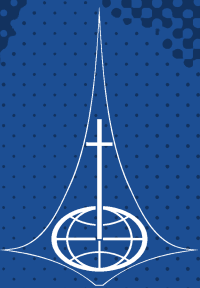


The Lutheran World Federation  
The Mennonite World Conference

# Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ

Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite  
International Study Commission





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2010

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## Preface

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

One of the great privileges of a General Secretary is to commend to our churches resources which can strengthen them in the lives to which they are called. It is our deep pleasure to call your attention in this volume to important work which opens the way to a new climate of relations between Anabaptist-Mennonites and Lutherans, developments in which we believe the Spirit of God is at work.

Too often, the apostolic exhortation to the Ephesians seems to reproach us for ways in which we have fallen short. The loving unity which the Spirit gives—a unity marked by humility, gentleness, patience, and peace—often seems far in front of us, far removed from the life of the communities we know. But in this report you will hear from those who have made “every effort” to renew bonds of peace between our two traditions. To receive it is an act of hope.

Between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites, the parting of ways has a particularly painful history. For half a millennium’s time, we have been separated not only by theological disagreements from the sixteenth century but also by the legacies of violence from that formative period. On the Lutheran side, there had been both persecution and theological justification for these violent actions. While Anabaptists did not return this persecution, they also have carried burdens from that era in their memories of what they had suffered. In recent years, it became clear that the time was right for initiatives of reconciliation. Already our communities were collaborating to relieve suffering in many places around the world. The upcoming half-millennial anniversaries of the Reformation invited efforts to address wounds remaining from that time. It was, then, in a spirit of hopefulness that our two world bodies in 2002 established the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission, whose work is reported here.

This commission’s work provides an excellent example of the ways in which international dialogues can build upon and continue efforts begun in local and regional settings. In the Introduction, the commission describes this earlier work and relates its own progress in understanding the task

before it. The surprises which commission members experienced as they overcame mutual misconceptions will be shared by many readers as well. It was a significant advance when the dialogue realized that remaining theological differences between our two traditions could not be honestly and fruitfully explored until the legacy of the persecutions was faced directly. It is the outstanding contribution of this commission to provide for the churches of both our families this valuable resource for addressing this difficult subject.

The commission discovered that there was no common narrative of the crucial events of the sixteenth century. For the first time, and in an attractive and accessible way, they have presented for us this shared history. To look at the past together in this way is itself an act of reconciliation. We expect that this work will find wide usefulness in our seminaries and other educational settings, as well as in our churches around the world. While it is demanding and sometimes uncomfortable to read, the story is also deeply engaging. It speaks directly to the minds and hearts of all those who care for the Church's history and for its present life in Christ.

The story explored here is not simple. There are many nuances and complications which reward careful attention. Lutherans, for example, can take comfort in the theological insights which Martin Luther could have drawn upon to resist policies of persecution; they can take note that Lutherans were not the only or even, in terms of numbers executed, the most deadly of the sixteenth century persecutors of Anabaptists. But as the report shows, finally all ameliorations and exculpations fail: the only adequate response is repentance. Mennonites and other Anabaptist-related churches too came to this study with a spirit of honest self-assessment of a non-persecuting but still highly imperfect tradition, and at the end they propose steps on their side toward new relationship. Throughout, this report demonstrates how the search for reconciliation can be served by rigorous historical and theological study. Having begun its work by taking up the desire of our churches to address divisive legacies from the past, this commission now returns to these churches concrete recommendations toward a future of greater unity.

We are, then, most pleased with the outcome of this report. For both of us, the hope for healing between our traditions is deeply personal. This is particularly so for Ishmael Noko who grew up in present-day Zimbabwe as the child of a mother from the tradition of the Anabaptists; her relatives from the Brethren in Christ church are part of his family and part of the Mennonite World Conference communion of churches. For him



the memories of their separation at the Lord's Supper are still vivid. We welcome this report for its consequences for individuals and families who have known the costs of division.

Indeed, reception of this report will be good for Mennonites and Lutherans around the world. Even before its publication, its recommendations have been greeted with approval and heart-felt enthusiasm on both sides. At the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Paraguay in July 2009, Ishmael Noko received an emotional standing ovation as he described Lutheran sorrow and regret at their history and their intention to seek forgiveness:

We take these steps as we Lutherans are approaching a milestone anniversary: in 2017, we will observe "500 years of Reformation." It is important we bring to this observance not only celebration of the fresh insights into the gospel which arose from this movement but also a spirit of honesty and repentance, a commitment to the continuing reformation of our tradition and of the whole Church. It is in this spirit that we hope to move forward on this issue of the heritage of our condemnations.

I have described the history of these condemnations as like the poison which a scorpion carries in its tail. We have not struck out with this poison for some time—but we still carry it with us in our system. We now are on a path which will lead us to expel this poison from our body, to allow us to live together with you, our sisters and brothers in Christ, in new ways.

Yesterday your General Council gave us great encouragement that you would walk with us on this way to healing. When you meet for your next Assembly, we Lutherans hope to be with you in a new way. And in that new relationship our witness to God's love for the world will be more fully manifest.

In turn, Larry Miller also received warm thanks and a standing ovation in October 2009, as the Lutheran World Federation Council voted unanimously to recommend that the 2010 Assembly ask forgiveness "of God and of our Mennonite brothers and sisters" for the wrongs of the persecution and its legacies "up until the present day." He said:

We receive your commitment to rightly remember this shared history, and your vulnerability in taking steps to heal the fractured body of Christ in which we live together, as a gift from God.

We are aware of the difficulty of the task. We are dealing with holy histories, yours and ours. We are dealing with our most basic self-understandings, yours

and ours. For you, the witness of the Augsburg Confession is foundational and authoritative, an essential shaper of your identity. For us, the witness of the Anabaptist martyrs is a living and vital story, retold in our global community of churches to build group identity.

How can you distance yourself from the condemnations and their consequences while still honoring your history and strengthening your identity? How can we distance ourselves from use of the martyr tradition which perpetuates a sense of victimization and marginalization—and your reaching out for forgiveness pushes us to do precisely that—how can we thus distance ourselves while still honoring our history and strengthening our identity?

Surely these things will happen best if we continue to walk together in the way of Jesus Christ, our Reconciler and the Source of our common history and identity.

In both Strasbourg and Geneva, in the offices of our international bodies, we have already received numerous inquiries about the forthcoming action and many requests for this report. We know that around the world our churches are waiting to reach out to one another, to learn about each other and to call upon the Spirit to strengthen anew the bonds of peace. This will indeed be good for both our traditions.

But this is good not for Anabaptist-related Christians and Lutherans alone. The pain of our separation has been borne not only by us; it is a wound for the whole Body of Christ. Similarly, reconciliation between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites is healing for the entire Body. To address this wrong not with rationalization but with repentance and to seek forgiveness rather than forgetfulness is to respond from the heart of our Christian faith. It is to trust in God's grace and not in our own strength. While in ecumenical relations it is often appropriate to seek forms of consensus or an exchange of gifts, in this distinctive relationship action must come first on the Lutheran side, and begin with repentance. The prayer for forgiveness cannot be an easy or trivial one. We Lutherans believe that in these prayers and in our commitments to transform our teaching about and relationships with Anabaptists, we are acting on behalf of healing for the entire Church. But action must come also from the Anabaptist-Mennonite side. We Anabaptist-related Christians believe that when we respond in genuine humility with forgiveness, with recognition of our own multiple failures in the body of Christ, and with commitments to transform our teaching about and relationships with Lutherans, we strengthen the bonds of unity among all Christians.

But this is good not for the Church alone. Instances of coercive violence, overt and hidden, lie all around us in this hurting world. No religious tradition has been entirely free from the temptation to rely on its insidious appearance of efficacy and inevitability. While our two traditions have been shaped by distinct views of legitimate uses of power—differences which we must continue to explore, as this report explains—we share commitments to seek God’s help in working together for the good of all God has made. If we help strengthen one another in this work and witness, it is good for all God’s creation.

It is, then, in hopefulness that we commend this report to your careful attention—to your reading, reflection, discussion, and prayer. But even more we commend our churches to new lives with one another. It is our hope that at every level—global, national, and local—Anabaptist-Mennonites and Lutherans now will seek one another out in new ways, that we will see in one another our sisters and brothers, called together to enjoy “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Ishmael Noko  
General Secretary  
The Lutheran World Federation

Larry Miller  
General Secretary  
Mennonite World Conference



# Part I

## Introduction

In 1980, when Lutheran churches celebrated the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, representatives of Mennonite churches were invited to participate in the ecumenical festivities marking the event. The Mennonites, however, aware that the Augsburg Confession explicitly condemned the Anabaptists and their teachings, wondered whether or how they could celebrate their own condemnation, since they regarded the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century as their spiritual forebears. Most Lutherans, on the other hand, had little awareness of the condemnations of Anabaptists, their persecution and marginalization, or of the ongoing memories of this painful history still alive among Mennonites today. Lutheran leaders were deeply moved by the Mennonite response, recognizing more clearly than ever before certain Lutheran failures in the Reformation. Expressing this new awareness, the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) adopted a “Statement on the Confessio Augustana” at its meeting in Augsburg on July 11, 1980, that included the following words:

It is with sorrow that we recognize the fact that the specific condemnations of the Confession against certain opinions that were held at the time of the Reformation have caused pain and suffering for some. We realize that some of these opinions are no longer held in the same way in those churches, and we express our hope that the remaining differences may be overcome. We worship Jesus Christ who liberates and call on our member churches to celebrate our common Lutheran heritage with a spirit both of gratitude and penitence.<sup>1</sup>

This growing awareness of the condemnations against the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the consequences of the doctrinal conflicts with them led to official dialogues between Mennonites and Lutherans at the national level in France (1981-1984), Germany (1989-1992), and the United States (2001-2004). Since the Augsburg Confession is one bond that unites the Lutheran churches within the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the LWF found it appropriate to enter into a dialogue at the international level with the Mennonite World Conference. The results of

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<sup>1</sup> LWF Report Series No. 10 (August 1982), 69-70.

that dialogue, undertaken by the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission from 2005 to 2008, are summarized in this report.

## **Origin and Mandate of the International Study Commission**

In July 1984, aware of both the awkward situation during the 1980 anniversary celebration and the French national dialogue to be concluded later in the year, the Lutheran World Federation expressed a desire for dialogue with Mennonites at the international level. During its global Assembly in Budapest, Hungary, the LWF sent a greeting to the Mennonite World Conference. Gathered a few days later at its own world assembly in Strasbourg, France, the MWC publicly received and read the message. Among other things, the LWF greeting noted that in spite “of our theological differences concerning holy baptism, we wish to express our willingness to overcome the condemnations of the past, and, through a process of dialogue, to find ways of recognizing each other freely as sisters and brothers in the one body of Christ.”

In the late 1990s, LWF and MWC leaders together considered the question of an appropriate process for that dialogue to move forward.<sup>2</sup> The project to establish an international study commission took shape and received approval in 2002. Its outline emerged in a meeting convened on April 11 at the LWF-related Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, where LWF and MWC representatives together focused particularly on the results of the national dialogues. Sven Oppgaard, at the time LWF Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs, then took the lead—in consultation with Larry Miller, General Secretary of the MWC—to develop a proposal. Several months later, the MWC Executive Committee (meeting in July, in Karlsruhe, Germany) and the LWF Standing Committee for Ecumenical Affairs (meeting in September, in Wittenberg, Germany) passed a joint recommendation to:

Approve the establishment of an international study commission with the following mandate: Drawing upon the results of previous national dialogues in Germany, France, and the United States, the commission shall: a) Consider

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<sup>2</sup> General Secretaries Ishmael Noko (LWF) and Larry Miller (MWC) informally discussed the possibility at the October 1998 meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CS/CWC), with Noko reiterating the interest the LWF had expressed already in 1984. In August 1999 the MWC Executive Committee went on record in favor of international Lutheran-Mennonite conversations. In December 1999, during the special millennium gathering of the CS/CWC in Jerusalem, Noko, Miller and MWC president Mesach Kristya agreed in principle to proceed with an international Lutheran-Mennonite encounter, pending approval of a specific project by the two communions at the appropriate decision-making levels.

whether condemnations of Anabaptists articulated by the Augsburg Confession (1530) apply to Mennonite World Conference member churches and related churches, and b) Submit a report of the commission's conclusions to the governing bodies of the Mennonite World Conference and the Lutheran World Federation for further action and with a view toward a possible official statement.

## Study Commission Members

In keeping with the mandate of the Study Commission, the LWF and MWC appointed historians or theologians representing each of the three national dialogues as members of the dialogue group. In addition, both bodies invited two African theologians to the group in order to better include the voices of the Global South. Additionally, the LWF and MWC each appointed chairpersons and staff to the commission.<sup>3</sup>

The Study Commission met annually for one week, from 2005 through 2008, at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg (France). Each year prayer united and strengthened the commission and commission participants. Every meeting began and ended with worship led by members of the delegations. Sharing meals twice each day fostered close personal friendships among members of the commission and deepened a sense of enduring Christian communion.

## The Commission and its Themes

The commission met for the first time from June 27 to July 1, 2005. At that session, Lutheran and Mennonite commission members presented, interpreted and discussed in detail the reports of the French, German, and American na-

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<sup>3</sup> Mennonite members of the commission were Prof. Dr Claude Baecher (Hegenheim, France), Ms Hellen Biseko Bradburn (Arusha, Tanzania), Rev. Rainer Burkart (Neuwied, Germany), and Prof. Dr John Roth (Goshen, Indiana, USA). Burkart (MWC Faith and Life Commission Secretary) served as Mennonite co-chair and Dr Larry Miller (MWC, General Secretary, Strasbourg, France) as co-secretary for the duration of the work of the commission. Lutheran members of the commission were initially Prof. Dr Gottfried Seebass (Heidelberg, Germany), Bishop Litsiesi M. Dube (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe), Prof. Dr Annie Noblesse-Rocher (Strasbourg), and Prof. Dr Timothy J. Wengert (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA). Prof. Dr Theodor Dieter (Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg) served as Lutheran consultant; Prof. Dr Marc Lienhard (Strasbourg) joined the commission in 2007. Seebass served as Lutheran co-chair of the commission until forced to resign for health reasons in 2006. Wengert then assumed the role. Rev. Sven Oppegaard was co-secretary for the commission until he left his LWF post in December 2006. Theodor Dieter then served as co-secretary. The Study Commission wishes to express its deep gratitude for Prof. Seebass, who passed away on September 7, 2008, both for his leadership of the Commission and for his valuable contributions to its work. An outstanding scholar and church historian, Seebass edited many Anabaptist sources and published several significant studies on Anabaptist theology and Lutheran attitudes towards Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. May he now see what he believed in!

tional dialogues. A careful analysis of those reports—helpfully summarized in a systematic inventory of the content prepared by the commission staff—highlighted differences among the three reports concerning their outcomes, their approaches and their emphases. Even though it was not possible simply to summarize their results and offer them on an international level, the commission nonetheless drew on the reports of the national dialogues and regarded them as valuable material for pursuing its goals.<sup>4</sup> The commission especially appreciated that these reports emerged out of a process of discussion and affirmation and played an important role in improving the relations between Mennonites and Lutherans on both a national and a local level.

The commission then concentrated on major papers from the Lutheran and Mennonite sides that dealt with “The Condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the Book of Concord: Their Historical Meaning, Purpose, and Effect.” Participants concluded that a common assessment of the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions would require substantial work on the following seven problems:

1. What exactly was the teaching condemned by the Lutherans?
2. Was the condemned teaching actually affirmed by Anabaptist groups at the time, or are the references to Anabaptists incorrect?
3. Are there implicit condemnations of Lutheran teachings and practices in Anabaptist writings?
4. Is the teaching condemned in the Lutheran confessions also rejected today by Lutherans—and must this be so?
5. What is the position of Anabaptists today regarding the teaching that was condemned by the Lutherans?
6. What can both sides state together today concerning the teaching at issue?
7. In what specific ways did the condemnations, or their misuse, contribute to the unjust persecution of Anabaptists?

