William Henry Angas Encounters the Mennonites: How Nineteenth-Century Palatine Mennonites Became Protestant

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Abstract: The history of Baptist encounters with Mennonites in the Netherlands and south Russia has been well documented. Far less, however, is known about early Baptist encounters with Mennonites in southwestern Germany. This essay traces the outlines of that story, focusing particularly on a visit to the region in the summer of 1824 by William Henry Angas, a representative of the Baptist Missionary Society in England who was seeking to recruit support among European Mennonites for Baptist overseas missions. Angas's visit came at a critical moment for Palatine Mennonites, whose identity had been profoundly unsettled in the aftermath of the French Revolution by their new status as citizens in which they suddenly enjoyed all of the religious and political freedoms of their neighbors. The encounter with Angas was a decisive moment in the process by which Mennonites in the region embraced their identity as "Protestants."

In early July of 1824, Johannes Risser, pastor of a small Mennonite congregation in the Palatine village of Friedelsheim, invited his fellow Mennonite pastors to participate in an unusual conference. An itinerant Baptist preacher, William Henry Angas, had recently appeared in the community and was eager to speak with Mennonite church leaders. Commissioned by the Baptist Missionary Society in London, Angas had been visiting Mennonite communities throughout Europe for the past fourteen months in an attempt to stimulate spiritual renewal and generate financial support for the society's overseas mission effort. Following extended visits with Mennonites in the Netherlands, Prussia, and Switzerland, he arrived in the Palatinate, finding a welcome reception in Risser's home.

Although Mennonite ministers in the Palatinate had long enjoyed informal fellowship with each other, only rarely—usually in times of

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crisis—did they gather for formal meetings. Two decades earlier, in 1803, Mennonite church leaders in the region had convened in the nearby village of Ibersheim to address the moral, spiritual, and political cataclysm unleashed by the French Revolution and the subsequent French occupation of the Rhineland. At the forefront of their concerns at Ibersheim in 1803, and at a subsequent conference of 1805, were a host of distinctive Mennonite practices that seemed to suddenly to be imperiled: traditional practices of church discipline and in-group marriage, for example, and the doctrines of nonresistance, simplicity in dress, and humility.[1]

But the forces of change introduced by the French Revolution persisted, even after the French occupation came to an end in 1815. In sharp contrast to the experience of a previous generation, early nineteenth-century Mennonites in the region were no longer merely tolerated as religious sectarians; instead, they were full citizens equal under the law—free to worship as they pleased, to build churches, and to proselytize without fear of legal consequences. But this era of newfound liberation was also a time of great uncertainty and tension within the Mennonite community.

More than he could have imagined, Angas became a catalyst for transformation among the Mennonite congregations in the Palatinate. The meeting hosted by Johannes Risser at the Spitalhof on July 13, 1824—in which Angas was the featured speaker—set in motion a series of events that resulted in renewed interest in missions, new expressions of ecumenism, and notable changes in theology and practices that marked a shift among Mennonites from a sect to a denomination. To put it another way, William Henry Angas and the Baptist connections he promoted enabled Mennonites in the Palatinate to adopt a new identity as "Protestants."

Palatine Mennonite Identity Prior to the French Reformation

Virtually all the Mennonites living along the upper Rhine River during the last half of the eighteenth century were descendants of Swiss Brethren emigrants—religious refugees for the most part—who had been driven out of their native cantons of Zurich and Bern during the various waves of persecution that swept through those regions in the 1640s, the 1660s, and again in the first decade of the 1700s. Along with other religious minorities, these Swiss Brethren—or Mennonites as they became known in the Palatinate—found a measure of toleration among the feudal princes

1. Cf. Paul Schowalter, "Die Ibersheimer Beschlüße von 1803 und 1805," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 20 (1963), 29-48.

and territorial lords of southwest Germany, who were seeking farmers to resettle their lands following the devastating depopulation of the Thirty Years' War.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were approximately thirty Mennonite congregations in the region, which included some 3,500 people. None of these congregations had more than 150 members, and they were geographically scattered, some separated from their closest neighbor by as much as five hours of travel. Yet despite geographical distance and the absence of any formal organizational structure, Mennonites continued to maintain a distinctive religious identity.

In part, this identity was imposed on them from the outside by a host of idiosyncratic legal restrictions and civil disabilities. Thus, most Mennonites in the region were forced to pay an annual "toleration" tax; their population could not exceed a fixed number; they were not permitted to join guilds or practice any profession apart from those related to agriculture; they could not build distinctive meetinghouses; and they were strongly forbidden to engage in any sort of religious proselytizing. Symbolic of their tenuous legal status was the so-called "law of retraction"—imposed by the Palatine Elector on Mennonite landowners in 1726—which gave any person who sold land to a Mennonite the right to buy it back at any time for the original sale price.[2] To be sure, not all of these laws were strictly enforced. But a significant element of Mennonite identity in the eighteenth century was forged in the delicate balance between the paternalistic goodwill of the feudal lord, their reputation as progressive farmers, and the various legal, social, and economic restrictions they endured as a tolerated religious minority.

At the same time, the distinctive character of the Mennonite community was reinforced from within by a cluster of theological convictions and practices that clearly separated them from their Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran neighbors. Mennonites, for example, did not baptize their infants; they refused to swear oaths, carry the sword, or participate in civil governance. At baptism, Mennonites not only promised to follow the commandments of Christ, but they also explicitly vowed to abide by the congregational regulations *(Ordnung)* and to submit to church discipline if they failed to comply. All baptizands promised to marry only within the church; and male members also agreed at baptism that they would accept the call to serve in ministerial offices —unpaid and without formal training—if the lot should happen to fall on them.

The style of Mennonite worship further set them apart from their neighbors. Mennonites met for worship in private homes or in

2. Christian Neff, "Das Auslösungsrecht gegen die Mennoniten in der Kurpfalz," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalendar* (1912), 120-134.

meetinghouses built to look like homes. Their hymns, comprised mainly of martyr ballads which they sang slowly and in unison, came from the *Ausbund*, a Swiss German hymn book dating back to the sixteenth century. And their ministers—often barely literate farmers—preached without notes, drawing heavily on Scripture passages that they had committed to memory with a strong emphasis on simplicity, humility, and the suffering Christians could expect to endure at the hands of an unregenerate world.

