones

Among all the Reformers of the sixteenth century who worked at the immense task of recovering, purifying, and restating the Christian Faith, no one was nobler in life and personality, and no one was more uncompromisingly dedicated to the mission of bringing into the life of the people a type of Christianity winnowed clean from the husks of superstition and tradition and grounded in ethical and spiritual reality that was Caspar Schwenckfeld, the Silesian noble.

Casper Schwenckfeld was born of a noble family in the duchy of Liegnitz, in Lower Silesia in 1489. He studied in Cologne, in Frankfurt-on-the-Older, and probably also in the University of Erfurt, though he attained no University degree. His period of systematic study being over about 1511 he threw himself into the life of a courtier, with the prospect of a successful worldly career before him. Martin Luther's heroic contest against the evils and corruptions of the Church and his proclamation of a Reforming faith shook the prosperous courtier wide awake and turned the currents of his life powerfully toward religion. He deeply felt at this time, what he expressed a few years later, that a new world was coming to birth and the old one dying away. To the end of his days, and in spite of the harsh treatment which he later received from Martin Luther, the Wittenberg Reformer, Schwenckfeld always remembered that it was the prophetic trumpet-call of Luther which had summoned him to a new life, and he always carried about with him in his long exile—an exile for which Luther was largely responsible—a beautiful respect and appreciation for the man who had first turned him to a knowledge of the truth.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer of Schwenckfeld's day couldn't go as far as Schwenckfeld did with his interpretation of the meaning of the sacraments of the Church. Luther, knew justification by faith, but he still hung on to the outer forms and rituals of the Church. Consequently, he ended up being the chief persecutor of Schwenckfeld's insights and therefore had him exiled from his own home and community. Ironically though, Schwenckfeld wrote of Luther in 1543, "I owe to you in God and the truth all honour, love, and goodwill, because from the first I have reaped much fruit from your service, and I have not ceased to pray for you according to my poor powers."

For thirty years he was a wanderer with a permanent home on the earth, but he could thank his Lord Christ, as he did, for granting him through all these years an inward freedom, and for bringing him in "His castle of Peace." He once wrote, "If I had wanted a good place on earth, if I had cared more for temporal than for eternal things, and if I would have deserted my Christ, then I might have stayed in my fatherland and in my own house, and I might have had the powerful of this world for my friends."

Here is what Schwenckfeld wrote concerning Christ, Our Salvation, the Scriptures, the Church, the Lord's Supper, and Baptism.

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Everything which has to do with salvation in Schwenckfeld's Christianity goes back to the historical Christ. Christ is the first born of this new creation. He is the first "new Adam," who by His triumphant life and victorious resurrection has become forever "a LIFE-GIVING spirit," the creative Principle of anew humanity. In Christ the Word of God, the actual Divine Seed of God, became flesh, entered into our human nature and penetrated it with Spirit and with Life, conquered its stubborn bent toward sin and transfigured and transformed this human flesh into a divine and heavenly substance. By obedience to the complete will of God, even to the extreme depths of suffering, sacrifice, and death on the Cross for the love of

men, Christ glorified human flesh, exalted it from flesh to spirit, and in His resurrection heavenly life He is able to unite Himself inwardly with the souls of believers so that His spiritual resurrected flesh and blood can be their food and drink, and he can become the life-giving source of a new order of humanity, the spiritual Head of a new race. "If the soul of man," he wrote, "is to be truly nourished, vitally fed and watered, so that it comes into possession of Eternal Life, it must die to its fleshly life and receive into itself a divine and spiritual Life, having its source in the Being of God and mediated to the soul by the living, inward-working Flesh of Blood of Jesus Christ," through which mediation we come into spiritual union and vital fellowship with God who is Spirit.