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the American report, referring back to the French and German reports, explicitly called for further studies. This is what the Study Commission understood as its task.



The second meeting of the international study commission took place June 5-9, 2006. Since the term “Anabaptist” (= “rebaptizer”) was imposed on the movement in the sixteenth century by its opponents as a derogatory label—and since leaders of the movement initially rejected the term, arguing that that were not “re-baptizing” but baptizing correctly for the first time—Lutherans were surprised that the Mennonite World Conference calls itself “a community of Anabaptist-related churches.” The Mennonites explained how they see their tradition as linked to Reformation-era Anabaptists. Over the past century, Mennonites in Europe and North America have developed a renewed and growing awareness of the spiritual heritage of their Anabaptist forebears, finding there a source of inspiration, orientation, and renewal. Mennonites often have summarized Anabaptist teaching in three essential points: that true faith must be expressed in daily discipleship; that the church is a visible, disciplined community; and that love—including love of enemy—is the basis of Christian ethics. Even though Mennonites had not been unaware of Anabaptists in previous centuries, what was new in the second half of the twentieth century was the self-conscious, systematic appeal to “Anabaptism” for the purposes of identity and renewal.

Today, the term “Anabaptist” seems to serve several purposes: it functions as an umbrella term to describe a general cluster of groups descended from the radical reformation; it serves as an explicit critique of certain practices and teachings within the contemporary Mennonite church; and it has become a useful reference to a cluster of theological convictions that transcend narrow denominational or national identities. Mennonite participants in the study commission emphasized that there is no full consensus among Mennonites regarding the precise theological meaning of “Anabaptism” or exactly how those meanings relate to modern-day Mennonites. The commission therefore affirmed once again that dealing with the condemnations required a careful and precise examination of both historical and contemporary Mennonite (and Lutheran) understanding.

The commission then focused systematically on each condemnation within their historical and theological contexts. The analysis confirmed one conclusion of the national dialogue reports, namely that most of the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession (CA) applied neither to contemporary Mennonites nor to their Anabaptist forebears in the faith.<sup>5</sup> However, members of the bilateral panel paid particular attention to the

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<sup>5</sup> See Part Three.

condemnation regarding baptism (CA IX)<sup>6</sup> and the condemnation regarding civic affairs (CA XVI), after agreeing that these two articles deal with matters of continuing significant theological difference between the two churches.

In the course of the common work, it turned out that the history of persecution and marginalization of Anabaptists consistently intervened in theological analysis and discussion of these controversial themes. Thus the commission decided to write a joint history of Anabaptist and Lutheran relations in the sixteenth century, paying particular attention to issues about which Lutherans and Anabaptists have disagreed in the past.

The commission met for the third time from June 18-22, 2007. At that meeting the panel reviewed the “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists” (adopted November 11-13, 2006) as well as the response of the Mennonite Church USA (April 2007). It also examined “Called Together to be Peacemakers’: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference (1998-2003),” with a view to its relevance for Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

The commission received an extensive draft of a joint historical account of “Lutheran Reformers and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists.” This draft gained more and more significance as the discussions of the commission continued. It represents a significant first attempt to tell together the history of the relations between Anabaptists and Lutherans in the sixteenth century, to describe what Anabaptists suffered from Lutheran authorities, and to analyze how Lutheran theologians argued in this matter. The commission felt it would be especially important for Lutherans to learn more about what happened to the Anabaptists, the spiritual forebears of the Mennonites, and for Mennonites to see that this history is now being told jointly by Mennonites and Lutherans.

The commission also continued to study the historical context of the condemnations in CA IX and XVI and their meaning in 1530. It identified

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<sup>6</sup> This report refers to individual articles of the Augsburg Confession (CA) using Roman numerals.

<sup>7</sup> The 2006 Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, together with the 2004 Report of the ELCA-Mennonite Church USA Liaison Committee, “Right Remembering in Anabaptist-Lutheran Relations,” can be found at <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Bilateral-Conversations/Lutheran-Mennonite.aspx>. The Mennonite letter of response is found at <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=9ptCMKotmQQ%3d&tabid=1336>. “Called Together to be Peacemakers” is found at <http://www.mwc-cmm.org/en/files/Catho-Menno/Report%20cathomenno%20Final%20ENG%20-%20PDF.pdf>.

and described social and ecclesial changes that influenced their respective understanding and practice of baptism, as well as the relation between Christians and the state in the centuries following the Reformation, and it discussed systematic aspects of their understanding today.

The fourth and final meeting of the commission took place June 2-6, 2008. The commission again discussed the text, “Telling the Sixteenth-Century Story Together: Lutheran Reformers and the Condemnation of Anabaptists,” proposed revisions to the document and finalized this section of the report, which is now **Part Two** below. The commission sees the joint presentation of this history as one of its major accomplishments. Christian reconciliation under these circumstances may properly begin with such a mutual telling of and listening to each other’s history.<sup>8</sup>

Discussions on the doctrinal conflicts about baptism and the relation of Christians to the state continued. The commission finalized its analysis of the two condemnations in CA IX and XVI in the theological, social, legal and political context of the Reformation. It quickly became apparent that a careful and detailed description of those changes in societies and churches that are significant for resolving our differences on the issues of baptism and Christian/state-relations would require much more time than allotted for the commission’s work. The main challenge would be to establish a theological framework that allowed Lutheran and Mennonite insights, convictions and concerns to be expressed to each other in such a way that each side would feel it was correctly understood by the other. This would require an analysis of the different thought structures, a clarification of differences in basic theological distinctions (such as the distinction between what God does and what human beings do), and more conversation regarding our different evaluations of New Testament statements on baptism and the relationship between systematic and biblical argumentation. Addressing these important questions in the necessary detail would require another round of dialogues. The commission will make available for further study the papers presented at its meetings.

In **Part Three** of the report (“Considering the Condemnations Today”), the commission summarizes what it can say about those condemnations in the Augsburg Confession that do not apply to Mennonites, and it describes the problems connected to the two remaining areas of disagreement. **Part Four** (“Moving Beyond Condemnations”) analyzes and describes

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<sup>8</sup> Included in this report are also two appendices: a select bibliography of resources and a translation of a document by Luther and Melancthon sanctioning capital punishment of Anabaptists.

how Lutherans recognize the failures of their forebears in dealing with Anabaptists during the Reformation and with Mennonites since that time, and how they should now understand and respond to this history. The Mennonite participants of the commission in turn respond to the Lutheran statement. One goal of this exchange would be an action by the Lutheran World Federation at its General Assembly in Stuttgart (2010). The three national dialogue reports, available in a variety of languages, contain many detailed suggestions as to how Mennonites and Lutherans can work together in the future in places where Lutherans and Mennonites live close to each other and how they can improve their relations further. The commission points to the recommendations of the national reports and offers additional suggestions on how to move beyond condemnations in a spirit of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and in the mission with which Christ entrusted his disciples and his church.

## Part 2

# Telling the Sixteenth-Century Story Together

### Lutheran Reformers and the Condemnation of Anabaptists<sup>9</sup>

From the very beginning of the dialogue, participants in the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission realized that reviewing the early history of relations between Lutherans and Mennonites was an important step in helping churches interpret the condemnations of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession (CA) that might hinder further conversations. Knowing this history will also help to clarify the connection between confession and persecution. As Prof. Gottfried Seebass stated in his initial presentation to the group: “We should keep in mind that under the conditions of the sixteenth century a church condemnation actually always had civic and secular consequences. The secular powers and often also the Reformers took the view that the holders of certain beliefs should not be tolerated by the authorities.”<sup>10</sup> Seebass went on to list four causes for this connection: the old Roman idea that right worship guaranteed the *salus publica*; the view that dissimilar preaching and teaching in a single city or country led necessarily to strife; the paternalistic view of government, which greatly expanded the prince’s duties as *pater patriae*; and the threat that some Anabaptist teachings

<sup>9</sup> Abbreviations used in this chapter: CA: Augsburg Confession; *BC 2000: The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000); CR: *Corpus Reformatorum: Philippi Melanthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Karl Bretschneider and Heinrich Bindseil, 28 vols. (Halle: A. Schwetschke & Sons, 1834-1860); LW: *Luther’s Works* [American edition], 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86; MBW: *Melancthon’s Briefwechsel: Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe: Regesten*, ed. Heinz Scheible, 8+ vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977-); MBW *Texte: Melancthon’s Briefwechsel: Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe: Texte*, ed. Richard Wetzel et al., 6+ vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991-); ME: *Mennonite Encyclopedia*; MQR: *Mennonite Quarterly Review*; MSA: *Melancthon’s Werke in Auswahl* [Studienausgabe], ed. Robert Stupperich, 7 vols. (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1951-1975); WA: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993); WA Br: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930-1985).

<sup>10</sup> Gottfried Seebass, “The Condemnations of Anabaptists in the Confessions of the Lutheran Churches: Their Historical Meaning, Purpose and Effect,” delivered in June 2005 in Strasbourg, France, p. 5 (par. 36).

(e.g., their refusal to take oaths or serve as armed guards) posed to social and political order. This jointly-written historical overview offers a brief account of the origins of the Anabaptist movement in the early sixteenth century, its relationship to early Lutheranism, and a description of its central theological motifs, followed by an analysis of the Lutheran reactions to the Anabaptist movement prior to and following the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530, with particular emphasis on the role of the condemnations. It is hoped that this joint summary of history will help both churches better understand each other and, even more importantly, will lead to deeper levels of cooperation and fellowship among our churches.

### **Anabaptist Movements in the 1520s**

Traditionally, the origins of the European, sixteenth-century “reformations” are traced back to October 31, 1517 and Martin Luther’s invitation to debate the theological suppositions surrounding indulgences. However, it is clear that even before Luther, several important reform movements were already changing the face of the medieval church. From the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century arose north of the Alps the strong movement of what is often called Biblical Humanism—a commitment to purified, classical rhetoric and investigation of the ancient church and its sources, especially the Bible. Remnants of the fifteenth century’s conciliar movement continued to champion the call for a reform of the church “in head and members.” In Bohemia, John Hus, the Bohemian Brethren and the more radical Taborites promoted broader access to Scripture, demanded ethical renewal and challenged the church’s teachings on the Lord’s Supper. And a lively movement of lay reform originating in Holland, called the *Devotio moderna*, included the founding of the Brethren of the Common Life, a quasi-monastic group highly critical of traditional forms of monasticism.

Luther’s invitation to scholarly debate over indulgences and the sacrament of penance quickly escalated into a full-blown legal case, involving condemnations by the church in 1520 and by the Holy Roman Empire in 1521. Luther’s own theology centered on God’s gracious justification of the sinner received by faith alone and not earned by works. It also included new understandings of authorities in the church—often summarized under the heading *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) but more fully understood as *solo Verbo* (by the Word alone)—a renewed appreciation for God revealed in the opposite place one would reasonably look (the theology of the Cross), and a distinction between Law and Gospel (that is, between God’s Word that

reveals sin and the Word that declares forgiveness). In 1520, in his tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther reduced the number of sacraments from the traditional seven to two (baptism and the Lord's Supper), defining them both in terms of God's gracious promise received in faith.

As early as 1520, Luther joined his criticisms of papal authority—culminating in his naming the papacy “anti-Christ”—with an appeal to secular authority to intervene in the church's governance.<sup>11</sup> One early result of this call came on Luther's return from the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Luther's prince, the Elector Frederick the Wise, engineered a friendly “kidnapping” to the safety of the Wartburg Castle. In 1523, Luther wrote an extensive tract on the limits of obedience to secular authority, dedicated to the elector's brother, John.<sup>12</sup>

The series of events instigated by Luther and the reformed-minded members of the University of Wittenberg faculty (including Andreas Karlstadt), triggered similar movements in other parts of northern Europe, as pastors, preachers and others also began to test the limits of church authority in the face of their recovery of what they thought to be biblical truth. For example, in the early 1520s Ulrich Zwingli, the city preacher of Zurich, encouraged by Luther's example, began to press the civil authorities for changes in church practice. Likewise, Martin Bucer in Strasbourg and Johannes Brenz in Schwäbisch Hall, began to preach a message in harmony with Luther's own.<sup>13</sup> And university teachers, especially those at the University of Wittenberg (Philip Melancthon foremost among them), also began to expound on this “evangelical” theology, as they often designated it.

## Emergence of the Anabaptists

Among other initiatives for religious and social reform in the early sixteenth century was a grassroots movement that opponents labeled Anabaptists (*Wiedertäufer* = re-baptizers). Whereas Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed<sup>14</sup> alike baptized infants, the so-called “Anabaptists” argued that

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<sup>11</sup> *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate* (WA 6: 381-469; LW 44: 115-217).

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion of both of these issues in Luther's theology, see below in this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Both of these men had first encountered Luther in 1518 at a meeting of the Augustinian order held in Heidelberg, the site of Luther's famous Heidelberg Disputation.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout this document, we will use the anachronistic terms “Roman Catholic,” “Lutheran” and “Reformed” to denote those Evangelical (as opposed to Reformed) theologians who would later sign and defend the Augsburg Confession and those “old church” supporters of Rome, respectively.

true Christian baptism assumed a prior recognition of one's sin and need for repentance, followed by a conscious decision to accept God's gracious gift of forgiveness and the invitation to become a disciple of Jesus—something they believed no infant could do. Members of the movement generally referred to themselves as *Brüder* (Brethren—or later by more descriptive terms such as *Täufer* (Baptizers) or *Taufgesinnten/Doopsgezinde* (Baptism-Minded)—since in their minds they were not “re-” baptizing, but rather baptizing correctly for the first time.<sup>15</sup> Still, the name “Anabaptist” stuck, not least because their opponents recognized that Roman law regarded “rebaptism” as a criminal offense, punishable by death. Despite its negative overtones in the sixteenth century, in contemporary English usage “Anabaptist” has become an accepted umbrella term for all Reformation groups who practiced believers' (rather than infant) baptism, and the contemporary denominations directly descended from them such as the Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites.<sup>16</sup>

The Anabaptist movement cannot be understood apart from its time, particularly the religious heritage of the Middle Ages, the economic, political and social upheaval of the early sixteenth century, and the dynamic voices of theological reform that gave rise to the Reformation.<sup>17</sup> All of the earliest participants in the Anabaptist movement started out as Roman Catholics—baptized into the church as infants and raised in the rituals, images, and stories of late-medieval Catholicism. Their concerns inevitably reflected the social and economic context of their day. Deteriorating economic conditions in the German territories, for example, fueled growing tensions between peasants and artisans on the one hand, and feudal lords and princes on the other. Resentment against rising ecclesiastical tithes and widespread corruption in the *sacerdotum* fostered deeply-rooted attitudes of anticlericalism across nearly all the sectors of early modern German society. New technologies

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on details regarding nomenclature, cf. ME, 1:113 (“Anabaptist”); ME, 2:86 (“Doopsgezind”); ME, 3:670 (“Swiss Brethren”).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1944). This landmark essay, first presented as the 1943 presidential address to the American Society of Church History and published in *Church History* (March, 1944) 3-24, became a symbolic point of theological and ecclesiological renewal that elevated “Anabaptism” to a central role in anchoring North American Mennonite group identity.

<sup>17</sup> The literature on emergence of the so-called Radical Reformation is vast. A very useful reference work summarizing current scholarship on the entire field is John D. Roth and James M. Stayer, eds. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); an encyclopedic treatment can be found in George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992); a very helpful concise summary of the events is James Stayer, “The Radical Reformation,” in *Handbook of European History, 1400-1600*, eds. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko Oberman and James Tracy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:249-282.



such as the printing press were revolutionizing the nature of communication, making possible the rapid dissemination of novel theological ideas. Moreover, the early Anabaptists regarded themselves as full participants in the broader evangelical movement of religious renewal that eventually became known as the Reformation: they shared the early reformer's enthusiasm for the principle of *sola Scriptura*, they read the pamphlets of the early reformers, and they participated eagerly in lay Bible studies, always asking themselves how Scripture might be applied to their lives. Indeed, when Luther and other reformers began to raise serious criticisms of the church between 1517 and 1521 that eventually led to a rupture with their opponents, many of the early Anabaptist leaders could be found among their early followers.