This internal sense of group identity was further strengthened by a complex network of family ties, by shared memories of persecution and suffering, and by the energetic efforts of a few itinerant ministers whose informal authority in matters related to church *Ordnung* transcended their particular congregation.

Despite their eccentricities, at the eve of the French Revolution Mennonites had come to enjoy a widespread reputation as hard-working, productive farmers who could be counted on to pay their rents and taxes. In the eyes of most contemporaries, they were models of industry, neatness, and moral rectitude. An official report in 1763 noted that "no more industrious, efficient or peaceful subjects are to be found."[3] And another report to the privy council of the Electoral Palatinate twenty years later, having established that Mennonites do not lie, cheat, steal, quarrel, or beg, concluded that "in short, they are a peaceful, orderly, God-fearing people whose conduct puts many other Christians to shame."[4] Indeed, some Mennonites, such as David Möllinger of Monsheim, were famous throughout the region for their progressive innovations in agricultural reform.[5]

But there were also signs of religious tensions and uncertainty within the Mennonite communities during the last half of the eighteenth century. In 1757, for example, Peter Weber—a young, newly-ordained minister at Höningen—began holding private meetings for Bible study and devotion which included people from outside the Mennonite church. At these meetings, Weber reportedly was critical of the church's emphasis on

3. Quoted in Fritz Hege, "Beruf und Berufung die Mennoniten in der Kurpfalz," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalendar* (1954), 65.

4. Quoted in "Eine Bekehrungsgeschichte: Aus den Akten des Karlsruhe General-Landesarchiv," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalendar* (1906), 67.

5. Möllinger was praised throughout the region for introducing crop rotation, new forms of fertilizers, and new breeds of cattle; and he is still identified in textbooks as the "Father of Palatine Agriculture."—For more on Möllinger and other examples of Mennonite agrarian success see Ernst Correll, *Das schweizerische Täufermennonitum* (Tübingen, 1925), 125ff as well as the contemporary account of Johann Nepomuk Hubert Schwerz, *Beobachtungen über den Ackerbau der Pfälzer* (Berlin: Verlag G. Reimer, 1816), 21ff. Frank Kornersmann has transcribed and edited Möllinger's diary.— *Das Gästebuch der mennonitischen Bauernfamilie David Möllinger Senior 1781-1817. Eine historisch-kritische Edition* (Alzey: Rheinhessische Druckwerkstätte, 2009).

tradition and external form. By contrast, he preached "redemption through faith in Christ and His sacrifice, and . . . salvation in that faith alone."[6] Though deeply moved by the Anabaptist model of costly discipleship and martyrdom, Weber hungered for spiritual nourishment that led him and his colleagues to look beyond the boundaries of the Mennonite community. His library included the complete works of Pietist leaders like Gerhard Tersteegen and Friedrich Oetinger. Weber avidly read August Herman Franck's *Glaubensweg* and Johann Heinrich Reitz's *Historia der Wiedergeborenen*; and he carried on an extensive correspondence with the famous South German Pietist, novelist, and physician Heinrich Jung-Stilling.

Weber was removed from his office and only reinstated in 1763 when he—along with a cohort of younger ministers—promised to conduct themselves in "stillness and quiet." But his critique of Mennonite spirituality and his search for sources of renewal beyond the Anabaptist theological tradition point toward tensions latent within the Mennonite community that would find fuller expression in the years following the French Revolution.[7]

Impact of the French Reforms

In 1792, the Mennonite communities of the Palatinate—along with all of the territories in southwest Germany—collided with the modern world in the form of the French Revolution. In October of that year, the revolutionary French army under the command of General Custin conquered Speyer, Worms, and Mainz in quick succession, planting liberty trees in villages throughout the Rhineland, while calling on German subjects to join in the revolution.

Like their neighbors, Mennonites experienced the initial consequences of the French occupation not in the lofty abstractions of revolutionary rhetoric, but in the tangible realities of sequestered grain, forced lodging of soldiers, and the raw fear that accompanied each passing wave of troops. Along with their Catholic and Protestant neighbors, Mennonite families either endured the interruptions of warfare or, like Christian Dettweiler of Kindenheim, they fled "the *Schrecknissen* (horrors) of the French Revolution" to the comparative safety of friends and relatives in Baden or Bavaria.[8] Adam Krehbiel, an aged Mennonite minister who

6. Quoted in Christian Neff, "Peter Weber, ein mennonitischer Pietist aus dem 18. Jahrhundert,"*Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalender* 39(1930), 72.

7. For a fuller account of Weber's story, see John D. Roth, "Pietism and the Anabaptist Soul," in Stephen L. Longenecker, *The Dilemma of Anabaptist Piety: Strengthening or Straining the Bonds of Community* (Bridgewater, Va.: Bridgewater College Forum for Religious Studies, 1997), 27-33.

8. [Christian Neff], "Christian Dettweiler," *Mennonitische Blätter* 10 (1902), 77.

chose to stay, watched in despair as French soldiers turned his meetinghouse at the Weierhof into a temporary barracks and then a granary.[9] A Mennonite farmer from Spitalhof kept track of the numerous requisitions for wood, hay, and straw demanded by the French; and he remembered with special clarity the *Republiksonntag* of 1794 when French Commissars Gibois and Gro planted a liberty tree and held a celebration, "amidst gluttony and drunkenness, dancing and music" for their high-ranking officers.[10] Martin Möllinger, a Mennonite pastor in Monsheim, wrote to Johannes Weber in 1795 that Prussian officers in the Imperial army had plundered his possessions to the tune of 5,000 florins. Three years later Weber recalled his own experiences with the French: "It was a common saying then," he wrote, "that the French never left anything behind except two eyes for crying."[11]

In later years, leaders were quick to blame the general decline in the nineteenth-century Mennonite church on the chaos, upheaval, and anti-ecclesiastical rhetoric of the French occupation. "Beginning with the French," wrote Hermann Reeder, a minister at the Weierhof, "a relaxed, frivolous spirit spread through the Palatinate . . . which had a destructive influence on the churches."[12] David Kägy of Offstein blamed the baneful influence of French atheism for the collapse of moral standards he observed among Mennonites. "For a while there were no church services held in our whole region," he reflected in 1842, "they were despised . . . and Sunday was not to be recognized at all. For these reasons the sensuous and worldly people among us walked freely down the broad road of lust and temptation."[13]

When a large group of Mennonite ministers gathered at Ibersheim in 1803 and again in 1805 to address matters of common concern, they readily admitted that the church was approaching a crisis. According to minutes from these meetings, members selected by the lot to serve as ministers were routinely refusing to accept their call; it had become commonplace for Mennonites to marry non-Mennonites; baptism was increasingly an empty symbol, formulaic and routine; church discipline was practiced only rarely; and many Mennonites had taken up with

9. Gary Waltner, "Aus der Pfalz nach Nordamerika," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* (1976), 15.

10. H. S., "Überlieferungen eines Bauern des Spitalhofes aus der Franzosenzeit," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalendar* (1937), 106.