Salvation for Schwenckfeld, therefore is participation in the life of this new creation, this new world-order. To become a Christian, in his sense of the word, is to pass over one of the most decisive watersheds in the universe, to go from one kingdom to another kingdom of a higher rank. The process—for it is a vital process—is from beginning to end in the realm of experience. By the exercise of faith in the crucified, risen, and glorified God-Man, as the life-giving Spirit, real power from a higher world streams into the soul. Something "pneumatic," something which belongs ontologically to a higher spiritual world-order, comes into the person as a divinely bestowed germ-plasm, with living, renewing, organizing power. With Schwenckfeld, salvation is "real redemption," the "deification" of mortal man, the actual formation of an immortal nature, the restoration of humanity to what it originally was, through the in-streaming life-energy of a mystical Adam-Christ, the Founder and Head of a new spiritual race.

By this incoming spiritual power and life-substance the entire personality of the recipient is affected. The recreative energy which pours in transforms both soul and body. The inner eternal Word of God, who become flesh, acts upon the inner nature of man, so that the believing man is changed into something spiritual, divine and heavenly, and like Jesus

Christ, the incarnated word of God, There comes, with this epoch-making experience, of sense of freedom not known before, a power of control over the body and its appetites, an illumination of the intellect, a new sensitiveness of conscience to the meaning of sin, an extraordinary expansion of the vision of the goal of life—which is full-grown man in Christ,—and an apprehension of the gift of the Spirit sufficient for the achievement of that goal. Not least among the signs of transfiguration and of heightened life is the attainment of a joy which spreads through the inward spirit and shines on the face—a joy which can turn exile into a *Ruheschloss*, “a castle of peace.”

Those who have experienced this dynamic transfiguration gain thereby gifts, capacities, and powers to hear the Word of God within their own souls, and thus became flesh in Christ and that produces the new creation in man, becomes a perpetual inward Teacher in those who are reborn. “Precious gifts of the Holy Ghost flow from the essential Being of God into the heart of the believer.” There is, Schwenckfeld holds, a double revelation of God. The primary Word of God is eternal, spiritual, inward. “The Word, when spiritual messengers preach or teach, is of two kinds with a decided difference in their manner of working. One is of God, even is God, and lives and works in the heart of the messenger. This is the inner Word, and is in reality nothing else than the continued manifestation of Christ. He is inwardly revealed, and heard with the inward ears of the heart.” It is, in fact, God Himself operating as Life and Spirit and Light upon the spiritual substance of the human soul, first as the Life-Seed which forms the new creation in man, and afterwards as the permanent nourishing and tutoring Spirit who leads the obedient soul on into all the Truth, and perfects it into the likeness and stature of Christ. “There is a living, inner Scripture, written in the believer’s heart by the finger of God.” “This inner Scripture has an active creative power of holiness, and makes holy, living, righteous and saved all those in whose hearts it is written,”

The divine word in the secondary sense is the outward word—the word of Scripture. “The other word which serves the inner Word with voice, sound, and expression is the external word, and is heard by the external man with his ears of sense, and is written and read in letters. He who has read and heard only that, and not the inner Word, has not heard the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of Grace, nor has he received or understood it.” It is at best only the witness or testimony, which assists the soul to find the real life-giving Word. Cut apart from the inner spiritual Word, the word of the letter is “dead,” as the body would be if sundered from the spirit. “It paints truth powerfully for the eye, but it cannot bring it into the heart.” “The Scriptures cannot bring to the soul that of which they speak. This must be sought directly from God Himself. “There is,” he says, “no writing on earth like the Holy Scriptures.” His Christianity is penetrated and illuminated at every point by the profound spiritual experiences of the saints of the Bible, and still more by the vivid portraits of Christ in the Gospels, by the words from His lips recorded there, and by the experiences of the apostles and the development of the primitive Church. He never doubts or questions the inspiration of the Scriptures; quite the contrary, he holds that Scripture is “given by God” and is an inexhaustible well of inspired truth from which the soul can endlessly draw. The actual content of Christian is supplied by the historical revelation; but Schwenckfeld always insists that written words, however inspired, are still external to the soul, and merely record historical events which have happened to others in other ages. “If man,” he writes, “is to understand spiritual things and is to know and judge rightly, he must bring the divine Light to the Scriptures, the Spirit to created work....In a word, to understand the Scriptures a man must become a new man, a man of God; he must be in Christ who gives forth the scriptures.” That which is to change the inner nature of a man must be something personally experienced and not external to him; must be in its own nature as spiritual as the soul itself is and not material, as written words are. “The pen cannot