The tensions that came to separate Lutherans and Anabaptists—particularly those related to baptism and understandings of the Christians' relation to the state—crystallized only gradually in the opening years of the Reformation. The separation that emerged resulted less from a series of closely-argued, face-to-face debates over theological doctrine, than as an evolving process of group formation within the complex, sometimes confusing, dynamics of religious convictions, political self-interest, and a basic struggle for survival.

To be sure, many of the differences that came to divide Lutherans and Anabaptists were expressed in theological vocabulary. But those concerns took on particular urgency since popular understandings of the Anabaptists associated them, sometimes even exclusively, with two traumatic events: the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 and the violent seizure of the north German city of Münster a decade later. Any understanding of the vehemence behind Luther and Melanchthon's denunciation of the Anabaptists—or their condemnation in the Augsburg Confession—must acknowledge the importance of this context.

## **The Peasants' Revolt of 1525**

Unrest among rural peasants and urban artisans had been building in the German territories for decades. Angry at the imposition of new feudal dues, frustrated by the immorality of local priests, and fearful of the economic and demographic changes unfolding around them, a diverse coalition of peasants and artisans began to demand a hearing for their grievances.

The events of the early Reformation seemed to encourage these sentiments. Not only did Luther provide a model of heroic opposition to Europe's most

powerful leaders, he also offered a clear rationale for reassessing the authority of tradition. Moreover, when Luther proclaimed in his early pamphlets that the Christian is “freed from the law,” the peasants were quick to interpret this as a political statement—that they were freed from oppressive feudal laws. When Luther implied that the authority of Scripture normed all other authorities for the Christian, the peasants took Luther at his word and claimed that their demands for economic and social reform were nothing more than an attempt to structure their communities around the teachings of the gospel. Nowhere in the Bible, for example, could they find justification for feudal labor obligations, the elaborate tangle of church tithes, or the traditional restrictions on their hunting and fishing rights. In 1524 and 1525 peasants and artisans throughout the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire summarized their demands in the Twelve Articles—a program of sweeping social and political reform explicitly based on Scripture—and launched a campaign of bloody uprisings against their feudal overlords.<sup>18</sup>

Luther and other reformers, to whom peasants and princes turned for advice, were taken by surprise. This was not the kind of reform they had intended. When asked by the peasants for an opinion of the Twelve Articles, Luther obliged by writing a more or less moderate tract, in which he excoriated both princes and peasants. Less than one month later, in May 1525, Luther, having experienced the revolt in Thuringia first-hand, dashed off an angry appendix to his tract, which was almost immediately published as a separate pamphlet titled “Against the Robbing Murderous Hordes of Peasants.” In it he called on the princes and lords of Europe to unite in repressing the peasant uprising. Indeed, such a response from the authorities was already underway. At the Battle of Frankenhausen in May 1525, knights fighting on behalf of the princes and nobles slaughtered the largest of the peasant armies. By the summer of 1525 and beyond, the Peasants’ War, and with it the Twelve Articles, came to a bloody and decisive defeat.

It was within this complex and dynamic context that the Anabaptists emerged as a distinctive expression of religious reform. Yet even though early Anabaptist leaders explicitly renounced the use of violence,<sup>19</sup> the first

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<sup>18</sup> For a useful overview of these events, see Peter Blickle, *From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the letter written by the Grebel circle in Zurich to Thomas Müntzer in September, 1524 in which they challenged Müntzer to put down the sword: “Moreover, the gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor [should] they [protect] themselves . . . True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. . . . They use neither worldly sword nor war, since killing has ceased with them entirely.” Leland Harder, ed. *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 290.

generation of Anabaptists reflected many of the same frustrations that had given rise to the Peasants' War along with a desire to create godly communities structured around the teachings of Jesus and the early church.<sup>20</sup> And even though the movement drew heavily on the insights of the early Reformation (with its challenge to traditional religious institutions and its elevation of Scripture as the ultimate authority for Christian faith and practice), their teachings represented something new and seemingly dangerous. By calling on Christians to refrain from swearing oaths, participate in lethal violence, or serve in magisterial offices, for example, they seemed to threaten the foundations of political stability. The Anabaptist model of economic sharing and social equality unsettled both theologians and civic authorities who viewed traditional societal structures as ordained by God. By defining the church as a voluntary community, separated from the "fallen world," Anabaptists raised doubts about whether Europe could legitimately call itself a "Christian" society.<sup>21</sup>

Although these teachings may not sound so radical in the light of today's pluralistic societies, political and religious authorities in the sixteenth century generally regarded them as both heretical (a threat to orthodox Christian doctrine) and seditious (a threat to the authority of the state). Indeed, the theologians and princes of Europe were so troubled by Anabaptist teachings that between 2,000-3,000 Anabaptists were executed during the course of the sixteenth century, and thousands more imprisoned, tortured, and exiled.

Establishing the precise number of judicially authorized Anabaptist executions—quite apart from the number of people who were tortured, imprisoned or exiled—has proven to be a difficult matter, complicated by the fragmentary nature of the source material, the theological orientation of scholars investigating the topic, and an Anabaptist-Mennonite martyrological tradition less interested in empirical numbers than a resolute focus on the theological significance of those who "died for their faith." Clearly, the estimated 5,000-10,000 Anabaptist executions cited in some Mennonite sources need to be revised downward on the basis of more careful calculations. Claus-Peter Clasen attempted to make an exact count of executions that he could independently confirm in primary sources and came up with 845 executions in the Swiss-south German area, though

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<sup>20</sup> For a nuanced account of the relationship between the early Anabaptists and the Peasants' War, see James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> See Scott Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyards: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

scholars have raised methodological questions about his quantitative methods and Clasen himself acknowledged that large bodies of sources have been destroyed. The figures generally cited for Dutch Anabaptist martyrs range from 1,000-1,500. Although caution is certainly in order regarding any claims to precision, current estimates suggest a total of approximately 2,500 executions. See the very helpful perspectives of Brad S. Gregory (note 22 below).

James Stayer provides a helpful summary of the significant differences among Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed princes in terms of their policies toward religious dissenters:

Reformed Zurich and Berne and Lutheran Electoral Saxony, which killed considerable numbers of Anabaptists, were the exception, not the rule, among Protestant rulers. In general, Protestant authorities spared the lives of religious dissenters, punishing them in milder ways. 84% of the executions that Clasen accounted for were carried out by Catholic governments. [Nevertheless], instead of Philip of Hesse and Strasbourg being commendable exceptions, as was previously thought, they were closer to the norm of Protestant practice than Melancthon, Luther and Zwingli, and the Protestant Schmalkaldic League protected governments that refused to carry out the Imperial mandate of 1529 that required death for Anabaptists.

If Gottfried Seebass is correct that one quarter of all executions by Protestant princes took place in Saxony, then the total number of Anabaptists killed in Saxony was likely around 100. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain how many of these executions if any might be directly attributable to the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession. As will be shown, it was the link between Anabaptist beliefs and the governmental responsibility to extirpate blasphemy that led directly to persecution.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the animosity directed toward the Anabaptists was fueled by a genuine confusion about their teachings and intentions. Like all grassroots movements, the first generation of Anabaptists struggled to reach agreement

<sup>22</sup> For these paragraphs, see Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), 370-372, 437; Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6; James M. Stayer, "Numbers in Anabaptist Research," C. Arnold Snyder, ed. *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honor of Werner Packull* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2002), 51-73, quote from 60. Gottfried Seebaß, "Luther's Stellung zur Verfolgung der Täufer und ihre Bedeutung für den deutschen Protestantismus," in *Die Reformation und ihre Aussenseiter. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Vorträge zum 60. Geburtstag des Autors Gottfried Seebaß*, eds. Irene Dingel and Christine Kress (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 271-82. Seebass suggests that Luther's influence in Electoral politics would have been sufficient to resist this if he had so chosen.

on the principles that would distinguish the group's core membership from the fringe teachings of a few inspired eccentrics. Some of its early converts were disillusioned veterans of the Peasants' War still hoping to transform social and political realities according to a biblical template. Others reflected the apocalyptic mood of the times, drawing from the prophetic writings of Daniel and Revelation a message of God's imminent judgment. Still others were gripped by the teachings of Jesus and assumed, naively perhaps, that the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the early church offered a clear blueprint for a renewed and purified church, separated from a fallen world. Contributing to the somewhat fluid boundaries of the movement was a general suspicion many Anabaptists shared of formal theology, preferring instead to focus on the concrete practices of Christian discipleship within the context of the local congregation. Moreover, most of the first generation of educated leaders were executed by 1530. That painful fact, combined with the on-going threat of persecution, made communication among various Anabaptist groups difficult and complicated efforts of the various Anabaptist groups to reach consensus in matters of belief and practice.

Thus, it is not surprising that Luther, Melancthon and other prominent reformers had only partial, or even contradictory, understandings of "the Anabaptists" in the opening decades of the Reformation or that they were quick to lump together everyone who rejected the baptism of infants—including Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer—regardless of their other teachings, and to dismiss the movement and its members as *Schwärmer* (fanatics) or *Rottengeister* (divisive spirits).<sup>23</sup> Yet for all of the evident diversity among the early Anabaptists, between 1525 and 1550 three identifiable Anabaptist groups had emerged which, despite their differences, clearly shared a similar theological worldview and recognized each other as members of the same religious tradition: the Swiss Brethren in the German-speaking territories; the Hutterites in Moravia; and the Mennonites of the Netherlands and North Germany, organized around the leadership of Menno Simons.

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<sup>23</sup> Several Hussite leaders, such as the radical Taborite Pierre Kanis, had advocated that baptism be withheld until around the age of 30, and then only for believers who requested it. Petr Chelcicky, the fifteenth-century Bohemian reformer, also taught baptism at a later age, and even the excommunication of someone in the Church who refused to confess Christ even if they had been baptized as a child. He himself, however, did not propose a "re-baptism." Only later, that is, after 1460, did the first generation of the Unity of the Czech Brethren practice rebaptism—that is, baptism after a personal confession of faith. But they were not systematically against the baptism of children so that children, belonging to the spiritual body of the church, might be led to faith.—Cf. Amedeo Molnár, "La mise en question du baptême des enfants par les hussites radicaux," *Bibliotheca dissidentium* 3 (1987), 35-52, 37, 41, 43. The practice of confirmation is largely the contribution of this family of faith to the larger Protestant church.

## The Swiss Brethren in Switzerland and South Germany

The earliest forms of Anabaptism appeared in the first half of the 1520s as part of the Reformation movement in the Swiss city of Zurich.<sup>24</sup> In 1519, the Zurich City Council invited Ulrich Zwingli, a university-educated Catholic priest, to assume the pulpit of the Great Minster church—one of the most important religious positions in the city. Zwingli was deeply committed to the authority of Scripture and he had a strong interest in church reform. Soon after his arrival in Zurich, he introduced a disciplined pattern of Bible study to a group of bright young students who were eager to read the New Testament in the original Greek and to apply its teachings to the renewal of the church. Zwingli also began to preach daily, captivating large audiences by his systematic study of the gospels and the epistles, particularly his ability to elucidate the relevance of a particular text to contemporary Christian life.

In the course of their study Zwingli and his students were quickly struck by the absence of a biblical basis for a host of traditional late-medieval practices. Initially, their questions focused on the mass—why, for example, was the mass in Latin? and why were common people permitted to receive the bread in communion, but not the wine? Doubts also emerged, probably influenced by similar criticisms from Luther, about the biblical basis for such things as monasticism, clerical celibacy, and religious relics and images. In January 1523, as religious controversies of all sorts swirled throughout the Empire, the Zurich City Council held a formal debate about the city's religious future. Zwingli's appeal for reform won the day. The Zurich Council voted to break ties with the Catholic Church and declare the city for the "evangelical" cause. What that meant in practical terms, however, was still quite unclear.

In the meantime, other lay Bible study groups had begun to form, especially among villagers in the small towns and hamlets scattered around Zurich. As with Zwingli's circle, these groups were emboldened by the example of other reformers to criticize church traditions that could not be directly defended on the basis of Scripture. But their critique soon became even more radical: where in the Bible, for example, could one find justification for the host of church tithes that peasants were expected to pay? On what basis were local congregations denied the right to select their own

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<sup>24</sup> This story is recounted in many texts. One of the most helpful summaries is still that of the Reformed Swiss historian Fritz Blanke—*Brothers in Christ: The History of the Oldest Anabaptist Congregation Zollikon, Near Zurich, Switzerland* (1961; rpt. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005); see also Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 212-245 and Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 191-224. A very useful compendium of primary sources from this period is found in Harder, *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*.

pastors? Perhaps most revolutionary, what was the biblical justification for the baptism of infants?

Gradually, a coalition formed between leaders of the rural Bible studies and the more radical voices in Zwingli's own study circle. Given the City Council's expressed openness to "evangelical" reforms, the coalition began to pressure Zwingli to implement these changes immediately. In October of 1523, the City Council met to consider arguments regarding the content and pace of church reforms. Aware that radical reforms, introduced suddenly, could lead to social and political upheaval, the Council called for moderation. When Zwingli agreed with this decision, the first clear signs of division emerged. Simon Stumpf, a spokesman for the radicals, challenged Zwingli directly: "You have no authority to place these questions in the Council's hands," Stumpf insisted, "for the matter is already settled; the Spirit of God has decided."<sup>25</sup> That claim—that the authority of Scripture and the Spirit trumped the authority of tradition, church hierarchy or political sanctions—marked the first public use of an argument that the Anabaptists would return to again and again. And it was an argument that they felt they had learned directly at the feet of Luther, Zwingli and the other reformers.

In the year that followed, tensions in Zurich between Zwingli and the more radical reformers continued to mount. The heart of the debate focused especially on baptism, though it seems that the radicals were also questioning the biblical basis for the oath and the Christian use of the sword. When some of the radicals refused to baptize their newborn babies—arguing that Christ's instructions in the Great Commission implied that teaching should precede baptism (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16)—the Council responded fiercely. On January 21, 1525, the Council issued an ultimatum, demanding that the radicals baptize their infants or risk expulsion from the city.<sup>26</sup> That same day, in defiance of the mandate, a small group gathered in a home close to the Great Minster church to plan a response. According to an account preserved in the Hutterite *Chronicle*, the meeting concluded with George Blaurock, a former priest, asking Conrad Grebel to baptize him with water for the remission of his sins. Blaurock then baptized others at the meeting, thereby marking a symbolic beginning to the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>27</sup>

The re-baptism movement spread rapidly. Already by the next day, reports had begun to trickle into the city of additional baptisms in Wytikon and other

<sup>25</sup> For a transcription of the Second Zurich Disputation, cf. Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 234-250.

<sup>26</sup> Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 337.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-342.

villages surrounding Zurich. Conrad Grebel, a humanist scholar and son of a prominent Zurich family, was soon discovered baptizing new converts in Schaffhausen; Blaurock went on a mission campaign into the Tyrol, southeast of Zurich; Hans Brötli began baptizing in Hallau, as did Lorenz Hochrütner in St Gall. According to Sebastian Franck, a chronicler sympathetic to the Anabaptists, the movement “spread so rapidly that their teachings soon covered the whole land and they secured a large following and also added to their number many good hearts who were zealous toward God.”<sup>28</sup> Some details of Franck’s account—his report of 1500 baptisms in the Swiss city of Appenzell, for example—may have been an exaggeration. But the angry response of Zwingli and the Zurich City Council makes it clear that they regarded the Anabaptist movement as a serious threat. On March 7, 1526, the council declared that “whoever henceforth baptizes another will be seized by Our Lords and ... drowned without any mercy. Hereafter, everyone knows how to avoid this so that no one gives cause for his own death.”<sup>29</sup>

The rapid growth of Anabaptism was both a strength and a weakness. Clearly, the biblicism of the early Anabaptists, combined with their call for a voluntary, disciplined church and a commitment to follow Christ in daily life appealed to many, especially those who were dissatisfied with Roman Catholic sacramentalism and a Lutheran theology of grace that did not seem to them to bear fruit in a regenerated life. At the same time, however, it quickly became clear that not all Anabaptists shared the same understanding of what baptism actually meant. Balthasar Hubmaier, a university-trained theologian and close friend of the Zurich radicals, is a good case in point.<sup>30</sup> Hubmaier was far and away the most articulate early defender of adult baptism. In public debates with Zwingli and in his numerous publications, he consistently presented systematic biblical arguments in favor of the practice. Hubmaier, however, did not necessarily link adult baptism with a voluntary, separated church; nor was he convinced that Christians should practice nonresistance—both principles that were soon to become central to the dominant Anabaptist tradition. Thus, in the spring of 1525, Hubmaier baptized virtually the entire town of Waldshut in one fell swoop. At the same time, he vigorously promoted the “Twelve Articles” of the Peasants’ War and encouraged the citizens of Waldshut to

<sup>28</sup> Sebastian Franck, *Chronica, Zeitbuch vund Geschichtsbibell* (Ulm, 1536), Book I, viii.