11. Martin Möllinger to Johannes Weber [1795], Hist. Mss. 1-536, Weber Collection, Archives of the Mennonite Church USA [hereafter cited as AMC]; Johannes Weber to Martin Möllinger, May 17, 1798, Hist. Mss. 1-536, AMC.

12. Hermann Reeder, *Predigten zu Festtagen und bei besonderen Veranlaßungen* (Leipzig: Karl Tauchnitz, 1843), ix.

13. David Kägy to John Lapp, May 22, 1842, 1-536, AMC.

"worldly amusements" such as dancing, drinking, and card-playing. Perhaps most painful of all was the recognition that the principle of pacifism had been endangered by the "voluntary taking up of weapons."[14]

The impact of the French occupation, however, also had more complicated political consequences for Mennonites. Between 1797 and 1814, a white-collar army of French-speaking bureaucrats, recruited on the basis of education and talent, replaced the notables and court society of German dukes and princes. At the same time, a new, highly-rationalized system of municipal administration supplanted the fragmented and idiosyncratic jurisdictions of the *ancien regime*. Religious institutions—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish alike—came firmly under the tutelage of the state, a secular state that guaranteed the freedom of individual religious conscience to everyone, including the Mennonites.

The anchor of these reforms—equality under the law, individual rights, religious liberty, and a secular state—was the Code Napoleon, or the French Civil Code of 1804. Lucid, simple, and unencumbered with casuistry or abstractions, the Civil Code embodied a modern society established on the principles of reason rather than the habits of tradition. Despite complaints about legal fees and *Vielregelei* (red tape), the Civil Code became firmly established in the Rhineland in the first decade of the nineteenth century, penetrating the consciousness of people at all levels of society. "Every illiterate farmer in the Pfalz," wrote folk historian Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, "became a born professor, a true doctrinaire," brandishing the code at every breach of trust and arguing vigorously over its principles.[15]

By the time allied German armies reconquered the western bank of the Rhine early in 1814, most of the reforms introduced by the French were deeply rooted. In 1815, attempts by the allied military government to roll back these administrative reforms met with fierce local resistance. Even the conservative Bavarian monarchy, which absorbed the Palatinate as a province in 1818, left the Civil Code virtually untouched—freedom of religion continued to prevail, and the basic outlines of the French constitution persisted intact through the conservative reaction of the 1820s and 1830s.[16]

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14. Schowalter, "Die Ibersheimer Beschlüße von 1803 und 1805," 38.

15. Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die Pfälzer: Ein rheinische Volksbild* (Stuttgart, 1846), 261; see also Max Springer, *Die Franzosenherrschaft in der Pfalz 1792-1814* (Stuttgart,1926), 333ff.

16. Cf. Adam Sahrmann, *Pfalz oder Salzburg? Geschichte des territorialen Ausgleichs* zwischen *Bayern und Österreich von 1813 bis 1819* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1921).

Post-Revolution Tensions

On the surface, the initial consequences of these reforms were overwhelmingly positive for Mennonites. For three full centuries, Mennonites had always been wary of civil government, regarding it as both a divinely-ordained source of order and a potential threat to their very existence. Now, suddenly, the state turned out to be their friend and protector—the guarantor of civil liberties, religious freedom, and legal equality. No longer merely "tolerated" by the arbitrary whim of their feudal lords, Mennonites now enjoyed every individual right and liberty afforded by their status as "citizens." In the free market of religious opinion that now prevailed, Mennonites could worship as they pleased, build public meetinghouses to rival those of their neighbors, and proselytize without fear. They were now free to leave their isolated estates, purchase land without restrictions, pursue university education, and enter any profession or occupation that they might choose.

Yet paradoxically, the new age of freedom ushered in by the French political reforms also marked an era of profound uncertainty within the South German Mennonite church. By the early 1820s, a cluster of five conservative congregations, led by Johannes Galle of Monzernheim and David Kägy of Offstein, had formed a *Bund*, or conference, in opposition to the energetic new projects being initiated by such progressive leaders as Johannes Risser of Friedelsheim and Leonhard Weydman of Monsheim.[17]

When William Henry Angas appeared in the Palatinate in the summer of 1824, he had no understanding of these complex cross-currents within the small Mennonite congregations of the region. His sights were set primarily on the emerging Baptist mission fields in India, Indonesia, and Jamaica. But during his prolonged sojourn in Europe, Angas had also come to regard the Mennonite communities he visited as themselves mission fields—a tradition that was clearly prospering economically, but ignorant of the lost souls in heathen nations far from home and badly in need of spiritual revival.

William Henry Angas (1781-1832)

William Henry Angas was born in Newcastle, England, in 1781 and raised in a pious home. As a young boy he apprenticed as a sailor on several lengthy voyages, and then studied navigation and served as a captain's apprentice.[18] At the age of 19, he took command of a ship

17. The best overview of this scarcely-noted conservative movement can be found in Christian Neff, "David Kaegy von Offstein," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalendar* (1925), 39-63.