completely bring the heart to the paper, nor within itself." The Bible leads to Christ and bears witness of Him as no other book does, **but it is not Christ!** And even the Bible remains a closed book until Christ opens it. The Scriptures tell, as no other writings do, but they are still not the Word of God. The spiritual realities of life cannot be settled by laboriously piling up texts of Scripture, by subtle theological dialectic, or by learned exegesis of sacred words. If these spiritual realities are to become real and effective to us, it must be through the direct relation of the human spirit with the divine Spirit—the inward spiritual Word of God. "He who will see the truth must have God for eyes."

The Church, in Schwenckfeld's conception, is this complete spiritual community of which Christ is the Head. "We maintain," he wrote in the early period of his mission, and it remained the settled view of his life, "that the Christian Church according to the usage of the Scripture is the congregation or assembly of all or of many who with heart and soul are believers in Christ, whose Head is Christ our Lord, as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians and elsewhere, and who are born of God's Word alone and are nourished and ruled by God's Word." "The Christian Church," he elsewhere says, "is the entire community of the children of God. It is the actual Body of Christ, the Seed of Abraham, the House of the living God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. It has its life and power through the obedience of faith, it manifests to the world the Name of the Lord, the goodness and the glory of Him who called its members from darkness into His marvelous Light. Wherever such a Church is gathered, there also is Christ, its Head, who governs it, teaches it, guards and defends it, works in it and pours His Life into its members, to each according to the measure of his living faith. This inward invisible Christ belongs to all ages and all times and lands." The Church, in its true life and power, is thus for him a continuation of the apostolic type. He had no interest in the formation of a sectarian denomination, and he was

fundamentally averse to a State-Church system. The true Church community can be identified with no temporal, empirical organization, whether established or separatist. It is a spiritual, invisible community as wide as the world, including all persons in all regions of the earth and in all religious communions who are joined in life and spirit to the Divine Head. It expands and is enlarged by a process of organic growth under the organizing direction of the Holy Spirit. "As often," he writes, "as a new warrior comes to the heavenly army, as often as a poor sinner repents, and body of Christ becomes larger, the King more splendid, His Kingdom stronger, His might more perfect. Not that God becomes greater or more perfect in His essence, but that flesh becomes more perfect in God, and God dwells in all His fullness in the flesh into which in Jesus Christ He ever more pours Himself." Each soul that enters the *kingdom of experience* through the work of the Life-giving Spirit is builded into this invisible expanding Church of the ages, and is endowed with some "gift" to become an organ of the Divine Head. All spiritual service arises through the definite call and commission of God, and the persons so called and commissioned are rightly prepared for their service, not by election and ordination, but by inward compulsion and illumination through the Word of God. The preacher possesses no magical efficacy. His only power lies in his spiritual experience, his clarified vision, and his organic connection with Christ the Head of the Church and the source of its energy. If his life is spiritually poor and weak and thin, if it lacks moral passion and insight, his ministry will be correspondingly ineffective and futile, for the dynamic spiritual impact of a life is in proportion to its personal experience and its moral capacity to transmit divine power. Here again the emphasis is on the moral aspect of religion as contrasted with the magical. There can be no severing of the ecclesiastical office or function from the moral character of the person himself. Schwenckfeld has cut away completely from sacerdotalism and has returned, as far as with his limited historical insight he knew how to do it, to

the ideal of the primitive Apostolic Church. The true mark and sign of membership in the community of saints--the invisible Church--is, for him as for St. Paul, possession of the mind of Christ, faith, patience, integrity, peace, unity of spirit, the power of God, joy in the Holy Ghost, and the abounding gifts and fruits of the Spirit. "No outward unity or uniformity, either in doctrine or ceremonies, or rules or sacraments, can make a Christian Church; but inner unity of spirit, of heart, soul and conscience in Christ and in the knowledge of Him, a unity in love and faith, does make a Church of Christ." The Church is in a very true sense bone of Christ's bone and flesh of His flesh, vitalized by His blood, empowered by His real presence, and formed into an organism which reveals and exhibits the divine and heavenly Life--a world-order as far above the natural human life as that is above the plant.