<sup>29</sup> Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 448.

<sup>30</sup> For a translation of all of Hubmaier’s published works, cf. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, eds. *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989).



arm themselves for battle against the Austrian government. Clearly, Hubmaier still held to a traditional view of society, often labeled Christendom, in which re-baptized believers might serve as magistrates and use violence to defend the “godly community” against perceived evil-doers.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Hubmaier, most other early Anabaptist leaders insisted that true Christians could not swear oaths, serve as magistrates or use coercive violence, even against their enemies. Some, following the example of the early church, taught a radical view of property that called on Christians to share their wealth with all in need. Although the Zurich radicals agreed that infant baptism and several aspects of medieval Christianity were not scriptural, they had still not reached consensus on the exact shape of the new church that they wanted to introduce in its place.

In the spring of 1527, two years after the first baptisms, a group of Anabaptists met in the small town of Schleithem, north of Zurich. There, under the leadership of Michael Sattler, a former Benedictine prior, they agreed on seven principles that would come to define the most distinctive features of Anabaptist doctrine.<sup>32</sup> The Brotherly Union of Schleithem—sometimes called the Schleithem Confession—was not intended to be a summary statement of Christian faith (for this, the Anabaptists generally appealed to the Apostolic Creed). They composed the confession hurriedly, under the threat of imminent arrest and execution. And at least one of the original Zurich radicals—Balthasar Hubmaier—would openly reject the statement. But the written agreement provided a useful and enduring expression of shared convictions. In the century that followed, the central themes of the Schleithem Confession, and occasionally the text itself, continued to resurface within many German-speaking Anabaptist congregations.

At the heart of the Schleithem Confession of 1527 is a view of the world in which the forces of good and evil are engaged in a dramatic spiritual struggle. As participants in this cosmic battle, human beings are faced with a genuine choice: to act according to their natural (though fallen) impulses of greed, selfishness, and violence, or to pledge allegiance to Jesus, who teaches the principles of love, generosity, and peace and who, through the Holy Spirit, empowers his followers to live according to his example. Baptism marks a clear and conscious transfer of allegiance—a “crossing over”—from the kingdom of darkness (the world) to the kingdom of light (the church). Those who are baptized

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<sup>31</sup> Arnold Snyder offers a detailed overview of this story that continues to generate vigorous historiographical debate.—“The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism,” 80 *MQR* (October 2006), 554-564.

<sup>32</sup> John H. Yoder, trans. and ed. *The Schleithem Confession* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973).

should separate themselves from the sinful practices of the world and promise to hold each other accountable for their actions and attitudes, following the pattern laid out by Christ in Matthew 18:15-20. The Lord's Supper, according to the Schleithem Confession, should be celebrated as a commemoration of Christ's suffering and death, and as a symbol of the unity of believers in their commitment to following in his steps. Leaders within the church are to wield their authority as gentle shepherds, not as coercive kings. Christ's followers should respect governing authorities, but—in keeping with Christ's teaching and the example of the early church—abstain from using the court systems or any form of lethal violence to defend their rights; likewise, believers should not serve in government positions that require the use of coercive force, but must instead treat all human beings—including enemies—with love. Finally, in accordance with Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount, the Schleithem confession rejected the swearing of oaths, with the admonition that Christians should keep their speech simple and always speak the truth.

In short, the 1527 Schleithem Confession affirmed a view of the church as a voluntary community separated from society at large by the distinctive practices of its members, who are united by their commitment to Christ, the path of Christian discipleship, and a commitment to mutual admonition and discipline. Viewed in the light of 480 years of history, these claims may not sound overly radical. At the same time, however, the rhetoric of the confession was uncompromising and polemical:

Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are [come] out of the world, God's temple and idols. Christ and Belial, and none will have part with the other. . . . From all this we should learn that everything which has not been united with our God in Christ is nothing but an abomination which we should shun. By this are meant all popish and repopish works and idolatry, gatherings, church attendance, winehouses, guarantees and commitments of unbelief, and other things of the kind, which the world regards highly, and yet which are carnal or flatly counter to the command of God, after the pattern of all the iniquity which is in the world.

It is not surprising, then, that sixteenth-century authorities regarded the convictions expressed in the Schleithem Confession as a serious threat to religious faith and social order. From the perspective of the reformers and Roman Catholics alike, the Anabaptists' refusal to baptize infants seemed callous, even cruel. Their view of the church as a "separated" community—identifying everyone outside their fellowship as part of the fallen

world—sounded arrogant and, in the ears of some reformers, like a return to monasticism. Civil authorities were especially troubled by the Anabaptist rejection of the civic oath and their suggestion that good Christians could not serve as magistrates or defend the territory against its enemies. Such arguments, with memories of the Peasants' War still fresh in mind, sounded like a formula for anarchy—as if Christians need not be concerned with social justice or maintaining political order.

In January of 1527, two years after the first baptisms, the Zurich City Council approved the execution by drowning of Felix Mantz. His execution would soon be followed by the death of hundreds of other Anabaptists, and the arrest, interrogation, imprisonment and torture of thousands more.

### **The Hutterites in Moravia**

The seven articles of the Brotherly Union at Schleithem were an effort to unify a movement that was in danger of spinning off in a dozen different directions. But just as the Lutheran reformers began to realize that a commitment to “Scripture alone” did not inevitably lead to unity (especially regarding the Lord's Supper), the radicals who broke with Zwingli in Zurich quickly discovered that a seven-point statement did not automatically result in broad agreement on all Anabaptist beliefs or practices. The Hutterites are a good case in point. Although contemporary Hutterites are not currently members of the Mennonite World Conference, several references to the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord clearly seem to be referring to the Hutterites.

On the surface, the group that eventually became the Hutterites shared a great deal with the Swiss Brethren—indeed, the Hutterites looked upon the first adult baptisms in Zurich as the beginnings of their tradition, and they included the Schleithem Confession of 1527 among their treasured texts. Yet the combustible mixture of personalities, historical context, and new readings of Scripture created a Hutterian form of Anabaptism distinct from that of the Swiss Brethren.

The spiritual and genealogical roots of the Hutterites began in the Tyrol, a region southeast of Zurich under the jurisdiction of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria.<sup>33</sup> As an ardent defender of the Roman Catholic faith, Ferdinand did

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<sup>33</sup> Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and Leonard Gross, *The Golden Years of the Hutterites: The Witness and Thought of the Communal Moravian Anabaptists during the Walpot Era, 1565–1578* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980) provide the best overviews of sixteenth-century Hutterite faith and practice.

not hesitate to bring the full weight of his authority to bear against heretics of any sort, and especially against the Anabaptists. In the face of the Archduke's persecution, many Anabaptist converts in the Tyrol left their homes (and sometimes their families) and emigrated eastward to Moravia—a territory east of Austria now divided into Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Although the lords of Moravia were technically under the authority of the Habsburg emperors (at that time Ferdinand's brother Charles V), they had long ignored imperial edicts against religious dissidents and charted their own course in matters of religion. As a result, Moravia had gained a reputation for being tolerant of dissident religious groups. For persecuted Anabaptists, it became a haven where they could practice their faith in relative safety.

In the Tyrol and other parts of Austria the Anabaptist movement took on its own distinctive character, one heavily influenced by the currents of late medieval mysticism and end-times apocalypticism. A key figure in all this was Hans Hut, a traveling book peddler, preacher and close friend of Thomas Müntzer—the fiery preacher of social reform who had led the peasant army to its disastrous defeat at Frankenhausen in the spring of 1525.<sup>34</sup> Hut was present at the Battle of Frankenhausen and was deeply shaken by the catastrophic end of the peasant uprising. In the following year, he renounced the tactics of violence, but he did not give up on his vision of a renewed Christian social order. Instead, Hut reformulated his message in language that echoed nearly all the themes of Swiss Brethren Anabaptism, albeit with a distinctive mystical and apocalyptic twist. Hut shared, for example, the Swiss Brethren emphasis on following Jesus in the suffering of the cross as well as in the glory of his resurrection; but the language he used to describe this—with numerous references to “yieldedness” (*Gelassenheit*), suffering and purification—sounded very much like late-medieval mysticism. Like the Swiss Brethren, Hut rejected violence; but only as a temporary measure until Christ returned to lead his followers in a final decisive battle against the forces of evil. In a similar way, Hut, like the Swiss Brethren, baptized adults (hence, he was a “re-baptizer”); but he did so by marking converts on their foreheads with the “sign of the Thau,” a spiritual symbol that would distinguish the 144,000 elect mentioned in Revelation from the ungodly on the day of judgment.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement, 1525-1531* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1977), esp. 62-129, traces Hut's career and influence. See also the seminal work by Gottfried Seebass, *Müntzers Erbe: Werk, Leben und Theologie des Hans Hut* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> It bears notice that the conviction of the approaching end of the world was prevalent among many reformers in Europe at the time, including most Lutherans.

When Hut's confident prediction that Christ would return at Pentecost, 1528 did not come to pass, he accepted the counsel of other Anabaptists to cease speculation about the date of the Judgment Day. Still, the mystical and apocalyptic themes in Hut's preaching hint at the range of expressions evident among the first generation of Anabaptist leaders.

In May of 1527 Hut's travels took him to Nikolsburg, Moravia—a thriving commercial city where hundreds of Anabaptists and other religious dissidents had found refuge under the benevolent protection of the lords of Liechtenstein. Shortly before Hut's arrival in Nikolsburg, Balthasar Hubmaier had won over the local prince, Leonard of Liechtenstein, to the Anabaptist cause and set about to pursue his vision of civic reform. Unlike most Anabaptists, Hubmaier defended the principle that Christians could legitimately serve in government, and he made a case for the magistrate's use of the sword. Hut, by contrast, publicly rejected the idea that a Christian could be a magistrate, denounced all forms of lethal violence, and reiterated his themes of suffering as the Christian calling.

Not surprisingly, Hut's teachings immediately came into conflict with Hubmaier, who insisted on a formal disputation to resolve their differences. Just as predictably, the lords of Liechtenstein, who adjudicated the debate, ruled against Hut. As a result he and some 200 of his followers—who called themselves *Stäbler* (or “staff-bearers”) to distinguish themselves from the *Schwertler* (“sword bearers”)—were forced to flee Nikolsburg in the dead of winter. Just outside the city they laid out a blanket and asked everyone to pool their possessions.

Historians differ as to whether the decision behind the radical step of “community of goods” was based primarily on Scripture or whether it was the result of economic necessity. Clearly, the concept of mutual aid had been an important part of Swiss Anabaptism from the start. Yet here in Moravia the principle of sharing moved beyond an occasional and voluntary act to an explicit rejection of all private property. Whatever the motivation, even after finding safe haven in the nearby town of Austerlitz, the group continued to share their material goods—a practice that became a defining feature of their community.<sup>36</sup>

In 1533, a missionary/preacher from the Tyrol named Jacob Hutter assumed leadership of a portion of the Austerlitz group, now relocated in the nearby town of Ausspitz. Although Hutter would be executed only two years later, he brought a new sense of administrative order to the community, especially regarding the community of goods, and ultimately lent his name to the “Hutterite” tradition

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed account of this story, and the broader context of early Hutterite life, see Martin Rothkegel, “Anabaptism in Moravia and Silesia,” in: Roth and Stayer, eds. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, 163-210.

that emerged. Shortly after Hutter's execution, Peter Riedemann, another gifted leader, produced a lengthy statement on Hutterite beliefs, which provided the Hutterites with a theological foundation for their community.

Like the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterites did not emerge instantaneously as a fully formed community. Rather, the movement—like all Reformation movements—took root in the midst of fluid, complex circumstances in which clarity of leadership, organization and theology took shape only gradually as a result of intense debates. This same transition toward theological clarity and group identity was a central theme in the story of a third branch of Anabaptism: the movement taking shape in North Germany and the Netherlands.

## **Anabaptism in the Netherlands**

As the Hutterites were moving toward a form of Anabaptism characterized by tightly structured communities in which members shared all their possessions, Anabaptists in North Germany and the Netherlands moved in a slightly different direction. Anabaptist ideas were introduced to northern Europe by a zealous evangelist and self-styled prophet named Melchior Hoffman.<sup>37</sup> As a young man, Hoffman was attracted to the teachings of Luther and he began to promote Lutheran doctrine as a traveling preacher in Roman Catholic regions. Like other early reformers, Hoffman associated faith with an intimate encounter with the Holy Spirit. Since God was Spirit, he reasoned, and since Christians were to worship God in "spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), then everything external and "non-spiritual" (religious images, for example) was an impediment to true faith. So he traveled throughout north Germany and Sweden, preaching fiery sermons against religious statues, images, altars and relics, and leading several iconoclastic rampages through churches and monasteries aimed at destroying "idols." Hoffman's anticlerical message and the promise of a new, purified Christian order were especially appealing to the poor. Not surprisingly, his actions also aroused the hostility of local authorities and other reformers. Even though Luther had once written a letter recommending Hoffman for a pastorate, by 1529 Luther firmly distanced himself from any association with his teachings and actions.

Eventually, Hoffman's travels took him to Strasbourg, a haven for religious dissidents. There he was won over to Anabaptism, and he began to preach and practice adult baptism. At the same time, Hoffman's biblical studies—drawing

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation*, trans. Malcolm Wren, ed. Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark., 1987).

especially on the books of Daniel and Revelation—increasingly focused on the End Times, leading to confident assertions regarding Christ’s imminent return. To be sure, Luther and other reformers were also convinced that they were living in the End Times; however, Hoffman began to preach that he was the first of two witnesses prophesied in Revelation 11, called directly by God to gather 144,000 of the elect to await the Second Coming. Like Hut, Hoffman understood baptism as a spiritual seal that marked the believer as a member of the elect. He also began teaching his own distinctive understanding of the Incarnation: namely, that Jesus had a “heavenly flesh” untainted by any human physical qualities. Though born of Mary, Jesus passed through her “like water through a tube,” thereby retaining his divine character.

Most of Hoffman’s mission success came from converts in the Low Countries. When Dutch authorities, under pressure from the Habsburg emperor, began to crack down on Hoffman, he incorporated the experience of suffering into his apocalyptic vision, predicting that Christ would return on Easter of 1533. As Hoffman’s followers gathered in Strasbourg to await the event, the Strasbourg City Council, having long since tired of such claims, had him thrown into prison. The appointed date of the Lord’s return came and went with Hoffman languishing behind bars. Ten years later, he died in prison—a broken man, ignored and irrelevant.

Even though Hoffman was gone from the scene, his teachings continued to live on. One disciple, Jan Matthijs, a baker from Haarlem, argued that Hoffmann had been wrong only about the place and the date of Christ’s return.<sup>38</sup> Claiming to be the second witness prophesied in Revelation 11, Matthijs called on Hoffman’s disciples and other new converts to leave their homes and join him in the north German city of Münster. There they would form the vanguard of a holy army that would help Christ destroy the wicked and godless when he returned in glory. As believers began to make their way to Münster, rumors swept through the Netherlands, inspiring hope among ordinary churchgoers and fear among the authorities.