18. Much of the biographical information that follows is taken from Francis Augustus Cox and William Henry Angas, *Memoirs of the Rev. William Henry Angas Ordained a 'Missionary to*

belonging to his father. According to his memoir, exposure to the coarse morality of sailors, encounters with distant cultures, and several harrowing experiences while at sea—including his capture and imprisonment by French privateers—gradually nurtured in him a desire to devote his life to Christian ministry. In 1817, after a year of study at Edinburgh, Angas was ordained as a Baptist minister. Soon thereafter he moved to Brussels for intensive language instruction in French and Flemish. Seven months later, he relocated to Rotterdam, where he lived with a Moravian family while learning Dutch; at some point, he also became fluent in German.[19]

In 1820, the Baptist Missionary Society in England asked Angas to accompany William Ward, a pioneer Baptist missionary to India, on a visit to the Netherlands with the express purpose of raising funds among Mennonite churches there for the Baptist mission effort. Although Ward soon returned to England, Angas remained for several additional months and reported positively on his initial encounters with Dutch Mennonites. By December he had "visited all the principal Mennonite churches in Holland and in the lower provinces of the Rhine." His encounters, he thought, "had a very favourable effect," which was "likely to lay the foundation of a large and lasting good to the Mission." Nevertheless, he also noted that even though Mennonites were "the most wealthy people in Holland," their actual contributions to the mission effort fell far short of their capacity. [20]

At the time, members of the Baptist Missionary Society seemed to have had only a vague understanding of the Mennonites.[21] The society's annual report in 1821, for example, mentioned "the Mennonite, or Baptist Churches" in the Netherlands, suggesting that the editors regarded Mennonites as their continental cousins.[22] Angas's initial encounter with Mennonites encouraged him to learn more about them. "During my tour in Holland," he wrote,

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Seafaring Men,' May 11, 1822 (London: Thomas Ward & Co., 1834). Also useful is the brief overview by James R. Hertzler, "English Baptist Interpret Continental Mennonites in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (Jan. 1980), 42-52.

19. Cox and Angas, *Memoirs*, 42. For a short time, Angas served with the British and Foreign Seaman's Friend Society as a missionary to seafaring men.

20. Ibid., 55-56.

21. Shortly thereafter the Dutch Mennonites created an auxiliary breach of the British mission society (*Engelse Baptisten-Zendingsgenootschap, Nederlandse Afdeling*), which led to several decades of modest financial support to the Baptist Missionary Society. The organization continued until 1847 when the Dutch Mennonites formed their own missionary society.—Cf. Hertzler, "English Baptists," 44.

22. See also C. C. Tauchnitz, "The Mennonite Baptists," *The Baptist Magazine* (London), 22 (1830), 393-394.

> I received information of an immense number of Baptist [i.e., Mennonite] churches in different parts of the continent of Europe. . . Now all these being, for the most part, very well able, as I learn, to aid in the spread of the gospel in India, I intend, in a year or two more, to be among them all, for the purpose of forming them into a solid union, for the good cause of Him who bled and died for us. . . . I intend to seek all these brethren out; and yoke them in different sections to the great car of the gospel, that they may cooperate with us in England, in every work of faith and labour of love.[23]

In 1823, the society reported that Angas was "making known, by personal communication, the nature and objects of our institution among the Mennonites in the North of Europe."[24]

That spring Angas had launched an expedition, at his own expense, to acquaint himself with the Mennonite presence in Europe. After renewing his contacts with Dutch Mennonite ministers, he set out for the large Mennonite community in the Vistula Delta of Prussian Poland, where he sojourned for four months.[25] Again he reported mixed results: "Nothing could surpass the kindness and hospitality" with which he was received, "and yet the temperature of feeling toward missions was lukewarm." Following a detailed description of a worship service at the Mennonite congregation in Brenkenhofswalde, Angas noted that the Mennonites he encountered there had heard of the Baptists, "but they thought the English Baptists were only a better sort of Roman Catholics!"[26]

While in Danzig, Angas published an open letter "To the Elders, Ministers, and Members of All Mennonite Congregations in West Prussia"[27] in which he described in great detail the missionary efforts of the English Baptists in India and closed with the confident claim that if "the faithful and pious Menno" were still alive, he "would rejoice deeply and be the first to offer his hand in support of our efforts."[28]

By December 1823, Angas had arrived in Switzerland where his travels led first to the "Swiss Baptists" of Basel, then to the French-speaking *Anabaptistes* in Moutier, and finally to the "Baptists" of Bern. His lengthy

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23. Cox and Angas, *Memoirs*, 58.

24. *The Annual Report of the Baptist Missionary Society* ([London]: Printed by order of the General Meeting, 1823), 29.

25. Cox and Angas, *Memoirs*, 78.

26. Ibid., 81.

27. Consciously signaling a fraternal connection between the English Baptists and the continental Mennonites (*Taufgesinnten*), Angas signed the document "In the name of the Baptism-Minded [*Taufgesinnten*] British Mission Society and as a member of the Committee who directs their affairs in London."

28. William Henry Angas, *An die Aeltesten, Lehrer und Mitglieder der sämmtlichen Mennoniten-Gemeinen in Westpreußen* (Danzig, 1823), 23.

letters included detailed descriptions of their dress, doctrine, history, and practices. Swiss Baptists, he claimed, were "gentle and peaceful in their dispositions," though they "mingle no more with other denominations than their secular business requires, and are consequently shy of strangers, arising chiefly from a fear of innovation."[29] Their style of preaching was "very confused," consisting of "pure quotations from the scriptures, though brought forward with scarcely any order. The Bible is the only book they read, excepting a sort of Baptist Martyrology. . . ."[30] They wore distinctive dress (with hats "not unlike our Quakers of the old school"), refused to bear arms or join the military, and refrained from dancing, alcohol, smoking, and snuff. "For the rest," Angas concluded, "their doctrines are soundly evangelical, and differ from us only in their not touching on Predestination and Election."[31] Again, it was difficult for him to assess his impact:

> After a good deal of work, I got the ice broken at last, and have kept it open ever since. My main argument was that I had come a great many hundred miles to see them; and that my message was no other than love to them, and to the cause of Him, whose example was love; and though I differed with them in outside, they might not find, perhaps, so great a difference. . . .[32]

By April of 1824 he reached out to the French "Baptists" in Upper Alsace, whom he described as "richer for this than for yonder world." Although he had enjoyed their hospitality, Alsatian Mennonites responded with "little curiosity." In general, Angas concluded, they are "engrossed with the world, and ignorant of the nature of vital religion." Indeed, the visit prompted a reflection on the dangers of wealth, with a final admonition that "every professing Christian be cautious of the fascinations of wealth and glory."[33]

By the time Angas reached the Palatinate, he undoubtedly had a deeper, more nuanced, understanding of the Mennonite tradition—ranging from the culturally sophisticated merchants in Amsterdam to rustic farmers in the Swiss Alps. It is highly unlikely, however, that he fully understood the catalytic role he was to play within the Mennonite community in southwest Germany.

