

This is an era of grace,
not “nice.”

—Martin Zender

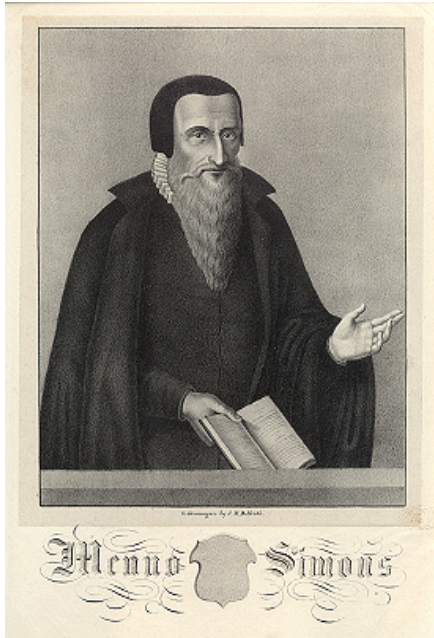
Martin Zender's Clanging Gong News

*“If I know all mysteries and all knowledge, but have no love,
I am a clanging gong” --1 Cor. 13:1-2*



Two out of three isn't bad.

Hell hath no fury like a Mennonite church sign



My job as an evangelist on a religion-scarred planet used to frustrate me so badly that I had to walk eight miles a day just to stay sane. I remember a particularly bad period a few years ago when waiting tables at Applebee's struck me as an appealing career. One day, banging out another eight-mile jaunt, I felt one-day away from quitting. Worse, I wanted to walk and not stop. *Why not just keep going? I asked myself. Walk for a year and see where you end up. Just walk and walk, and forget this God stuff. It's too hard; you're tired of it; God can find someone else to drive crazy.*

This is an account of what God did that day to re-inspire me.

Ramblin' man

There I was, rambling through the countryside on a Thursday morning, wondering if my shoes would last all the way to

St. Louis. That's when God directed my glance to a condemnatory sign planted in a front yard by a tribe of Mennonites.

Horse-drawn madness

Ah—the Mennonites. Thank you, Menno Simons. Just what we needed: another religious sect wearing strange headgear. I had always hoped that condemnation would one day smell like horse poop; alas—you've delivered. And thank you, Jacob Amman, Amish patriarch, for taking the religious severity of Simons to the highest methane levels possible. Your clippity-clop testimony to the world is: *“We're pleasing God and the rest of you are going to hell in a hand-basket. ... Can we interest you in a pie?”*

Several Mennonites in my corner of Ohio had become fond of driving condemnatory religious signs into the fertile, flowered soils of their property. The posts were wooden and uniform of grain and girth, birthed—apparently—at the same shop of carpentry. The signposts were as sturdy as the cross that Simons and Amman crucified Christ upon. The most ingenious feature of the sign was the part of the post holding the epistle itself—it was a slot, actually—allowing for interchangeable messages of varying degrees of spiritual harm. Oh, and guilt. I almost forgot the guilt.

The menfolk in these parts pounded these posts out near the road so that the hell-bound, driving past, might quickly imitate the Mennos and save their souls from perdition. Some “gospels” I had read in the past included:

■ BE YE PERFECT ■ CEASE FROM SIN ■ THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT

THE EARTH ■ GOD SHOWS MERCY TO THE MERCIFUL ■ GOD'S WORD: HEED AND OBEY ■ THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH.

While these self-righteous salvos—in one form or another—were Scripture-based, the references were divorced of context and married to the distinct scent of threat. In my two years of studied ambulation, I had not once seen a positive message. There was nothing of what God had done for humanity. If the cross of Christ had benefited anyone, free of charge, the gratuity was never mentioned, or even hinted at. Those parts of Paul's letters full of grace, peace, thanksgiving, and the wonders of race-wide vindication, were ignored in favor of those parts deemed by

“If the cross of Christ had benefited anyone, free of charge, the gratuity was never mentioned.”

the Mennonites as favoring them and damning the rest of humanity: CEASE FROM SIN. All right, I will. Cross my heart and hope to die, I will. But can I start Monday? I'd like to enjoy the weekend.