Meanwhile, initiatives for religious reform in the Roman Catholic city of Münster had brought the guilds into conflict with the church, with both groups struggling for control of the City Council. Initially, the council sought to maintain a neutral position; but slowly civic support shifted in favor of the reformers. Leading the reform movement was a former priest named

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<sup>38</sup> The best summary of the complex events that unfolded in Münster—often described by contemporary observers and modern historians alike as “the Anabaptist kingdom in Munster”—can be found in the essay by Ralf Klötzer, “The Melchiorites and Münster,” in Roth and Stayer, eds. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, 217-254.

Bernhard Rothmann, who had come under the influence of Melchiorite teaching and had begun to implement believers' baptism—a radical step for the City Council since rebaptism was now a capital offense throughout the Holy Roman Empire. When voices on the council called for restraint, Rothmann's Anabaptist supporters managed to gain a majority during the February 1534 elections, effectively taking control of the city.

The events that followed were tragic. In response to the rising power of the Anabaptist party, allied armies of the Roman Catholics and evangelical princes, led by the Bishop of Waldeck, sought to retake the city by force. In the meantime, Jan Matthijs moved into Münster with many of his followers and began to prepare the besieged inhabitants for Christ's return on Easter, 1534. When Christ failed to appear, Matthijs led a small squad of armed men in a wild charge against the army encircling the city. Matthijs was killed immediately—his head cut off and mounted on a pike where all the inhabitants of the city could see it.

Matthijs's sudden death and the failure of the prophecy led to still more radical measures. Leadership now fell into the hands of twenty-four-year-old Jan of Leiden, an actor who was more at home with the pageantry of Old Testament kingship than with the New Testament gospel. Jan saw himself as the reincarnation of King David. In short order he replaced the elected council with 12 elders, introduced polygamy, mandated adult baptism, enforced community of goods, proclaimed the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster (complete with its own currency), and, in September of 1534, declared himself to be "King of the New Israel and of the whole world." In the face of dissent Jan resorted to and dramatically staged demonstrations of his absolute authority that included public executions.

By the spring of 1535 the inhabitants of Münster were hungry and exhausted. They had come to the city convinced that they were players in the fulfillment of a divine plan. Now they were tired and disappointed. On June 25, 1535, troops from both Roman Catholic and evangelical territories stormed the city. The bloody massacre that ensued brought a decisive end to the kingdom of Münster. Leaders who survived the battle were interrogated, tortured with red-hot tongs, and then executed—their bodies exposed to the public in three iron cages hoisted to the top of the bell tower of the Lamberti church, cages that can still be seen to this day. Indeed, centuries after the ill-fated event, the story of the so-called "Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster" continues to live in the European imagination as the only Anabaptist story that really mattered.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, a detailed survey of the lingering perceptions of "Anabaptism" created by the Münster debacle in Stadtmuseum Münster, *Das Königreich der Täufer: Reformation und Herrschaft der Täufer in Münster*, 2 vols. (Münster: Stadtmuseum Münster, 2000).



In the eyes of many, the tragic events at Münster revealed the true character of the Anabaptist movement: religious fanatics who preached heresy and spread sedition and chaos wherever they were to be found. As a result, a new wave of anti-Anabaptist persecution rolled across Europe.

### **Emergence of the “Mennonites”**

The collapse of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster left hundreds of people dead and thousands more deeply disillusioned. Yet out of the ashes of Münster a new Anabaptist group emerged. Led by Menno Simons (1496–1561), a Roman Catholic priest turned radical reformer, Anabaptism in northern Europe regained its theological moorings.

In the spring of 1535, as the horrors of the Münsterite kingdom unfolded, Menno penned his first surviving tract—a polemic against Jan of Leiden, in which he denounced the visions and violence of the Münsterites and advocated a method for interpreting Scripture based firmly on the teachings of Christ. For the next nine months, Menno preached his new message of practical Christianity from the pulpit of his parish church in Witmarsum. Finally, on January 20, 1536—just as public sentiment against the Anabaptists reached a crescendo—Menno resigned his priestly office, gave up the salary, status, and security of his former identity, and publicly aligned himself with the Anabaptist cause. “Without constraint,” he wrote, “[I] renounced all my worldly reputation, name and fame, my unchristian abominations, my masses, infant baptism, and my easy life, and I willingly submitted to distress and poverty under the heavy cross of Christ.”<sup>40</sup>

Immediately, Menno set out to rebuild the scattered and dispirited fellowship. For the next three decades, he and his wife, Gertrude, traveled almost constantly—preaching, baptizing, and instructing new believers in the faith. To a movement of uneducated peasants and disillusioned artisans, Menno brought a renewed commitment to Scripture, anchoring the distinctive themes of the radical reformation within the broader categories of orthodox Christianity. The group that gathered around his energetic leadership was dedicated to a biblicism shorn of apocalyptic visions, to an ethic of suffering love in all human relations and to a vision of a disciplined, visible church committed to Christian discipleship in daily life.

<sup>40</sup> Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c.1496–1561*, trans. by Leonard Verduin, ed. by John C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 671.

Menno was among the first Anabaptist theologians to publish his thought in print, giving his teachings considerable influence beyond his own circle. His focus was consistently on Christ, both the practical teachings of Jesus and his saving work in the cross and resurrection. Indeed, these themes were so central to Menno's thought that the title page of every book he published included the inscription "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). The transformation of the Christian into a "new creature," Menno argued, is made possible only through Christ's atoning sacrifice. But in the very next breath, he insisted that this new birth was more than simply an opportunity to have one's sins forgiven. The gift of grace must lead to a life of Christian discipleship. It will not "help a fig," he wrote, to "boast of the Lord's blood, death, merits, grace and gospel so long as we are not truly converted from this wicked, immoral and shameful life."<sup>41</sup> Becoming "like minded with Jesus" implied a commitment to actually live like Jesus. Menno wrote, "True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. . . . It clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it returns good for evil; it serves those that harm it . . . it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people."<sup>42</sup>

Many of Menno's writings focused on the distinguishing characteristics of the church. He argued that the true body of Christ would be found not in the state-dominated churches of Christendom, but in the voluntary gatherings of believers who pledged themselves to study Scripture, to follow Jesus in daily life, and to practice mutual aid. This community was an alternative society where violence and coercive force had no place. Here discipline, practiced according to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18, could happen in Christian love. By presenting itself as the bride of the risen Christ "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph 5:27), the church offered the world a collective witness to the resurrected Christ. The church was Christ's body made visible.

The violence at Münster had also convinced Menno of the profound danger of confusing Christian convictions with the power of the sword. Thus, in virtually all his writings, Menno challenged his readers to reconsider Christ's teachings on peace, and particularly the alliance medieval Christians had made with the political order. God offered the gift of unconditional love, Menno insisted, while humans were still enemies of God, alienated from him (Rom 5:8-11). The gift of God's grace has world-transforming power precisely because it enables followers of Jesus to express that same grace-filled love to others, including those who might

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 110-111.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 307.

be considered their enemies. “The Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ,” wrote Menno. “We who were formerly no people at all, and who knew of no peace, are now called to be ... a church ... of peace. True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace. Their hearts overflow with peace. Their mouths speak peace, and they walk in the way of peace.”<sup>43</sup>

Over the following centuries, the group that gathered around these teachings—initially called “Mennists,” and then, more commonly, “Doopsgezinde” (“baptism-minded”)—became an enduring and visible presence in the emerging Dutch state. Although not given full legal status until the early nineteenth century, the Doopsgezinde entered vigorously into the expanding Dutch commercial life, participated fully in the eighteenth-century flowering of arts and literature known as the Dutch “Golden Age,” and found a home within the relative tolerance of Dutch urban society.<sup>44</sup>

## Summary

The story of Anabaptist beginnings amid the tumultuous upheaval of the sixteenth century Reformation is filled with a host of colorful characters, an intricate storyline, and numerous complex subplots. Yet beneath all of these details, traces of a coherent narrative are still evident. The Swiss Brethren, Hutterites and Mennonites all emerged out of the same soil: they all drew deeply on forms of piety inherited from late medieval spirituality; they all were indebted to the Protestant reformers of their day for a new awareness of the power of Scripture as the “Word of God,” and they all reflected something of the utopian vision of the peasant revolutionaries who tried, unsuccessfully, to restructure medieval village life around a New Testament blueprint. With few exceptions, the first generation of Anabaptist leaders shared a commitment to the radical principle of voluntary, or believers’, baptism and to a life of practical discipleship, including the love of enemies. And they envisioned the church as a gathered community of true believers, followers of Christ who were ready to leave behind the tradition and assumptions of late-medieval Christendom to shape an alternative community.

Yet their teachings—to the degree that they were understood by the religious and political leaders of their day—were deeply unsettling. Although today

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 554.

<sup>44</sup> For a fuller account of this fascinating and complex story, see Piet Visser, “Mennonites and Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands, 1535-1700,” in: Roth and Stayer, eds. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, 299-343 and Samme Zijlstra, *Om de ware Gemeente en de oude Gronden: Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden, 1531-1675* (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 2000).

we may lament the willingness of sixteenth-century theologians to condemn collectively all Anabaptists, and may wince at their arguments invoking capital punishment, there can be no question but what Anabaptist teachings—especially within the context of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1525 and the debacle at Münster a decade later—seemed to call into question not only the gospel message but also the very foundations of sixteenth century European society.

### **Initial Responses from Wittenberg’s Theologians and Their Allies**

To understand the responses by the Wittenberg theologians and their allies to these various Anabaptist movements, it is important to recognize that in 1525 there was no “Lutheran” church per se. Most political jurisdictions throughout the Holy Roman Empire had witnessed few if any changes in church doctrine or practice. Moreover, even those who called themselves “evangelical” (including some early Anabaptists) hardly agreed among themselves. At the same time, the very opponents of Luther who had labeled him a heretic and had had him condemned by the pope and imperial diet, were not only continuing to attack Luther and his supporters but were also quick to blame the Wittenbergers for the teachings of other quite different reform movements and for the Peasants’ Revolt of 1524-1525. In addition, Luther’s own experience with secular authorities had been quite mixed. On the one hand, in some areas of the Empire his “followers” were being driven out of their positions or, in a few cases, executed. On the other hand, certain princes and cities (especially Luther’s own Saxon electors) protected him and, at least beginning in 1525, heeded his call for reform, expressed already in his tract from 1520, *Address to the Christian Nobility*. Similarly, his experience with the clergy was also divided. Although no bishops supported him he did receive wider support among the pastors, preachers and teachers.

Luther had also thoroughly addressed the question of baptism in his 1520 tract, *Prelude Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. There, while rejecting the notion that baptism was effective by the mere performance of the rite (*ex opere operato*) and thus underscoring the importance of faith to receive baptism’s benefits, he defined baptism in terms of God’s unconditional promise of grace and mercy received in faith. To be sure, he later criticized Karlstadt and Müntzer for rejecting baptism but never for advocating what he regarded as rebaptism. The earliest echo of controversies specifically over rebaptism in Martin Luther’s correspondence came on March 21, 1527, in

a letter to one Clemens Ursinus, where Luther warned Ursinus to flee the “blasphemous” work on infant baptism by Balthasar Hubmaier.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the same year, in a letter to Georg Spalatin dated December 28, Luther was equating the growth of Anabaptists with the work of the Devil.<sup>46</sup> In 1528, both Luther and Philip Melanchthon, his colleague at the University of Wittenberg and chief drafter of the Augsburg Confession, wrote refutations of the movement.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Johannes Brenz, a reformer in the imperial city of Schwäbisch Hall and an ally of Luther who worked with Melanchthon on the Augsburg Confession, dealt directly with the question of capital punishment for rebaptizers (a practice already being used in Swiss territories and in lands of princes faithful to Rome) and rejected it. These tracts serve as a benchmark for the early position of “Lutheran” reformers on the question of (what they viewed as) rebaptism. What we find in these responses are concerns both about the doctrine of baptism and about the political and social ramifications of these early Anabaptist movements.

### **Martin Luther’s Von der Wiedertaufe (1528)**

Luther’s tract, an open letter to two unnamed pastors published in early 1528, began by claiming that he had read Balthasar Hubmaier’s work and had responded to it in his collection of sermons on the appointed Scripture

<sup>45</sup> WA Br 4: 177, 17. As WA 26: 137-40 makes clear, earlier encounters with the Zwickau prophets and Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, who also questioned infant baptism, did not cause Luther to react publicly. To be sure, in 1525, in an open letter to the Christians in Antwerp, Luther mentions people who do not want to baptize at all. See WA 18: 547, 29-34. In a lecture on 1 John delivered on October 9, 1527 (WA 20: 745), Luther mentions that Cyprian practiced rebaptism, about which Augustine stated that such sins should be overlooked in martyrs. On the preceding day, he referred, for the first time in his lectures, to current rebaptizers (WA 20: 738, 27; cf. WA 20: 779; LW 30:315). (This information was obtained from *Luthers Werke im WWW*) This relatively late date contrasts to Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, who published his first extensive refutation of Anabaptism early in 1526.

<sup>46</sup> WA Br 4: 303, 10-12. In this early phase, Luther and others used the word “Anabaptist” to designate those who practiced rebaptism and not necessarily a specific group or movement.

<sup>47</sup> Luther’s open letter, *Von der Wiedertaufe an zwei Pfarrherrn* (WA 26: 137-74; English: *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40: 225-62) appeared by 5 February 1528, according to WA 26: 138. Melanchthon’s Latin tract, *Adversus anabaptistas iudicium* (MSA 1: 272-95; English: *Against the Anabaptists*, in: *Melanchthon: Selected Writings*, ed. Elmer E. Flack and Lowell J. Satre, trans. Charles L. Hill [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962], 100-22), was finished by January 1528 and probably published soon thereafter. It was hurriedly translated into German by his Wittenberg colleague Justus Jonas (*Underricht Philips Melanchthon wider die lere der Wiederteuffer*) and published in the original Latin or in translation both separately and in combination with the work of Johannes Brenz, *An magistratus iure possit occidere anabaptistas* [Translated into English as part of the collection made by Sebastian Castellio in 1554, under the title *Whether the Magistrate Has Authority to Put to Death Anabaptists and Other Heretics*, in: Sebastian Castellio, *Concerning Heretics*, trans. Roland Bainton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 154-69].

readings for the church year, published in 1525.<sup>48</sup> Although admitting that Saxony had had no direct experience with such people, he directly criticized those who killed them for their faith, although he allowed capital punishment for those convicted of sedition. He even suggested that his Roman opponents, who put people to death for rebaptizing, were guilty of the same “crime” when they rebaptized Lutherans.<sup>49</sup>

Not knowing much about Anabaptist beliefs, Luther attacked several of their presumed theological arguments, suspecting all along that they were the work of Satan.<sup>50</sup> To the claim that baptisms under the (anti-Christian) papacy were invalid, Luther, on the basis of Christ’s practice of not rejecting everything taught by the Pharisees, pointed to things taught correctly by Rome. To the notion that baptisms had to be personally remembered to be valid, Luther argued that one also only trusts Christ based upon the secondary testimony of the apostles. In the argument that faith must precede baptism because the word “believes” precedes “is baptized” in Mark 16:16, Luther saw only a recipe for uncertainty and works righteousness, for trusting in one’s own faith as an idol rather than in God’s promise.<sup>51</sup>

Luther then posed the theological question of infant faith and baptism. In light of references to John the Baptist “leaping in his mother’s womb” and Jesus’ blessing of children, he insisted that infant faith cannot be completely ruled out.<sup>52</sup> Baptism of “households” recounted in Scripture must have included babies. Even presuming that children do not yet have faith did not provide sufficient grounds for rebaptizing them, any more than a woman who marries a man she does not love would have to be remarried after she fell in love with him. Against what Luther viewed as a Donatist claim that the unbelief of the one baptizing invalidates baptism, he argued that one can never trust the officiant, but only God’s promise. If it turns out that

<sup>48</sup> See especially his sermon for the third Sunday after the Epiphany, where the text (Matthew 8:1-13), especially v. 8 gave Luther leave to explain alien faith. See WA 17/2: 78-88 (part of the *Kirchenpostil* first published in 1525), where he takes after both the scholastic understanding of the sacrament effective by its mere performance (*ex opere operato*) and the Waldensians and first defends the notion of infant faith.