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29 Cox and Angas, *Memoirs*, 86.

30 Ibid., 88-89.

31 Ibid., 87.

32 Ibid., 88.

33 Ibid., 98-99.

Angas's Encounter with Mennonites in the Palatinate, 1824

During the four weeks that he spent in the Palatinate, Angas visited all of the Mennonite churches. On July 13, 1824, thanks largely to the initiative of Johannes Risser, his efforts were rewarded in the form of a gathering of some fifteen ministers from eight Mennonite congregations at the Mennonite meetinghouse at Spitalhof. According to the published minutes of the meeting, the purpose for the gathering was to determine "whether, and how, we should initiate a means by which our congregations could also assist in the spread and advance of the Gospel among the poor heathen." [34] Following an opening hymn, a "heartful prayer" by Angas, and a short sermon on the Great Commission by Mennonite minister Heinrich Ellenburger, the group turned to Angas.

In his sermon, Angas noted he had learned a great deal about Mennonites in the course of his travels, but his efforts to promote missions had thus far resulted only marginal success. The key to spiritual revival, he continued, would have to start with a transformation of the hearts of Mennonite leaders. His visit was not primarily about raising money from the wealthy; indeed, in England the most generous supporters of mission were often the poor, who gave what they had. Everyone, regardless of wealth, could support missions in prayer; and prayer for those who were sharing the gospel in distant mission fields, Angas concluded, would create a generous heart.[35]

At the end of the meeting the ministers addressed several church-related concerns, particularly related to the distribution of alms. For Risser, however, who served as secretary of the gathering, Angas was clearly the highpoint of the conference. Taking the liberty of his role as recorder, Johannes Risser added another six-page defense of Angas's character and integrity. "It pains me," he wrote, "to have to defend him against the least suspicion. Even the necessity of writing this tries my patience." "I was in his presence daily for three weeks," Risser wrote, "during which time I had more than 100 conversations with [Angas], which all testified to his character as an alert and thoughtful Christian." [36] Moreover, "his noble heart, the compassion of his character, and his warm love of the brethren" had earned Angas a positive reputation with Leonard Weydmann, the Mennonite pastor from Monsheim; and the Dutch Mennonites had supported the Baptist mission efforts for at least four years. Citing reports from a periodical issued by the mission institute

34. *Guttbefinden einer kleiner Kirchenversammlung der Mennoniten-Gemeinen. Gehalten auf dem Spitalhof, am 13 Julius 1824* ([Friedelsheim: Johannes Risser], 1824).

35. Ibid., 8-12.

36. Ibid., 17-18.

in Basel, Risser insisted that "what is now happening has not happened since the time of the Apostles. Not only are our Mennonite brothers being drawn into the field against the Lord of Darkness, but from all religious parties the sword of the spirit is being drawn . . . and success is being witnessed everywhere."[37] Risser ended with an apology for moving from the "student's bench" into the "teaching stool" and begged his readers to interpret his zealous words with charity. But he could not refrain from a final appeal in which he compared the sacrifice "of our ancestors who were beheaded in the fierce persecution" with the comparatively simple offering of the "widow's mite" in support of the mission program. "How sad it would be for us," he wrote, "if the Lord should return and find us sleeping." He closed the report with a warm invitation to all people – "the more distant from us, the more welcome" (*je fremder, je wilkommener*)—to attend the next conference in May 1825.[38]

In the years that followed, Angas's work among the Mennonites in the Palatinate clearly bore fruit. He had arrived in the region at a critical moment, when Mennonites were still struggling to understand their identity as citizens in a new context of legal, economic, and religious freedoms. His charismatic presence, and particularly his invitation to participate more fully in the larger overseas mission movement, played a significant part in a deeper transformation taking place among Mennonites. Fraught with tensions, that transformation found expression in the following years in a new interest in missions, a new posture of ecumenism, and new expressions of faith and practice that borrowed heavily from their Protestant neighbors. In short, Angas helped formerly sectarian Mennonites in the Palatinate enter fully into the mainstream of Protestant Christianity.

Palatinate Mennonites in Transition

Missions

The most obvious long-term consequence of Angas's visit was a renewed interest in mission. For several years, both Johannes Risser and Leonard Weymann had attempted to persuade Mennonites in the region to support the emerging mission initiative among the Dutch Mennonites. In January of 1824, Weydmann, who had been educated at the Dutch Mennonite Seminary in Amsterdam, translated and circulated a leaflet published by the Dutch Mennonite Missionary Aid Society that invited other Mennonites to support their work and the larger vision of the Baptist

37. Ibid., 19.

38. Ibid., 22-23.

Missionary Society.[39] But few ministers in the Palatinate expressed any interest in the initiative.

Angas's visit in July of 1824, by contrast, provided both a persuasive theological rationale and a ready-made framework for Palatine Mennonites to engage the cause of overseas mission. Before the day was over, the ministers gathered at Spitalhof agreed to several specific actions. On the first Sunday of each month, pastors agreed to read aloud a mission report to their congregations, based on a regular summary of information that Angas would supply in German. The ministers also committed themselves to pray "for faith and repentance, as always . . . but especially for the power and outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the poor heathen." And every participating congregation agreed to create a special collection box for missions, located next to the alms chest by the meetinghouse door so that "friends of missions" would have the opportunity to make a financial contribution to the Baptist Mission Society in London. [40] The proceeds would be pooled at the next meeting, set for May of 1825, and forwarded to Angas. Finally, Angas also agreed to send two young Mennonite men, at his own expense, to the Teachers' Training Seminar for the Poor (*Armenschullehreranstalt*) at Beuggen/Basel, to prepare them for leadership as teachers in the Mennonite community.

No archival records remain from the 1825 conference, but an extensive printed report of a conference of sixteen ministers who gathered in Friedelsheim on May 7, 1826, noted that some 119 florins had been raised "for the spread of the gospel among the heathen and sent to the Baptist Mission, our brothers, in England."[41] According to the alms book of the Weierhof congregation, donations to the society continued regularly until the founding of the Dutch Mennonite Missionary Society in 1847.