Quite consistently with this spiritual view of religion--this view that the true Church is an invisible Church--Schwenckfeld taught that the true sacrament is an inner and spiritual sacrament, and not legal and external like those of the Old Testament. "God must Himself, apart from all external means, through Christ touch the soul, speak in it, work in it, if we are to experience salvation and eternal life." The direct incoming of the divine Spirit, producing a rebirth and a new creation in the man himself, is the only baptism which avails with God or which makes any difference in the actual condition of man. Baptism in its true significance is the reception of cleansing power, it is an inward process which purifies the heart, illuminates the conscience, and is not only necessary for salvation but in fact *is* salvation. Christian baptism is therefore not with water, but with Christ: it is the immersion of the soul in the life-giving streams of Christ's spiritual presence.

Schwenckfeld was always kindly disposed toward the Anabaptists, but he was not of them. He presented a very different type of Christianity to their type, which he penetratingly criticized, though in a kindly spirit. He did

not approve of rebaptism, for he insisted that the all important matter was not how or when water was applied, but the reception of *Christ's real baptism*, an inner baptism, a baptism of spirit and power, by which the believing soul, the inner man, is clarified, strengthened, and made pure.

His view of the Lord's Supper in the same way fits his entire conception of Christianity as an inward religion. It was through his study of the meaning and significance of the Supper that he arrived at his peculiar and unique type of religion. He began his meditation with the practical test--the case of Judas. If the bread and wine of the Last Supper were identical with the body and blood of Christ, then Judas must have eaten of Christ as the other disciples did, and, notwithstanding his evil spirit, he must have received the divine nature into himself--but that is impossible.

In his intellectual difficulty he turned to the great mystical discourse in the sixth chapter of John, in the final interpretation of which he received important suggestion and help from Valentine Crautwald, Lector of the Dom in Liegnitz. In this remarkable discourse Christ promises to feed His disciples, His followers, with His own flesh and blood, by which they will partake of the eternal nature and enter with Him into a resurrection life. The "flesh and blood" here offered to men cannot refer to an outward sacrament which is eaten in a physical way, because in the very same discourse Christ says that outward, physical flesh profits nothing. It is the Spirit that gives life, and, therefore, the "flesh and blood" of Christ must be synonymous with the Word if they are actually to recreate and nourish the soul and to renew and vitalize the spirit of man.

This feeding and renewing of the soul through Christ's "flesh and blood," Schwenckfeld treats, as we have seen, not as a figure or symbol, but as a literal fact of Christian experience. Through the exercise of faith in the person of the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ--the creative Adam--incorruptible, life-giving substance comes into the soul and transfigures it. Something from the divine and heavenly world, something from that

spiritualized and glorified nature of Christ, becomes the actual food of man's spirit, so that through it he partakes of the same nature as that of the God-Man. Not once or twice, but as a continuous experience, the soul may share this glorious meal of spiritual renewal--this eating and drinking of Christ.

The external supper--and for that matter the external baptism too--may have a place in the Church of Christ as a pictorial symbol of the actual experience, or as a visible profession of faith, but this outward sign is, in his view, of little moment, and must not occupy the foreground of attention, nor be made a subject of polemic or of insistence. The new Creation, the response of faith to the living Word, the transfiguration of life into the likeness of Christ, are the momentous facts of a Christian experience, and none of these things is *mediated* by external ceremonies.