<sup>49</sup> One of the Roman Catholics whom Luther accused of this practice wrote a tract against Luther insisting that he had done no such thing.

<sup>50</sup> The problem of ignorance and distortion in tracts by Luther, Melanchthon and, later, Justus Menius, has been fully investigated by John Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists: Luther, Melanchthon and Menius and the Anabaptists of Central Germany* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), especially pp. 239-52.

<sup>51</sup> WA 26: 161, 35-37.

<sup>52</sup> On this question, Luther also discusses the objection that the children brought to Jesus were circumcised. Luther retorts that since girls were also among those brought to Jesus the argument holds no water. See WA 26: 157, 24 - 158, 27, where he also refers directly to his arguments in the *Kirchenpostil*.

children should not be baptized, he argued, God would regard it as a minor offense, since the Scripture does not clearly forbid it. Moreover, the history of the church proved that plenty of people baptized as infants showed all the signs of the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>53</sup> Otherwise, the church had not existed for over 1,000 years—a notion Luther found absurd. God’s covenant with human beings in baptism did not exclude children.<sup>54</sup> Luther was convinced that Anabaptists viewed baptism more as a human invention than as God’s ordinance. “But because we know that baptism is a divine thing, instituted and commanded by God himself, we do not look at the misuse of it by godless people but simply at God’s ordinance. Thus we discover that baptism in itself is a holy, blessed, glorious and heavenly thing.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the heated polemic and despite the fact that in other situations Luther often referred to the societal consequences of his opponents’ positions, Luther clearly treated rebaptism as a theological dispute not a political one. As noted above, he even chastised those who would condemn Anabaptists to death on the basis of their beliefs. He simply wanted to protect these unnamed pastors and other readers against what he regarded as false teaching.<sup>56</sup> This same focus on the doctrinal differences, rather than on social matters, recurred in his comments on infant baptism penned the following year for his *Large Catechism*.

### **Philip Melancthon’s Adversus Anabaptistas Iudicium (1528)**

At nearly the time Luther’s tract was being published, the Imperial government promulgated a rescript on January 4, 1528 declaring that all who practiced rebaptism should be put to death. Melancthon’s tract, which appeared months later, must be viewed in the light of this new political situation. Melancthon began with general comments about the nature of theology, before providing a definition of the word “sacrament” (“a divi-

<sup>53</sup> This and several other arguments Luther will repeat in the *Large Catechism*, published the following year in 1529.

<sup>54</sup> Melancthon will make this argument much more extensively in his tract.

<sup>55</sup> WA 26: 171, 10-14.

<sup>56</sup> Luther’s other published comments on the Anabaptists written before the 1530 Diet of Augsburg came in the form of a preface to the work of Justus Menius, *Der Wiedertäufer Lehre* (WA 30/2: 209-14). He only briefly (and inaccurately) describes their teaching: holding secret meetings, teaching a community of property and goods, anticipating that Christ will crush their enemies with the sword, and imagining that good works are worthless. This may reflect somewhat the teaching of Melchior Rinck, but many other groups, including later Mennonites, rejected many of these teachings, too.

nely instituted sign of grace”).<sup>57</sup> Such sacraments were not simply signs to distinguish Christians from other people (something Ulrich Zwingli had argued) but were “signs of God’s will toward us”<sup>58</sup>—signs that did not justify by their mere performance but only in conjunction with faith. Melanchthon then defined baptism as “a sign of repentance and the forgiveness of sins”<sup>59</sup> and its “use and fruit”<sup>60</sup> in revealing God’s wrath against sin (placed upon Christ) and God’s mercy. In all afflictions, Christians ought to regard their baptisms and thereby be humbled and promised God’s aid. Melanchthon then argued that the baptisms of John and Jesus<sup>61</sup> are the same as far as the external sign goes (just as there is no difference in the external Word of God, regardless of the speaker). Indeed, John’s pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God simply proves that Christ, not human works, removes sin.

Melanchthon then focused on infant baptism, referring to the examples of Origen, Augustine, Cyprian, and Chrysostom, which were not to be rejected without the clear testimony of Scripture. There was no such clear word forbidding the baptism of infants. Here he described other teachings held by Anabaptist groups—including holding property in common and calls for the abolition of government—teachings that Melanchthon labeled signs of the End Times.

Now, one-third of the way into the document, he finally asked whether infants should be baptized. Circumcision and Christ’s blessing the children proved that the promise of grace applies to infants. Yet, these promises applied specifically to those whose sins are forgiven, something that occurs in the church through God’s appointed means of grace—the Word and the sacraments. Thus, Word and sacraments applied to children, too. While admitting to the lack of a clear biblical command to baptize infants, Melanchthon insisted that the example of Scripture (with circumcision and the proven need for grace) remained on his side, demanding that those opposing infant baptism come up with a single command forbidding such a practice.

Part of Melanchthon’s argument assumed the existence and forgiveness of original sin, which he then described in some detail,<sup>62</sup> refuting both Roman and Anabaptist opponents who imagine that such corruption is not

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<sup>57</sup> MSA 1: 274, 30-31.

<sup>58</sup> MSA 1: 276, 9. Melanchthon will reiterate this distinction in CA XIII over against, among others, Ulrich Zwingli.

<sup>59</sup> MSA 1: 277, 27-28.

<sup>60</sup> MSA 1: 278, 22.

<sup>61</sup> MSA 1: 280-81.

<sup>62</sup> MSA 1: 285-87.



sin. Only at the very end of the document did Melanchthon again note other characteristics of those he labels Anabaptists, especially in relation to government and the holding of communal property, which he called seditious and derived from Platonism.<sup>63</sup>

Clearly, this tract, like Luther's, was constructed as a theological argument and as a serious refutation of an important, opposing viewpoint. Often published with Brenz's argument against capital punishment, it doubtless had as much influence as Luther's. By attaching other teachings regarding political authority and communal property, however, Melanchthon introduced what he considered legal grounds for their punishment by the government for sedition, which was a capital crime.

### **Johannes Brenz's An magistratus iure possit occidere anabaptistas (1528)**

If Luther and Melanchthon's tracts concerned chiefly theological issues, Brenz's was an official opinion related to the punishment of rebaptizers. Because it is less known and directly addressed the political ramifications of theological condemnations, it deserves more detailed analysis. In August 1528, a German translation of Melanchthon's attack on the Anabaptists appeared, published by Johannes Setzer in Haguenau,<sup>64</sup> to which was appended a short memorandum by Johannes Brenz, the reformer in Schwäbisch Hall.<sup>65</sup> Earlier that year, Brenz had received a request from the city of Nuremberg (which would two years later be among the original subscribers to the Augsburg Confession) for his opinion on the use of capital punishment for Anabaptists. The city fathers were, in essence, asking for theological opinions concerning the imperial mandate of January 4, 1528, which, based upon the decrees

<sup>63</sup> MSA 1: 291-95. Most of these issues are also mentioned in CA XVI. See MSA 1: 294, 31, where he refers to Plato's *Republic* 5, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Setzer had studied at Wittenberg but took over his father-in-law Thomas Anshelm's printery in Haguenau upon the latter's death. In the 1520s, Melanchthon, who had worked at Anshelm's printshop when it was located in Tübingen, often used him as a printer.

<sup>65</sup> For this section, see James Estes, *Christian Magistrate and State Church: The Reforming Career of Johannes Brenz* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 123-41. Estes based his work on Gottfried Seebaß, "An sint persequendi haeretici?" Die Stellung des Johannes Brenz zur Verfolgung und Bestrafung der Täufer," *Blätter für Württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, 70 (1970): 40-99 (reprint: Gottfried Seebaß, *Die Reformation und ihre Außenseiter* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997, 283-335]). For the tract, *Ob eyn weltliche Oberkeyt... möge die Widerteuffer... zum Tod richten lassen*, and an introduction (also dependent upon Seebaß), see Johannes Brenz, *Werke: Eine Studienausgabe*, part 2: *Frühschriften*, ed. Martin Brecht et al. (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1974), 472-98. (Henceforth referred to as *Frühschriften* 2: 472-98.)

of Roman emperors against Donatist rebaptisms, had prescribed the death penalty for rebaptizers. Whereas no one doubted the legitimacy of the death penalty for sedition, Nuremberg's theologians, unlike its lawyers, counseled less stringent measures for non-revolutionary Anabaptists.<sup>66</sup>

Brenz's answer, published without reference to date, place or printer, caused quite a stir, and efforts were even made to prevent its publication.<sup>67</sup> Brenz addressed two questions: first, whether Scripture allows this and, second, whether Roman law requires that all Anabaptists be killed. Brenz then distinguished between spiritual and secular offenses.<sup>68</sup> Only the latter may be punished by the sword. Spiritual crimes (he listed unbelief, heresy and the misinterpretation of Scripture) were to be punished by the spiritual sword, that is, Scripture. Brenz was convinced that secular punishment of any kind for such matters would only strengthen heresy not extirpate it. Otherwise "what point would there be in studying Scripture, for the hangman would be the most learned doctor?"<sup>69</sup> As long as heretics or unbelievers lived among Christians peaceably, secular authorities had no business persecuting them.

Brenz then addressed several objections. To the use of Deuteronomy 13:1-10, which authorized the killing of false prophets, Brenz insisted that such commandments applied only to the Kingdom of Israel and not to Christ's kingdom, since they were simply signs of the coming reign of Christ. To the traditional distinction between spiritual authorities, which had no right to wield the sword in such matters, and secular authorities, which should, Brenz repeated his distinction between the two and claimed that secular authority had only to concern itself with external peace and order. He also reminded those who insisted that the magistrate wield such power against heretics that they would have no argument to contradict its use in future generations against the true faith. "Therefore, it is by far safest and surest for secular government to exercise its own office and let spiritual sins receive spiritual punishments. For it is much better and more preferable to tolerate a false faith four or ten times than to persecute the

<sup>66</sup> Luther was also asked for advice. See WA Br 4: 498-99 for material associated with a letter to Wencslaus Linck, dated July 14, 1528.

<sup>67</sup> Sebastian Castellio included its Latin translation in his work on tolerance, *De Haereticis, an sint persequendi & omnino quomodo sit cum eis agendum, Luteri et Brentii, aliorumque multorum tum veterum tum recentiorum sententiae* (Basel, 1554), and he even dedicated the work to the Duke of Württemberg in part because Brenz, now in the duke's service, had shown himself to be so tolerant.

<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of this in Luther's theology, see below.

<sup>69</sup> Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 124, paraphrasing Brenz, *Frühschriften* 2: 485, 18-20.

true faith only once.”<sup>70</sup> To the objection found in Melanchthon’s tract that the Anabaptists are also guilty of other crimes, Brenz noted that at least they did not force others to follow their practices (for example, holding property in common—something the monks also did). Their crime was simply misunderstanding a few passages of Scripture, for which no one should be put to death, lest all Christians be liable to such punishment.

Brenz turned aside concerns that the growth of Anabaptism might lead to insurrection by arguing that this had not happened with monks in the past and that such worries could also be applied to such practices as public drinking, markets, and the like, since they, too, could lead to riot. Even the Anabaptist unwillingness to take oaths and their teaching on the impossibility of Christians being magistrates did not rise to the level of a capital offense, because priests and monks taught as much. One should simply deprive them of civic privileges. “To impose any greater punishment would be tyranny and oppression and unjust. Why in the world should one in this case punish an Anabaptist more sharply [than anyone else who breaks such a law]?”<sup>71</sup>

Brenz then turned his attention to the ancient imperial rescript against the Donatists (opponents of Augustine, bishop of Hippo), which provided the justification for the current law. After quoting it in Latin and German, he first attempted what James Estes characterizes as a strained reading of the text, arguing that it only applied to the clergy.<sup>72</sup> Second, he insisted that it applied only to those caught in the act of rebaptizing. Third, given Emperor Theodosius’s erudition, Brenz doubted that this law applied to “rebaptism pure and simple” (*uff das schlecht und bloß wiedertaußen*), as if there was no place for instructing those ignorant of the truth, but to some specific crime, which was not recorded in the rescript itself. In this connection, Brenz pointed out that other greater crimes (that of a bishop who rebaptizes someone) were met with milder punishments. Even a relapse into Judaism had a lesser punishment attached to it in Roman law (namely, confiscation of property). Brenz also suggested that if rebaptizing were such a serious crime, then priests who rebaptized children baptized in an emergency by midwives should also be killed.<sup>73</sup> Even Cyprian of Carthage had, in error,

<sup>70</sup> Brenz, *Frühschriften 2*: 487, 31–488, 3; see Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 125.

<sup>71</sup> Brenz, *Frühschriften 2*: 492, 7–9; see Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 126.

<sup>72</sup> Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 126, where he rightly points out that such readings were not exceptional in interpreting such texts in the medieval or early modern times.

<sup>73</sup> Brenz, *Frühschriften 2*: 495, 29–32. Luther, Brenz and others approved baptism by midwives without rebaptism.

rebaptized some people. If the law were aimed at rebaptism pure and simple, Brenz added, then it must have been the product of “bloodthirsty bishops.”<sup>74</sup> In any case, he concluded, a Christian magistrate should have far more concern for simple-minded people who misunderstand Scripture. The sword was no cure at all. If magistrates wanted to prevent rebellion, they should consider first their own lifestyles, the way they oppressed the poor, and the discontent that sprang from that behavior.<sup>75</sup>

Brenz’s position was not unique in 1528 (other Nuremberg theologians and the City Council held the same position), and even Luther’s and Melancthon’s views did not exclude his position on punishment.<sup>76</sup> The publication of this memorandum in both German and Latin, however, led to it being a counterpoint during the sixteenth century to other Lutheran views. Moreover, by 1531, as we shall see below, the Saxon theologians and government were practicing much harsher measures, placing Brenz’s opinion in sharper contrast to them and to others who supported capital punishment for spiritual crimes. In later memoranda from 1530 that were not widely disseminated, Brenz, while still trying to remain true to his principle of the two realms, did allow for the banishment of particularly stubborn Anabaptist teachers, not on the grounds of their beliefs but because they disseminated them in public.<sup>77</sup> He remained opposed to the death penalty but also held to his principle that the government has no authority in matters of faith.

At nearly the same time, Brenz also prepared (unpublished) memoranda for another signer of the Augsburg Confession, Margrave Georg von Brandenburg-Ansbach.<sup>78</sup> As a result of interviews with some Anabaptists arrested in the margraviate, Brenz and his fellow theologians counseled that their leaders be banished but not killed. Even though their leader had propagated Hans Hut’s theory that secular government would be destroyed within three-and-a-half years of the Peasants’ War, he was to be treated as a follower of insurrection, not a leader, and thus spared the death penalty. Brenz’s concern throughout was not to punish false belief but to prevent false teaching.

Only in a later memorandum to the prince from February 1531, written in conjunction with other theologians in Ansbach, did Brenz seem to allow capital

<sup>74</sup> Brenz, *Frühschriften* 2: 496, 27; see Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 127.

<sup>75</sup> See Brenz, *Frühschriften* 2: 497, 27—498, 8, where he mentions how King David’s adultery led to Absalom’s insurrection.

<sup>76</sup> See Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 128-29.

<sup>77</sup> See Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 130-31. See Brenz, *Frühschriften* 2: 498-541.