In 1829, Angas returned to Germany where he met with Karl C. Tauchnitz, son of the well-known Leipzig bookseller and printer, Christian Bernhard von Tauchnitz, "to engage his services for the revival and diffusion of religion among the Mennonites." In July 1830, Tauchnitz was ordained in the Camberwell Baptist Church in London specifically "to do the work of an evangelist to the Mennonite churches on the continent of Europe."[42] Six months later, Tauchnitz reported that he was planning to settle in Mannheim as the base for his visits to Mennonite

39. Ibid., 17.

40. *Guttbefinden* (1824), 13. This collection canister can still be seen at the Mennonitische Forschungstelle, Weierhof, Germany.

41. Leonhard Weydmann, *Nachricht von den Verhandlungen der dritten Jahres- und Kirchenversammlung der Mennoniten Gemeinden : Gehalten in Friedelsheim, bei Dürkheim a. d. Haardt, den 7ten Mai 1826* (Worms: Johann Andreas Kranzbühler, 1826), 7.

42. Cox and Angas, *Memoirs*, 130, 155.

churches in the region, where he intended to promote the cause of missions. In 1833 Tauchnitz helped to co-found the Pilgrim Missionary Society in Basel. Although he eventually came to realize that Baptists and Mennonites were not as closely aligned as Angas had assumed, his influence on the Palatinate Mennonite community continued long after he returned to Leipzig in 1836 to take over his father's publishing house.

Though resistance would continue among some Mennonite pastors, many Mennonites in Palatinate enthusiastically participated in the broader Protestant mission movement, inspired by the direct appeal from William Henry Angas. In the decades that followed, progressive congregations in Sembach, Friedelsheim, Monsheim, and the Weierhof aggressively pursued their interest in missions, holding periodic mission rallies, collecting funds, circulating translations of the Baptist Missionary Society newsletter, and supporting scholarships to the mission schools at Beuggen and Basel.

New Forms of Ecumenism

In a closely related way, collaboration with the Baptists in missions opened the door for Mennonites to adopt other practices from neighboring Protestant churches that signaled a fundamental shift away from their identity as a separatist minority. Confession identities ran deep in the Palatinate prior to the French occupation. The local archives are filled with reports of bitter disputes between Lutheran and Reformed villagers over access to cemeteries, ringing of church bells, issues related to mixed marriages, and even the proper language for the Lord's Prayer: the Lutherans began the prayer with the words "Vater Unser," whereas the Reformed version began with "Unser Vater."

But the shared trauma of the French Revolutionary armies, along with the political reforms enacted during the twenty-year occupation that followed, put these confessional antagonisms in a new perspective. From 1801 to 1816, ecclesiastical administration of all churches in the Palatinate had come under the firm oversight of the French state. Under the French, confessional identity no longer conferred political benefits or liabilities. Greater freedom of mobility led to a noticeable increase in mixed Lutheran-Reformed marriages. And Lutherans and Reformed villagers found common cause in their fears when the Congress of Vienna determined in 1816 that the Palatinate would be incorporated as a province of Catholic Bavaria.

The celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Reformation in 1817 turned these concerns into a concrete program of action. In August of 1817, Lutheran and Reformed members of the General Consistory in Speyer began holding regular meetings to discuss details of a possible Protestant Union, leading to the publication of a joint Lutheran/Reformed

songbook. Between November of 1817 and February of 1818, at least twenty-five communities in the Palatinate—including communities with significant numbers of Mennonites such as Kirchheimbolanden, Marnheim, and Göllheim—arranged local church mergers on their own initiative.[43] When the General Consistory put the matter to a vote in the spring of 1818, popular support was overwhelmingly in favor of a merger (98.6%). In August 1818, the Lutheran and Reformed churches formally joined to create the Union Church of the Palatinate.

Although Mennonites were not formally invited to participate in the Union, they clearly took note of the new ecumenical spirit. Indeed, welcoming Angas and joining in the mission movement were only the first expressions of a new openness to the broader Protestant world that would flourish in the course of the next two decades. In the late 1820s, for example, Abraham Hunzinger, a young Mennonite from across the Rhine in Baden, enlisted a group of subscribers to finance an analytical study of the German Mennonite church, which he titled *The Religious, Ecclesiological and Educational Conditions of the Mennonites or Baptism-Minded*. Published in 1830, the book was a blend of history, theology, criticism, and polemic. The first section began in a descriptive mode, listing South German Mennonite and Amish religious doctrines and then slipping into a lengthy harangue against the Mennonite practice of church discipline and their rejection of scientific study. In the second half of the book Hunzinger offered his solution to halt the church's decline. In somewhat pompous tones, he called for dramatic changes in the Mennonite position on nonresistance, endogamous marriage, divorce, and in their attitudes toward government. The salvation of the Mennonite church, according to Hunzinger, depended on restructuring its polity along the lines of the state churches. Thus, he argued in favor of a salaried church council, the introduction of church synods, the use of graded Sunday school material for religious instruction through the age of 18, and an endowment raised with the help of the state out of which the salary of the ministers might be paid.

Hunzinger's book clearly appealed to several leading Mennonite preachers in the Palatinate. Writing in June of 1830, Johannes Risser excitedly reported that Hunzinger had personally given him a copy of the book in addition to seven other copies to pass along to local subscribers. "As is well-known," commented Risser, the book "is useful to all of us,

43. The full details of the union can be followed in Johannes Müller, *Die Vorgeschichte der pfälzischen Union* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1967). Lutheran and Reformed congregations in Mainz (1802), Koblenz (1803), and Lambrecht (1805) had joined together in local unions already during the period of the French occupation.

especially for preachers and elders [who are] implementing the rebuilding of our congregations, whose decay . . . appears to be imminent."[44]

In a similar spirit, progressive Palatine Mennonites in the early 1830s joined forces to publish a new hymnbook. For generations, Mennonites in the region sang from the *Ausbund*, a collection of sixteenth-century hymns whose lyrics, sung slowly and in unison, reminded congregants that following Christ would entail persecution. But now that Mennonites were no longer living under the shadow of persecution, progressives increasingly regarded the songs of the *Ausbund* as anachronistic and tedious. In February of 1827, Johannes Risser noted in a letter that Leonhard Weydmann, pastor at the Monsheim congregation, had offered to take on the task of compiling a new hymnal. "We and our churches," concluded Risser, "have an obligation to extend him a helping hand in bringing this pleasant prospect to fruition." [45] Three years later, in 1830, Weydmann presented a draft of the book—which integrated the best "old core-songs" (*Kernlieder*) with a host of popular new songs borrowed from Reformed and Lutheran hymnals—to a meeting of local ministers who agreed that it should be further circulated among the preachers and elders.[46]