From the horse's mouth

The sign in this particular Mennonite yard—located at the two-mile mark of my round—had for months read: GOD SHOWS MERCY TO THE MERCIFUL. True enough—as it stood. But this was an Old Covenant deal between God and humans, void of the present grace. The question I wanted answered—directly from the horse's mouth, as it were—was:

... Hell hath no fury



What happens to the unmerciful? I often dreamed of asking. In my fantasy, I knock out the Mennodoor in search of a happy sequel. A plain woman answers. Her head is covered, she is aproned, and several Amlets duck and hide behind her skirts.

Not even a gardening tip!

“Hello,” I say. “My name is Martin Zender, a sinner. Yes, I said, a sinner. I do not even own a hoe and—God help me—I eat cream puffs on the Sabbath. I bathe daily and tumble-dry my clothes. Forgive me; bear with me; have mercy on my mustache. I have read your wonderful sign for many months now, hoping to earn my way into heaven. ‘God shows mercy to the merciful,’ says your wooden headline, and I thank you for it. You are

good people, a merciful people, reaching out to a sinning man such as myself who has never once baked a single loaf of bread or fertilized a carrot. May God have mercy upon your household and curse mine in Hades, naturally. But before I depart for the underworld, I must know, from a sanctified lip that has never been rouged or glossed: *What happens to the rest?* What happens to the unmerciful of our sorrowful race?”

“Humphs” and giggling Amlets

In my fantasy, the Menness calls up a holy “humph” from deep behind her epiglottis. At the same time, she snatches up a firepan and a golden snuffer from the altar of God, next to her spatula rack. She then bangs me with the firepan, while smiting me with the snuffer. It hurts, but I know I deserve it. It is my penance for driving a red car. The Amlets giggle, bite me in the knees, then run away to play in their little Sinai sandbox. Things look dim for me, but alas, I shall not return home void.

“The rest?” says the Menness. “The rest?” Imitating her favorite Old Testament Prophet, the Menness smites me a second time. “The rest?” she says again. (She says it a total of three times, the third time accompanied, in my fantasy, by the third smite of the sacred snuffer.) Three more “humphs” emerge, each one holier than the last.

“Why, the rest are damned for eternity,” she says, “in hell, of course. Do you not know anything?” In comes the firepan, again, to my forehead. In spite of the ensuing headache, I manage a smile. The Menness intends to send me away happy, and she does. She concludes her sermon with a kick to my buttock area and a verse from the book of Exodus, chapter 38, verse 22: “‘Now Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that the Lord had commanded Moses.’

Go and doest thou likewise!” With the slam of the door, my fantasy sadly ends. I have not even received a gardening tip!

Back now to that famous Thursday; it was just past noon, I believe. My fantasy was not only dissolved, it was dead. For, in place of the MERCIFUL sign sat a new sign that made the old sign look like a peace sign:

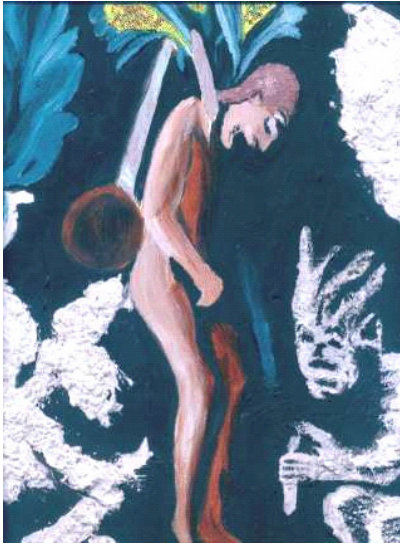


Dear God, Moses, Abraham, and Lot. Why me? Why must I suffer so upon this vale of tears? Is it fair that I should have been made a modern-day apostle, a sent-one, a teacher, a bearer of the glad tidings of God? A light in the midst of the darkness? A fine-tuned discerner of all things dark? And what darkness!