It was his ideal purpose to promote the formation of little groups of spiritual Christians which should live in the land in quietness, and spread by an inward power and inspiration received from above. He saw clearly that no true Reformation could be carried through by edicts or by the proclamations of rulers, or by the decision of councils. A permanent work, from his point of view, could be accomplished only by the slow and patient development of the religious life and spiritual experience of the people, since the goal which he sought was the formation, not of state-made Churches, but of renewed personal lives, awakened consciences, burning moral passion, and first-hand conviction of immediate relation with the World of Divine Reality. To this work of arousing individual souls to these deeper issues of life, and of building up little scattered societies under the headship of Christ, which should be, as it were, oases of the kingdom of God in the world, he dedicated his years of exile. All such quiet inward movements progress, as Christ foresaw, too slowly and gradually "for observation"; but this method of reforming the Church through rebirth and the creation of Christ-guided societies accomplished, even during

Schwenckfeld's life, impressive results. There were many, not only in Silesia but in all regions which the missionary-reformer was able to reach, who "preferred salt and bread in the school of Christ" to ease and plenty elsewhere, and they formed their little groups in the midst of a hostile world. The public records of Augsburg revealed the existence, during Schwenckfeld's life, of a remarkable group of these quiet, spiritual worshippers in that city. Their leaders were men of menial occupations--men who would have attracted no notice from the officials of city or Church if they had been contented to conform to any prevailing or recognized type of religion. Under the inspiration which they received from the writings of Schwenckfeld they formed "a little meeting"--in every respect like a seventeenth-century Quaker meeting--in their own homes, meeting about in turn, discarding all use of sacraments, and waiting on God for edification rather than on public preaching. They read the books and epistles of Schwenckfeld in their gatherings, they wrote epistles to other groups of Schwenckfeldians and received epistles in turn and read them in their gatherings. They objected to any form of religious exercise which seemed to them incomprehensible to their spirits and which did not spring directly out of the inward ministry of the Word of God. They were eventually discovered, their leaders banished, their books burned, and their little meeting of "quiet spirituals" as they called themselves was ruthlessly stamped out. Societies something like this were formed in scores of places, and continued to cultivate their inward piety in the Fatherland, until harried by persecution they migrated in 1734 to Pennsylvania, where they have continued to maintain their community life until the present day.

But the most important effect of Schwenckfeld's life and work must not be sought in the history of these visible societies which owed their origin to his apostolic activity. His first concern was always for the building of the invisible community of God throughout the whole world--not for the promotion of a sect--and his greatest contribution will be found in the silent,

often unnoticed, propagation of his spirit, the contagious dissemination of his ideas, the gradual influence of his truth and insight upon Christian communions and upon individual believers that hardly knew his name. His correspondence was extraordinarily extensive; his books and tracts, which were legion, found eager readers and transmitters, and slowly--too slowly for observation--the spiritual message of the homeless reformer made its way into the inner life of faithful souls, who in all lands were praying for the consolation of God's new Israel. Even so early as 1551, an English writer, Wyllyam Turner, in a book written as "a preservative and treacle against the poyson of Pelagius," especially as "renewed" in the "furious secte of the Annabaptistes," mentions the "Swenckfeldianes" as one of the heads of "this monstre in many poyntes lyke unto the watersnake with seven heads." There is however, slight evidence of the spread of Schwenckfeld's views, whether they be called "poyson" or "treacle," in England during the sixteenth century, though they are clearly in evidence in the seventeenth century. One of the most obvious signs of his influence in the seventeenth century, both in England and in Holland, appears in the spread of principles which were embodied in the "Collegiants" of Holland and the corresponding societies of "Seekers" in England. The cardinal principle of these groups in both countries was the belief that the visible Church had become apostate and had lost its divine authoritative power, that it now lacked apostolic ministry and efficacious sacraments and "the gifts of the Spirit" which demonstrate the true apostolic succession. Therefore those who held this view, "like doves without their mates," were *waiting* and *seeking* for the appearing of a new apostolic commission, for the fresh outpouring of God's Spirit on men, and for the refounding of the Church, as originally, in actual demonstration and power.