When the *Christliches Gesangbuch* was published in 1832 it appeared in versions—alike in all respects except for the title page and foreword. The standard version lacked a foreword and included the subtitle: *Primarily for use among the Baptism-Minded* (*Zunächst für den Gebrauch der Taufgesinnten)*. Progressive Mennonites in Friedelsheim and Sembach, however, had protested against the use of the term *Taufgesinnten* in the title, fearing that the name still carried connotations in the popular mind of the discredited *Täuferreich* (Anabaptist kingdom) at Münster. Indeed, the Sembach congregation had been so adamant about the concern that they refused to accept them until a "correction" had been made on the books destined for use in their setting.[47] Thus a variant print run of some 200 copies of the new hymnal was arranged in which the words *Taufgesinnten* in the title page were replaced with the phrase *evangelischen Mennoniten-Gemeinen*.

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44. Johannes Risser to Johan Jakob Krehbiel, Oct. 22, 1830, 1-536, AMC. Interestingly enough, Hunzinger's book eventually found its way to America and, in 1862, was reprinted by the American Mennonite reformer John Oberholtzer. "Hunzinger, Abraham," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 2:845.

45. Johannes Risser to cousin, Feb. 14, 1827, 1-536, 5/4, AMC.

46. Johannes Galle and other conservatives opposed the new songbook from the outset, claiming that it had "eliminated all the good core-songs on the themes of suffering and the cross." Indeed, in Galle's judgement, the book was so bad that "if someone would hack off the arms and legs or cut away the nose and ears of a person, his body would not be so mutilated as the songbook has been mutilated."—Quoted in Christian Neff, "Männer der alten Richtung: Aus alten Papieren - IV," *Mennonitische Blätter* (1907), 96.

47. Johannes Weber to [?], Oct. 28, 1832, 1-536, 4/5, AMC.

To their ears, "evangelical Mennonites" sounded more modern, more in line with their *evangelischen*—or Protestant—neighbors.[48]

Around the same time, several congregations began to express frustration with the traditional model of uneducated, unsalaried ministers, selected randomly by lot. In 1835, following a pattern established at Monsheim, Sembach, and Ibersheim, the Weierhof congregation hired its first paid minister. Hermann Reeder was educated at a Baptist Seminary in London and had heard about Mennonites from William Heinrich Angas. Shortly after his ordination as a Mennonite minister in Neuwied, he moved to Kirchheimbolanden with the expressed intention of deepening the spiritual life of the Mennonites there and of cultivating their newly-awakened interest in missions. Almost immediately after arriving in the Palatinate, Reeder determined that his first project would be the construction of a new church house. To that end, he embarked on a fundraising tour among North German Mennonite churches and the Baptists in England. By 1837 he had collected enough money to finance the construction a new Mennonite church at the Weierhof. In contrast to the plain meetinghouses Mennonites had traditionally constructed, the new structure was modeled directly on a Baptist church Reeder had seen in Tottenham, England, and was built on an elevation that featured an imposing stairway. In 1837, Joseph Galle described the new construction at the Weierhof in sharply critical tones to his brother Johannes. "It seems that just because they installed a new, educated missionary preacher (*Pfarrer*)," he wrote, "they must also have a new elegant church." Galle went on to quote a passage from the prophet Hosea where Israel "forgot their creator and built a temple."

The architectural novelties did not end there. The new building at Ibersheim included a bell tower—a feature consciously borrowed from the state churches. Many of the new churches introduced organs for the first time, which called for the specialized skills of a trained musician and introduced a significant shift in congregational singing. And even though Reeder insisted that the introduction of a raised pulpit (*Kanzel*) was for acoustical reasons, the innovation inevitably helped to underscore the

48. A 1839 republication of the hymnal simplified *evangelischen Mennoniten-Gemeinen* to *Mennoniten*. The 1832 hymnal found ready acceptance in the leading Mennonite congregations in South Germany. Katharina Krehbiel, writing from the Weierhof early in 1833 to her brother Daniel, a recent emigrant to New York, said that the congregation there had started singing through the book, beginning with the "new" songs in the middle, learning all the new melodies as they went. "Every evening people sing. Whole families gather to practice singing new melodies in four parts and some of them have even been sung in church."—Addendum by Katharina Krehbiel to a letter from Johannes Krehbiel to Daniel Krehbiel, Jan. 6, 1833, 1-536, 7/6, AMC.

new authority of the professional preacher and as well as the centrality of the sermon in the worship service.

New Theological Emphases

Not surprisingly, these changes in Mennonite practice in the Palatinate in the years following Angas's visit found theological expression as well. The most visible measure of that shift can be seen in a controversial initiative to revise the church's catechism.

For at least fifty years, Mennonites in the region had been using the thirty-five questions and answers of the *Christliches Gemüthsgespräch* as their basic text for catechal instruction. Written in 1702 by the highly-respected North German Mennonite preacher and elder Gerrit Roosen, the catechism had found favor among Mennonites in the Palatinate who frequently reprinted it, along with the *Anleitung zum christliches Glauben,* a similar catechism written by the Dutch Mennonite Johannes Deknatel.[49]

Progressive ministers, however, chafed at several specific questions in the Roosen catechism, particularly Article 26 that restricted marriage to other Mennonites, Article 27 against divorce, and Articles 31-33 on church discipline. So Leonhard Weydmann set about to write his own new and improved catechism, openly enlisting the help of local Protestant (*evangelisch*) clergy in the process. Even before the new catechism appeared in 1836, conservative ministers raised their voices in protest. Their concerns are illuminating. In a letter to Christian Krehbiel at the Weierhof, a proponent of the new catechism, Johannes Galle contrasted the manner of its presentation with an earlier era:

> Fifty or one hundred years ago when our congregations were scattered from 30-60 hours apart, everyone was informed and worked together with the Holy Spirit's leading whenever anything important was decided. But this new catechism was prepared in such secrecy and released like a whirlwind on innocent and unsuspecting congregations. Now disunity has arisen because many ministers and deacons—indeed most Mennonite congregations—find it impossible to agree with you in calling light darkness and darkness light, or sweet sour and sour sweet.[50]

On February 25, 1835, ministers from six congregations of the conservative union met to consider an invitation to meet with Weydmann and others for an extended discussion of the new catechism. Rejecting the

49. The most recent publication of the book at the time had been orchestrated (and likely paid for) by David Kägy, a wealthy conservative farmer from Offstein who, in the fall of 1828, ordered 400 copies of the book from Kranzbuhler printers in Worms.—David Kägy to Herrn Kranzbuhler, Nov. 26, 1828, 1-536, AMC. The edition appeared in 1829.