Poor Judas, a man, set apart by God from his mother’s womb for dishonorable use, chosen by Christ Himself, possessed in the end by none other than Satan, steamrolled by the God-machine of divine inevitability, freed at last from the demonic oppression, remorseful, self-loathing, hanging himself, burst open at the belly, disemboweled, buried, only to happen upon—today—this rude disinterment, dragged from his peaceful sleep, hung from a new tree, used, abused, his same tangled bowels rearranged upon a Mennonite signpost for the admonition of moderns who could not—ever—offend the Deity in a



That's Martin Zender. He's going to hell.



like manner as he.

And Acts 1:24-25? Dear God, take me now.

“And praying, they say, ‘Thou, Lord, Knower of all hearts, indicate one whom Thou chooseth, out of these two to take the place of this dispensation and apostleship, from which Judas transgressed, to be going into his own place.’”

“To be going into his own place”—is a simple euphemism for the grave. To the hell-seeking Mennonite, however, it is synonymous—in the case of their favorite whipping boy—with eternal separation from God. That this is their proof text exposes both the state of their scholarship and the state of their hearts.

It exposed, for me, the course of my next sixty years.

The sign affected me deeply, powerfully—not in the way the Mennonites hoped, but—in a way aligned with the purposes of God.

Renewed calling

God, my Father, has called me in this life to defend His character. He has no need for such human assistance, but He condescends to inspire and accept it for the sake of honoring those called to it. I defend Him neither for reward nor for honor, but because I have to. It is woe to me if I don’t. It is woe to me either way—truth be known—because

I feel the heartache God feels when He sees this sign. I have sympathy pains. The message harms me. I have a problem with it. The worldly human ignores it; the religious person applauds it; but the man standing stock-still now in all his useless walking gear feels it grinding in his gut.

To nonscripturally condemn a person to an unscriptural hell for an unscriptural eternity is to condemn the man’s God along with him. It is to condemn the One Who created him in His own image, for His own glory. The Apostle Paul said of the Jews in Romans 2:23-24:

“You who are boasting in a law, through the transgression of the law you are dishonoring God! For because of you the name of God is being blasphemed among the nations, according as it is written.”

Imagine if Paul had met the Mennonites.

It is true that Judas Iscariot disqualified himself, relatively speaking, from the glories of Christ’s millennial kingdom. The 1,000-years of peace will find the human betrayer of Christ still in the grave. He will rise at the great white throne, however, to be judged and adjusted by God for his sin. This adjudication does not satisfy some divine vindictive streak. Rather, it is for



Judas’s own good. Here, before God’s majesty, Judas will apprehend, at last, the glories that eluded him on earth. And yet God has not appointed him to live for the eons, so he is returned to the grave: the second death. Is this the end of him? It cannot be, for God is called, in 1 Timothy 4:10, “the Savior of all humankind.” Unless He saves all humankind, the inspired appellation is a joke.

The inspired appellation—I assure you—is not a joke.

Abolition of death

The Apostle Paul, by divine inspiration, wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that, at the consummation of the eons, death is to be abolished. For those in the second death, this means deliverance into life. The Apostle John, also inspired by God’s holy spirit, quoted John the Baptist in John 1:29, writing, “Lo! The Lamb of God Which is taking away the sin of the world.” Did he mean all the sin of the world, or all sins except that of Judas?

Take a guess.

If you can’t grasp this truth right now, don’t worry. You will. You will get it right, eventually. You will figure it out in a high place on a future day when you hear a voice louder than all others praising God for His wisdom, patience, mercy, and love—and worshipping the One he necessarily betrayed—worshipping Him for His plan, His purpose, and for dying, yes, even for the likes of him.

As for me, standing and shaking before this blasphemy in flowers, I realized I was still not doing enough. With so much darkness in the world, I needed to make better use of my time. There were other paths to fitness besides those requiring a quarter day’s work. It was time to reclaim the era and take God’s light into every place—a resolution I embrace to this day.

Into *every* place? Not quite. This Mennonite residence already assumed it had God’s light; its sin was therefore worse; its eonian course was set. Therefore, I shook the dust from my shoes, finished my walk, and devised ten new ways to publish truth.

The Mennonites? I will leave them to *their* fantasies. Their spiritual light bulbs are not coming on until Judas’s does. ■