<sup>78</sup> See Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 132-35, and Brenz, *Frühschriften* 2: 541-76.

punishment.<sup>79</sup> That memorandum distinguished leaders from followers and three kinds of teaching (errors, open blasphemy, and sedition). Those who fell into the first group should be punished the least severely, despite the demands of secular law. Those guilty of open blasphemy (the memorandum mentioned Trinitarian errors and teaching universal salvation) should be given plenty of opportunity to recant but otherwise dealt with according to the civil code. Finally, the secular authorities already knew how to deal with those guilty of trying to overthrow the government. This memorandum was to serve in negotiations with the Saxon theologians, who, as shall be seen, took a much stricter position. It did not reflect either Brenz's ongoing position or the policy of the Margrave, both of whom opposed the death penalty.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, it is further evidence of the effect that the political situation exercised over theological discussion.<sup>81</sup>

### Political Aspects of the Dispute to 1530

What immediately complicated relations with the so-called "rebaptizers" was imperial law. As we have seen, an imperial rescript, which passed into Roman law already in the fourth century, called for the capital punishment of such people, in line with Augustine's political solution to the problem of the Donatists.<sup>82</sup> This meant that as soon as theologians, who at some level had the power of the state on their side, labeled sixteenth-century Christian dissenters Anabaptists, these people became liable to extreme persecution.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, several governments, including Zurich on the "Reformed" side and Austria on the Roman Catholic

<sup>79</sup> Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 134-35.

<sup>80</sup> This, at least, according to Estes, *Christian Magistrate*, 134-35. For Brenz's later negotiations with Melancthon in the 1550s and his unchanging position against the death penalty, see pp. 135-41.

<sup>81</sup> It is also important to note that Johannes Brenz was by no means open to Anabaptist theology and practice. See, for example, comments Brenz made in a sermon on John 12:38-41 delivered in the 1540s and noted in Martin Brecht, "A Statement by Johannes Brenz on the Anabaptists," *MQR*, 44 (1970): 192-98.

<sup>82</sup> See W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) and the above discussion on Johannes Brenz. Already among the Hussites, the charge of Donatism and rebaptism arose. See Amedeo Molnár, "La mise en question du baptême des enfants par les hussites radicaux," in: *Anabaptistes et dissidents au XVIe siècle* (Bibliotheca Dissidentium scripta et studia, 3), ed. Jean-Georges Rott and Simon I. Verheus (Baden-Baden and Beuxwiller: Koerner, 1987), 35-52.

<sup>83</sup> It should be remembered that throughout the 1520s, others were also persecuted for their faith. In 1523, the first Lutheran martyrs were burned in Brussels, and to commemorate that event, Luther wrote his first hymn. (See WA 35: 411-15; LW 53:211-16.) Many "Lutherans," as they were called, were exiled from or fled their homelands and often ended up as refugees in Wittenberg, Strasbourg or other important evangelical centers. Among others were nuns who fled their monasteries (Katherine von Bora, Luther's later wife, among them), priests (Caspar Aquila, who was briefly arrested in Augsburg by the bishop), and well-to-do citizens (the parents of Caspar Cruciger, Sr., who left Leipzig).

side, immediately began putting people labeled Anabaptists to death. On the contrary, Johannes Brenz's position vis-à-vis capital punishment, which seems to have influenced policy in Ansbach and Nuremberg, represented a rejection of the government's use of such extreme coercive power in matters of conscience.<sup>84</sup> However, when the imperial diet renewed this very law in 1529, events were set in motion enabling severe persecution of these believers.

Moreover, when Melanchthon's tract labeled the rejection of government and the holding of property communally as sedition and inferred that all Anabaptists held to this position, he opened an avenue for government intervention that had little to do with the theological debate. This concern over sedition, heightened by recent experiences during the Peasants' War of 1525 and sharpened later by the events in Münster in 1534-1535, would continue to color all contacts between Saxon Lutherans and these opponents.

The time between 1526 and 1529 represented a hiatus for those territories that were beginning to experiment with church reform arising out of Luther's teachings. The imperial diet (parliament) met in Speyer in 1526 and in the absence of Emperor Charles V agreed that each jurisdiction should behave in such a way as they could answer to God and the Emperor. For evangelical princes like John of Saxony, this meant implementing serious reforms of the church and even an official, though not episcopally sanctioned, "visitation" of the churches in Saxony, starting in 1527. In 1529, however, with a victorious Emperor eager to assert more control over the Empire through his brother Ferdinand, the Second Diet of Speyer rescinded the earlier agreement and demanded enforcement of the decree against Luther and his teaching passed at the 1521 diet meeting in Worms, while at the same time affirming the imperial decree that sanctioned capital punishment for Anabaptists. Against the former action, the evangelical princes and cities filed an official appeal, called a *protestatio* (from which comes the term Protestants, literally, appellants). These Protestants argued that their reform had not broken any imperial law. Their imperial opponents, however, would sometimes lump them together with rebaptizers as a way of proving that they stood in violation of imperial law.<sup>85</sup> Thus, these evangelical theologians and political leaders had to show

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<sup>84</sup> For a review of the statistics, originally compiled by Claus-Peter Clasen, see Eugène Honée, "Burning Heretics—A Sin against the Holy Ghost? The Lutheran Churches and How They Dealt with the Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Movement," in: *Truth and Its Victims*, ed. Wim Beuken et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 94-104, esp., 100-101, citing C.-P. Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1972), 358ff.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, John Eck, *Four Hundred Articles*, trans. Robert Rosin, in: *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 58-60 & 73-75, where positions on baptism and secular authority held by Luther and Melanchthon are mixed with those of Hubmaier and Zwingli among others.

not only that their own teaching conformed with Christian teaching of the past (and, hence, could not be illegal) but also that they were in no way connected to heresies condemned by church and empire—especially to the practice of rebaptism. Thus, some of the evangelical princes supported the measures against the Anabaptists.

The decision reached at Speyer had an immediate effect upon Electoral Saxony's reaction to Anabaptists in its territories. An incident that occurred near Gotha in 1529 was particularly important.<sup>86</sup> A group of folks labeled Anabaptists, who had been previously apprehended and released, had been rearrested near the monastery of Reinhardsbrunn. When six of their number refused to recant, the Saxon authorities summarily executed them. This caused serious consternation among some evangelical pastors in the region. It is clear that the Saxon officials had been placed in a difficult political position by the second diet of Speyer. Faced with the diet's clear condemnation of Anabaptists, with which the evangelical princes had agreed, some protesting princes decided to prove that they were not condoning a universally condemned teaching and thus were not themselves *ipso facto* heretical (and also worthy of the Empire's outright condemnation). Thus, when one of the concerned pastors, Friedrich Myconius, expressed his misgivings to Philip Melanchthon, the Wittenberg reformer responded that these rebaptizers were "angels of the devil." Had the Saxon elector not responded so ruthlessly, he continued, their blasphemy could easily have engendered theological uncertainty and civil unrest.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, the Wittenberg theologians published Justus Menius's defense of such punishment, accompanied with a preface by Martin Luther in 1530.<sup>88</sup> Although Luther did not mention the issue of capital punishment directly, Menius defended it on two grounds: because of treason (already intimated as an issue in Melanchthon's tract and mentioned in Luther's preface and in his commentary on Psalm 82) and blasphemy (mentioned in Melanchthon's letter and in Luther's commentary). Of course, some reformers, notably Johannes Brenz, did not agree with this position and

<sup>86</sup> See Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers*, 50-51, 182.

<sup>87</sup> MBW 868 (MSA 7/1: 127-31), dated the end of February 1530. Melanchthon claimed that the Anabaptists and Ulrich Zwingli were actually offspring of Nicholas Storch, one of the Zwickau prophets with whom Melanchthon had dealings in 1521. Melanchthon also remarked that Brenz's position was so lenient in part because he had never dealt with any Anabaptists personally (as had Justus Menius) or experienced the kind of contagion they spread.

<sup>88</sup> For a thorough review of this document, see Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers*, 179-210. The preface of Luther is in WA 30/2: 209-14. He had a copy of the manuscript, which he showed to Philip Melanchthon, before 12 April 1530. See WA Br 5: 274 (no. 1545), a letter to Menius dated April 12, 1530.

continued to argue that Anabaptists should not *ipso facto* be liable to the death penalty.<sup>89</sup>

Comparison of what Luther first wrote in 1523 about secular authority with his commentary on Psalms 82, published in early 1530 before the drafting of the Augsburg Confession, reveal important changes in his position on civil punishment for religious crimes. (This is even more remarkable given that Luther was condemned in the papal bull of excommunication for rejecting capital punishment for heretics by the church, a position that Luther then continued to defend in his rejection of that bull.)<sup>90</sup> Those changes even appear, in part, to be a response to Brenz. Again, debates in the city of Nuremberg over the question of punishment for heretics caused Lazarus Spengler, secretary of the City Council, to ask Luther for advice (via Veit Dietrich, Luther's companion and later preacher in Nuremberg).<sup>91</sup> Specifically, Spengler criticized the "new teaching" (i.e., Brenz's) that governmental authorities could not intervene in matters of faith and had to tolerate all forms of religious teaching and practice.<sup>92</sup> Luther responded in his commentary, originally intended as a simple "mirror for Christian princes," appending to his comments on Psalm 82:4 a lengthy excursus.<sup>93</sup> In it Luther identified four different situations. First, some heretics, who taught disobedience to governmental authorities, abandonment of property or the communal sharing of property, were seditious and ought to be punished by the authorities in accord with Romans 13. Second, there were those who taught contrary to the common Christian faith as expressed in the Apostles' Creed. Here he specifically mentioned Turks and Anabaptists [!] who, he claimed, deny Christ's divinity, but he also included his Roman opponents, who did not teach that Christ forgives sins, and "Epicureans," who do not believe in heaven or hell. Just as the Nicene Fathers drowned out the Arians with hisses to prevent their being heard and Moses commanded the Israelites to stone blasphemers (Lev 24:16), so in Luther's day magistrates were to silence such people.<sup>94</sup> Rulers could not force anyone into believing the truth,

<sup>89</sup> See above.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle un-rechtlich verdammt sind (March 1521) in WA 7: 439-42; LW 32: 87-89.

<sup>91</sup> WA 31/1: 183-84.

<sup>92</sup> He refers directly to Luther's tract from 1524, *A Letter to the Princes of Saxony concerning the Seditious Spirit* (WA 15: 199-221), where Luther seems to have said as much.

<sup>93</sup> WA 31/1: 207, 33—213, 22.

<sup>94</sup> Despite Luther's reference to Leviticus, he does not make direct reference to the use of capital punishment by present-day rulers.



but they could prevent them from speaking publicly. The third case involved a city in which there were both “Lutheran” and “Papist” preachers, as he called them. Here, Lutherans were to keep silent if not granted a fair hearing, but the Christian magistrate, following Constantine’s example, could determine which of the two groups most clearly preaches according to Scripture, since in Luther’s view having more than one Christian message in a jurisdiction would only lead to confusion and trouble. Fourth, one should under no circumstance mention disagreements about non-essentials from the pulpit.

Luther then turned his attention to clandestine preachers, arguing that, because they had no call, they have no right to preach. All Christians were priests, but not all were pastors. Citizens should turn such self-appointed preachers over to the authorities. Luther even argued that had people done this when Müntzer and Karlstadt first began to preach, they could have prevented the later unrest. Although Christ’s command to the Apostles to evangelize all gave them the right to preach secretly, pastors and bishops do not have such a command and must remain with their specific parishes and dioceses. Anticipating the objection that he himself had not limited his preaching to his Wittenberg pulpit, Luther answered that he was called as a doctor of the Bible, that he did not choose to publish anything but was forced into it, and that people freely used his writings in other places. To the objection (expressed by Brenz) that one should not punish such people or guard against them, just as one tolerated the Jews, Luther pointed out that Jews already bore the punishment of being outside Christendom and that they did not have the right to preach publicly. To Brenz’s objection that giving the authorities such power would give their enemies more encouragement to punish the evangelicals, Luther seemed unconcerned, admitting that the same thing had happened when Israel’s kings killed the prophets. Yet that did not prevent good rulers from using the law correctly. With these comments, Luther now had more closely connected the work of the Christian magistrate with the prevention not only of sedition but also of public blasphemy. Condemnations of Anabaptists for matters of doctrine could therefore more easily translate into political punishment.

Thus, in 1530, when the Emperor surprised the Protestants by calling another diet to meet in Augsburg in his presence, at which all would give an account of their faith, the issue of rebaptism was bound to find a place in their response. Fueling their concerns was the fact that John Eck, one of the most notorious opponents of the Lutherans, published his *404 Articles* in April 1530 in which he listed 386 heretical statements gleaned from the writings of Protestants. Included in the accusations were several

charges regarding baptism and disobedience to governing authorities that seemed to associate them with the Anabaptist heresy, which the imperial government had agreed was a capital crime. In the account of their faith that followed, these theologians had to make clear that especially these statements did not apply to them.

### **The Augsburg Confession and Its Condemnations**

Sketched upon this background, problems regarding the condemnations of the Anabaptists, or “rebaptizers,” in the Augsburg Confession take on new clarity. For one thing, these statements were not intended primarily to reflect or refute the theological positions held by specific Anabaptist leaders. Instead, they were meant to distance the reformers theologically and politically from a group with which their Roman opponents had falsely identified them and whose behavior could *prima facie* be construed as worthy of capital punishment. Some were even designed, indirectly, to accuse their Roman opponents of supporting Anabaptist positions.

There is, however, another, more difficult historical problem lurking behind these condemnations. As we have seen, the reformers did not know very much about the specific beliefs of many Anabaptists. Not only were there relatively few Anabaptists in Saxony at this time, but also they had only limited access to the printing press. Thus, one of the few Anabaptist theologians whose writings were known to the reformers was Balthasar Hubmaier. This may explain, for example, the condemnation of Anabaptists in CA V: “Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.”<sup>95</sup> Although one might plausibly—if unfairly—associate this understanding of human agency with Hubmaier, the argument is not found in the writings of any other Anabaptist and certainly not among the later Mennonites. Moreover, the rhetorical point being made in CA V had less to do with what Anabaptists taught and more to do with the “others,” including Gabriel Biel and many other late-medieval theologians who taught that from one’s own powers (*ex puris naturalibus*) one could, by doing what is in one (*facere quod in se est*), merit God’s grace and the Holy

<sup>95</sup> CA V.4, as translated in *BC 2000*: 40. See Balthasar Hubmaier, *On Free Will*, in: *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 112-35, especially, 123-27.

Spirit.<sup>96</sup> By linking the thought of the opposition with the universally condemned Anabaptists, Melanchthon hoped to turn the tables on his opponents through a kind of theological guilt by association.<sup>97</sup> Comments in CA XVII, condemning the apocalyptic theology of Anabaptists, also involved a small number of theologians (perhaps only Hans Hut and Melchior Rinck), whose theology the reformers also knew firsthand but who hardly represented most Anabaptist or later Mennonite theology. Similarly, CA XII's accusation that Anabaptists were Novatians (who insisted that after baptism one may not sin) also involved few if any actual Anabaptists. Finally, an oblique reference to people who thought even political authorities ought not take revenge (i.e., punish crimes) in CA XXVII.55 may have had the teaching of some Anabaptists in mind, but it comes in the midst of an attack on the reformers' Roman opponents and their views on monasticism.

On the other hand, some articles condemning the Anabaptists may appear to be more widely applicable. The condemnation in CA VIII.3 ("What is the Church"), for example, mentions the Donatists expressly but may have been intended to reflect Luther's 1528 tract against rebaptism. Whether this represented most Anabaptists or not, Luther was convinced that they, like the Donatists, predicated the validity of baptism upon the holiness of the officiant. Again, however, the main point was to distance the evangelical princes at Augsburg and their teachers from such positions and to prevent dismissal of their confession out of hand.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, condemnations expressly mentioning Anabaptists in CA IX (on the validity of infant baptism) and CA XVI (on secular government) reflect Luther and Melanchthon's impressions of the Anabaptists, already stated in his earlier tract.

What was the political force of such condemnations? In the light of Luther and Melanchthon's growing support for the responsibility of governmental authorities in matters not only of sedition but also public blasphemy, certain comments in the preface and conclusion to the Augsburg Confession take on new weight. The preface of the confession (par. 3)—written not by Philip Melanchthon but by the Saxon chancellor, Gregory Brück—quotes the emperor's summons to Augsburg, "so that all of us can accept and preserve a single, true

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<sup>96</sup> This is a connection made clear in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV.61-68, in *BC 2000*: 130-31. That "and others" (*BC 2000*: 40) refers to late-medieval theologians like Gabriel Biel and their followers is also proved by Melanchthon's explanation in Apology II.7-10 (*BC 2000*: 113-14) and IV.9-11 (*BC 2000*: 121-22).