50. Johannes Galle to Christian Krehbiel, Dec. 19, 1835, 1-536, AMC.

offer, they dismissed the new book as an effort to reduce salvation to the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, something that the Catholics, Reformed, and Lutheran could all accept as well. "Christ called us to the narrow way. . . . Therefore we will stay by those old catechisms that we value most."[51] The statement was signed by eighteen ministers.

In April of 1835, Kägy organized another gathering of conservative ministers at Sinsheim where he was more specific in his critique. The new catechism was clearly "not for Mennonites," he argued, since it left out any mention of church discipline, the selection of leaders, marriage, and nonresistance.[52] In a letter of the following month, he wrote that "all of our doctrines and church discipline (*Ordnungen*) are contained within the 35 Questions and Answers and every member and leader can understand them." Weydmann, he claimed, to yet another correspondent, "has thrown out the doctrinal basis that separates us from the Protestant denominations (*Evangelischen Glaubensgenossen*)." In the same letter, he cast the new catechism in the broadest perspective: "because we Mennonites have sat for such a long time in proud peace and have had the gospel without the Passion of Christ we know nothing of the persecution and suffering of our forefathers. Thus many despise the old teaching books which they are now trying to destroy. . . ." Our basis, Kägy continued, "is none other and none newer than the Apostle Paul who says in Hebrews 13:5— be happy with what you have."[53] "The Mennonites and the Protestants," lamented Johannes Galle, "continue to melt together."[54]

The protests of the conservatives met with little success. By 1836, the large congregations of Monsheim, Ibersheim, Friedelsheim, Sembach, and the Weierhof all had adopted the new catechism, titled C*hristliche Lehre, zunächst zum Gebrauch der Taufgesinnten in Deutschland*.[55] In subsequent years, Mennonites in the Sembach and Friedelsheim congregations began celebrating Reformation Sunday; and in 1850, Weydmann published a glowing biography of Martin Luther titled *Luther: Ein Charakter- Und Spiegelbild Fur Unsere Zeit*.

Conclusion

The opening decades of the nineteenth century were a tumultuous time for all inhabitants of the Palatinate, but especially for the small community of Mennonites in the region. Thanks to the legal reforms introduced by the

51. Quoted in Neff, "Die Männer der alte Richtung," 98.

52. David Kägy to friend [in Bruchhausen], April 18, 1835, 1-536, AMC.

53. David Kägy to "Brother Galle," May 16, 1835, 1-536, AMC.

54. Johannes Galle to John Lapp, March 20, 1838, 1-536, AMC.

55. The title clearly mirrored that of the recently-published songbook. Weydmann apparently was not among those who resisted the use of the term *Taufgesinnten*.

French, Mennonites were no longer merely "tolerated" subjects of a feudal prince, subject to burdensome legal restrictions and fears of renewed persecution or expulsion. The reforms invited—indeed compelled—Mennonites to join with their Catholic and Protestant neighbors in a modern secular society made up of citizens equal under the law. Yet at the same time, Mennonites were ill-prepared to understand, critique, or creatively engage these new realities. Conservatives saw no reason why the convictions, practices, and postures inherited from the past should suddenly change to reflect the new context. On the other hand, progressives like Johannes Risser and Leonhard Weydmann were convinced that the cognitive dissonance between the inherited language of suffering and the reality of religious freedom simply could not be sustained.

When William Henry Angas arrived in the summer of 1824 preaching a gospel of personal spiritual renewal and active engagement in overseas missions, his message immediately appealed to progressives. In the free marketplace of religion, it made sense to develop budgets, organizations, and long-term strategies to win the souls of the lost. In an increasingly bureaucratized culture—organized around principles of efficiency, professional training, and competence—trained and salaried ministers offered clear competitive advantages over the barely literate farmer-preachers chosen by lot. In a context where religion had increasingly become a private matter of individual conscience, the Protestant language of forensic salvation and a personal relationship with God seemed more compelling than the communitarian themes of Mennonite ecclesiology. In short, engagement in world missions, ecumenical contacts, a professional pastorate, new hymnbooks, and revised catechisms all offered a better "fit" with the emerging public culture. Mennonites were no longer sectarians; they could now rightly claim their new status as Protestants.

From a longer theological and historical perspective, the consequences of this new posture remain rather ambiguous. Weydmann's reworked catechism, for example, retained passing references to the traditional Mennonite themes of nonresistance and adult baptism; but by consciously dropping the principle of church discipline, these distinctive themes became options for individual discernment, no longer a test of church membership. The fundamental organizing principle of Weydmann's new catechism was now the doctrine of personal salvation. Teachings on moral regeneration had virtually disappeared and instruction regarding the nature of the church had become generically Protestant.

Not surprisingly, within a generation or so, the principle of nonresistance had virtually disappeared from the German Mennonite vocabulary. Today, the cemeteries of many German Mennonite congregations are filled with the graves of those who "died for the

Fatherland" in deadly combat with fellow Christians from France, England or North America.

Clearly, William Henry Angas was not personally responsible for the concerted efforts by many nineteenth-century Mennonites in the Palatinate to assimilate into the mainstream Protestant churches of their day. Nor should the sobering consequences of that assimilation undermine the importance of ongoing ecumenical conversations between Mennonites, Baptists, and other Protestant denominations. But Angas's visit to the Palatinate in the summer of 1824 was a catalytic moment in the history of Mennonites in southwest Germany. The larger questions it raised about Mennonite identity—and the relationship between the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the broader currents of Reformation Protestantism—are still relevant today.