It was a settled view of Schwenckfeld's that the visible Church had lost its original power and authority, and he cherished, too, a persistent faith and hope that in God's good time it would again be restored to its pristine vitality

and its original conquering power. "We ask," he writes, "where in the world today there is gathered together an external Church of the apostolic form and type, and according to the will of Christ." And yet scattered everywhere throughout the world--even in Turkey and Calcutta--God has, he says, His own faithful people, known only to Him who love Christlike and holy lives, whom Christ the living Word, that became flesh, baptizes inwardly with the Holy Spirit and inwardly feeds without external preaching or sacrament, writes His law in their hearts and guides into Eternal Life. But the time is coming when once more there will be in the world an apostolic and completely reformed Church of Christ, His living body and the organ of the Spirit, with divine gifts and powers and commission. In the interim let the chosen children of God, he writes, rejoice and comfort themselves in this, that their salvation rests neither in an external Church nor in the external use of sacraments, nor in any external thing, but that it rests alone in Jesus Christ our Lord, and is received through true and living faith.

For Schwenckfeld himself the important matter was the increase of this inward life, the silent growth of this kingdom of God in the hearts of men, the spread of this invisible Church, but his writings plainly suggest that God will eventually restore the former glory to His visible Church. "You are," he says, in one of his epistles, "to pray earnestly that God will raise up true apostles and preachers and evangelists, so that His Church may be reformed in Christ, edified in the Holy Ghost, and unified into one, and so that our boasting of the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right understanding and use of the sacraments may be true before God," and the time is coming, we may in good faith believe, when the sacraments will be used according to the will of Christ, and then there will be a true Christian Church, taught outwardly by apostolic ministers and taught inwardly by the Lord Himself. Fortunately, however, salvation does not depend upon anything outward, and during the *Stillstand* or interim there is no danger to be feared from the intermission of outward ceremonies.

Sebastian Franck graphically describes this waiting, seeking attitude as well known in his time. He wrote in his "Chronicle" (1531): "Some are ready to allow Baptism and other ceremonies to remain in abeyance ("stilston," evidently Schwenckfeld's *Stillstand*) until God gives a further command and sends true labourers into His harvest-field. For this some have great longings and yearnings and wish nothing else." The intense *expectation* which the seekers, both in Holland and England, exhibit was, ofcourse, a much later development, was due to many influences, and is connected only indirectly with the reforming work and the Gospel message of Schwenckfeld. It indicates, in the exaggerated emphasis of the Seekers, a failure to grasp the deeper significance of spiritual Christianity as a present reality, and it misses the truth, which the world has so painfully slowly grasped, that the only way to form an apostolic and efficacious visible Church is not through sudden miracles and cataclysmic "restorations" and "commissions," but by the slow contagion and conquering power of this inward kingdom, of this invisible Church, as it becomes the spirit and life of the outward and visible Church. This truth the Silesian reformer knew full well, and for this reason he was ready at all costs to be a quiet apostle of the invisible Community of God and let the outward organism and organ of its ministry come in God's own way. The nobler men among the English Seekers, as also among the Dutch Societies, rose gradually to this larger view of spiritual religion, and came to realize, as Schwenckfeld did, that the real processes of salvation are inward and dynamic. Samuel Rutherford is not a very safe witness in matters which involve impartial judgment, or which concern types of spiritual experience foreign to his own type, but he is following a real clew when he connects, as he does, the leaders of spiritual, inward religion in his day, especially those who had shared the seeker aspirations, with Schwenckfeld. Rutherford's account is thoroughly unfair and full of inaccuracies, but it suffices at least to reveal the fact the Schwenckfeld was a living force in the period of the

English Commonwealth, and that, though almost a hundred years had passed since his "home-passage" from Ulm was accomplished, he was still making disciples for the ever-enlarging community and household of God.

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