<sup>97</sup> This approach can also be seen in Brenz's 1528 memorandum.

<sup>98</sup> See Melanchthon's comments in the Apology VII/VIII, as he reflects on the condemnation of CA VII-VIII by the opponents in their *Confutatio*, in part on the basis of suspected Donatism.

religion.” Even more striking in its assurance that princes have responsibility in religious matters is a statement in the Conclusion (par. 5), where the princes and their allies state that, “we have very diligently and with God’s help (to speak without boasting) prevented any new and godless teaching from insinuating itself into our churches, spreading, and finally gaining the upper hand.” Thus, these evangelical rulers are claiming the right to prevent the spread of such teaching as they and their theologians judged to be “new and godless” (a term that would have included Anabaptist teaching), and in so doing they do not clearly distinguish between church and territory. At the same time, CA XX-VIII carefully distinguishes between the office of magistrate and the office of bishop, where the latter alone has authority to condemn false teaching.

Here a closer analysis of CA XVI may also help clarify possible political ramifications for these condemnations. The topic discussed in CA XVI (German: “Concerning Public Order and Secular Government”; Latin: “Concerning Civic Affairs”), gets near to the heart of historic differences between Lutheran and Mennonite churches and their Anabaptist predecessors: the role of the Christian in society. In the Latin version of CA XVI.3, we read, “They condemn the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities.”<sup>99</sup> The list of such responsibilities includes: “to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take an oath when required by magistrates, to take a wife, to be given in marriage.”

This cornerstone of Lutheran social ethics—that the gospel does not forbid full engagement in worldly affairs—was first spelled out in Luther’s 1523 tract, *On Secular Authority*.<sup>100</sup> Philip Melancthon, whose own reflections on what he often calls the two-fold righteousness of God come to expression best in his commentaries on Colossians 2:23 from 1527 and 1528, also holds a similar position, reflected in CA XVI.<sup>101</sup>

Several comments may help in understanding the condemnations of CA XVI. First, although the German is more indiscriminate in its condemnation,

<sup>99</sup> *BC 2000*: 49. The German version (*BC 2000*: 48) reads, “Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.” As the footnote (86) indicates, by not distinguishing among various groups and persons this statement exaggerated the differences by lumping all Anabaptists together.

<sup>100</sup> WA 11: 245–281.

<sup>101</sup> See Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 110–36. In large measure, Melancthon’s point of view was also shaped over against Thomas Müntzer’s role in the Peasants’ War. We have also seen how important this distinction is for Brenz.

at least the Latin is clearly not finding all Anabaptists in default for the entire list of approved civic duties (including marriage and owning property) but is specifically talking about those “who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities.” Second, as the following paragraphs in CA XVI make clear, another serious point of disagreement lies with late-medieval monasticism and its claim to be in a state of perfection by means of the vow.<sup>102</sup> Third, the other unnamed “opponent” here is the charge of treason emanating from the imperial court, the Roman legate, and the polemics of John Eck, all of whom in one way or another accused the evangelical princes of sedition. Thus, CA XVI also, ironically, contains a defense of civil disobedience on theological grounds, as the closing lines make clear. “But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5[:29]).”<sup>103</sup>

As we have seen, CA XVI came in the midst of a process through which evangelical reformers were slowly developing new understandings of the magistrate’s role in religious matters (*cura religionis*).<sup>104</sup> By the mid-1530s, when Luther and Melanchthon wrote their memorandum defending the use of capital punishment against the Anabaptists (see below), not only had the debacle at Münster occurred but they had now become even more convinced that princes had a positive role to play in maintaining order and preventing blasphemy.<sup>105</sup> Yet other theologians of the time, notably Johannes Brenz (who worked on the Augsburg Confession with Melanchthon in Augsburg), insisted that Luther’s earlier tracts and Melanchthon’s commentaries made the division between the political and theological much sharper to prevent the killing of heretics. Thus, CA XVI found approval among those Lutherans who opposed the very position that was developing among Wittenberg’s theologians, a position that justified the capital punishment of heretics, especially Anabaptists. Therefore its condemnations cannot be said necessarily to have led to persecution.

<sup>102</sup> The language will lay the groundwork for the arguments against monastic vows in CA XXVII.

<sup>103</sup> CA XVI.6-7, in *BC 2000*: 50/51.

<sup>104</sup> See James Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melanchthon, 1518-1559* (Leiden, Brill, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> *Daß weltliche Oberkeit den Wiedertäufern mit leiblicher Strafe zu wehren schuldig sei, Etliche Bedenken zu Wittenberg* (1536) in WA 50: 6-15 (dated 5 June 1536 and published in late August in Wittenberg; see also MBW 1748 [MBW *Texte* 7: 150-57], based upon the fair copy). The letter was jointly written by Philip Melanchthon and Martin Luther, and signed also by Johannes Bugenhagen, and Caspar Cruciger, Sr. To be sure, the document still tries to distinguish the two hands of God by dividing the clerical and magisterial offices and by distinguishing treason from blasphemy. However, it is precisely on the last point that it struggles with opposing voices within the evangelical camp.

## Reactions in the 1530s

In the aftermath of the rejection of the Augsburg Confession by the Emperor and his acceptance instead of the *Confutatio* (a refutation of the Augsburg Confession), the reformers in Wittenberg became more and more convinced that Christian (read: Lutheran) princes had a positive role to play as rulers in protecting true doctrine. Already in 1527, it was Elector John of Saxony who had called for official visitations of the churches in his territories. It was he, among others, who presented and signed the Augsburg Confession in 1530. He continued to support and maintain evangelical (Lutheran) churches in his territories. But what happens when these very churches were faced with purveyors of what they determined to be false doctrine?

On the one hand, and already before 1530, these theologians realized that governments could punish religious folk for sedition. Luther had mentioned this in his tract *On Rebaptism*, although Brenz was far more skeptical of this charge. Having lived through the uncertainty of the Peasants' Rebellion of 1525, the reformers were convinced that one of the chief duties of secular government was to maintain peace. To these sixteenth-century theologians, this meant preventing and punishing sedition. On the other hand, there was more uncertainty regarding blasphemy. Put in their terms, these theologians were convinced that government had a responsibility to maintain the so-called "second table" of the law (beginning with obedience to parents through the tenth commandment). They were divided about what to do with the first table (the first through the commandment on keeping the Sabbath), especially the command not to blaspheme or "take God's name in vain." Whereas Johannes Brenz consistently rejected capital punishment for people deemed heretics, Luther and Melanchthon took a harsher position.

One thing that hardened their position was the 1534 uprising in Münster by people who rejected the validity of infant baptism. The political disorder and violence unleashed by this kind of Anabaptism underscored Luther and Melanchthon's tendency to equate the practice of rebaptizing itself with seditious and godless behavior.<sup>106</sup> Not to punish these people, they argued, would leave the land itself vulnerable to rebellion and open to God's retribution, an argument already found in Melanchthon's 1530 letter to Myconius. In February 1536, Melanchthon wrote and published *Verlegung etlicher unchrist-*

<sup>106</sup> From Luther we have, among other things, two prefaces that appeared early in 1535, one to Urbanus Rhegius's tract refuting Münster's confession of faith (his *Widerlegung des Bekenntnisses der Münsterischen neuen Valentinianer und Donatisten*; WA 38: 336-40) and the other to the anonymous *Neue Zeitung von den Wiedertäufern zu Münster* (WA 38: 341-50).

*licher Artikel, welche die Widerteuffer fürgeben (Refutation of Some Unchristian Articles That the Anabaptists Have Proposed).*<sup>107</sup> He did it in part to instruct the simple folk but also to encourage governmental authorities to act against a sect that, he claimed, undermined public order, oaths, and marriage. He connected their claim of being pacifists to the uprising in Münster, where, in his opinion, people also began by renouncing the sword before rebelling against their overlords. He attributed the popularity of the movement to the devil's ability to deceive and humanity's lust for novelty. The bulk of the tract examines five political articles of Anabaptists<sup>108</sup> and the question of infant baptism.<sup>109</sup> In the concluding pages, Melanchthon again calls upon the governmental authorities to take action against such blasphemers of God's clear Word, especially given the way they deceive people through their fancy words and the appearance of humble behavior.<sup>110</sup>

At the same time, the Augsburg Confession itself was taking on a new role, beyond its original function as a confession of faith, to serve increasingly as a norm for teaching and theology in the lands of princes who had subscribed to it.<sup>111</sup> For example, in 1537 a host of leading evangelical theologians also subscribed to the document.<sup>112</sup> This meant that the complex reasons for singling out and condemning Anabaptist teaching as a defense against the false accusations of the Roman party became obscured by the larger goal (shared by church and government officials alike) of establishing doctrinal harmony in the developing territorial churches. Luther's warning of 1527 against punishing a person for false belief was now forgotten or mitigated even by Luther himself! Now the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession, far from simply defining theological disputes, became the means for enforcing theological conformity and, thus, punishing dissenters.

In several tracts from this period, Martin Luther also weighed in. His open letter against clandestine preachers, published in 1532, made such people (perhaps especially Anabaptists) liable to civil punishment, not because of their

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<sup>107</sup> MSA 1: 301-22.

<sup>108</sup> MSA 1: 307-15: ban on involvement in secular government; insistence that Christians have no other authorities than servants of the gospel; ban on oaths; insistence on holding property in common; permission to divorce an unbelieving spouse. Brenz's position clearly had no impact on Melanchthon.

<sup>109</sup> MSA 1: 315-20.

<sup>110</sup> MSA 1: 320-22.

<sup>111</sup> See Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991).

<sup>112</sup> See *BC 2000*: 343-44.

teaching but because they taught without a legitimate call. “Thus, officials, judges and those who govern should simply know and be certain that such skulkers must be held under suspicion not only of false teaching [which Luther did not regard as a capital offense *per se*] but also of murder and rebellion, because the authorities know that such people are driven by the devil.”<sup>113</sup> Even before that, in an addendum to a letter from January/February 1531 drafted by Melanchthon and sent to Elector John of Saxony to assist in negotiations with the Smalcald League, Luther also agreed to stricter punishment.<sup>114</sup>

In 1536, these developments culminated in an official letter to Prince Philip of Hesse (a signatory of the Augsburg Confession)—written jointly by Luther and Melanchthon, signed also by Bugenhagen and Cruciger and published in August—which defended the use of coercion, and especially capital punishment, against Anabaptists.<sup>115</sup> Although it was not the only direction Protestant thought would follow, it was one of the most important and shaped the reception of the Augsburg Confession and its use in that punishment.<sup>116</sup>

Prince Philip had recently arrested a group of Anabaptists—including several who had already been arrested and banished from Hesse—and wanted an opinion from the theologians under what circumstances, if any, one could use capital punishment. The response of the Wittenberg faculty showed by its very convolution how difficult they perceived the problem to be. The authors began by distinguishing the preaching office from that of governing and insisted that pastors could not wield the sword, lest they fomented another Münster.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, theologians also bore responsibility for shaping public policy. Second, they made clear that their advice presupposed judicial due process. The mere accusation of being Anabaptist was not a crime, against which one did not need to prove one’s innocence. Third, they argued that the government had authority

<sup>113</sup> WA 30/3: 520, 8-11 (*Ein Briefff D. Mart. Luthers Von den Schleichern und Winkelprediger*, 1532).

<sup>114</sup> For a synopsis of the dating arguments, see MBW 1119 (*Regesten*, 2: 18f.; *Texte* 5: 39-43; against WABr 6: 222-23). Luther argued that defaming called pastors was worse than cruel punishment of Anabaptists (who presumably did such things). Melanchthon justified punishment on these grounds: breaking the law by holding secret meetings; teaching seditious things such as that the magistrates were not Christian; blasphemous condemnation of ministers of the gospel (ministers the authorities are, according to the second commandment, supposed to protect). He went on to argue (answering Brenz) that this is the reason for the condemnation of the Donatists in Imperial Law. Furthermore, he distinguished beginners from those who are hardened in their beliefs and counsels that punishment be milder for them. *Texte* 5: 42, 71-72: “All this one should make milder or stiffer according to the circumstances.” He also did not think that the fact that the Anabaptists went to their deaths joyfully should have much, if any, impact on their punishment.

<sup>115</sup> See n. 105 and Appendix A.

<sup>116</sup> For this reason, an English translation of that letter is appended to this statement.

<sup>117</sup> WA 50: 9, 21-29.



to punish those who fomented rebellion. At this point, the authors turned to an examination of Anabaptist doctrine and tried to show, first, that their teaching about government, property and marriage was *ipso facto* seditious.<sup>118</sup> Despite Anabaptist protests that this was not their intent, Luther and Melanchthon insisted that the teaching itself proved the contrary. To be sure, the reformers included a proviso that, for any teaching to rise to this level, it must have been shown to be unjust and to undermine secular authority directly and that the governmental authorities had to determine how severely to respond to such a threat. Upon this background, the reformers then answered the objection (posed by Philip of Hesse and Brenz's memorandum of 1528) that secular authorities could not rule the heart. They replied, first, that they were only discussing external unjust teaching that called into question oaths and property, things that made up the fabric of sixteenth-century society and that they saw being undermined in the Peasants' Revolt and the Münster uprising. Second, as they had argued at least since 1530, the reformers insisted that secular authorities had to guard against blasphemy as well as sedition.<sup>119</sup> They described—albeit inaccurately in many instances<sup>120</sup>—Anabaptist teaching on infant baptism, original sin, the means of grace and Christology, and insisted that these doctrines take God's name in vain. Again, they insisted that such an argument against the Anabaptists had to be proved in each instance through due process and not simply on the basis of hearsay. However, because Anabaptists were establishing separate churches, they had become guilty of crimes spelled out in imperial law and thus were liable to the death penalty. To answer the objection posed by Johannes Brenz and other reformers—that none of this behavior rose to the level of capital crimes—the Wittenbergers argued that for Christians both secular and ecclesial offices had to serve God's glory, which meant specifically preventing blasphemy and idolatry. Because, in the reformers' view, Matthew 13:30 (the parable of the weeds sown among the wheat) applied only to the preaching office, governmental officials had to protect their citizens from blasphemy and heresy by preventing and punishing both.

On the question of punishment, the authors, while acknowledging that the grounds for judging secular crimes were easier to determine, stressed the dangers of denying infant baptism—a practice that in their opinion jeopardized the infants' salvation and created two peoples (the baptized

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<sup>118</sup> Here their claims seem directed toward the Hutterites.

<sup>119</sup> WA 50: 11, 26—12, 7. See James Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God*.

<sup>120</sup> Most historians would argue that the reformers' knowledge of the mainstream Anabaptist groups was extremely limited. See, for example, Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers*.

and unbaptized) in a single jurisdiction. They concluded that such teaching, when adhered to by repeat offenders, was worthy of capital punishment. Although admonishing the magistrates to practice discernment by allowing people to change their mind and by meting out milder punishments for neophytes, the tract also counseled them to be hard on those who might be filled with “Münsterish” ideas. Furthermore, the reformers insisted that they themselves had to defend God’s honor and to follow their conscience in giving this instruction to would-be judges. They asserted that stiff-necked people, blinded by the devil, only gave the appearance of humility. These wolves in sheeps’ clothing were known by their fruit: an unwillingness to be convinced by clear statements from Scripture. Thus, the judge could rest assured that the sect is from the devil. This was perhaps the most chilling conclusion of all: that a refusal to agree with the reformers’ view of Scripture was itself a sign of the devil’s work and grounds for severe punishment.

The conclusion of the printed tract revealed why these theologians felt they had to address the government: it was their pastoral duty to instruct all kinds of folks in their daily callings.<sup>121</sup> In the manuscript version delivered to Philip of Hesse but, unfortunately, not included in the published version, there was some further appeal for fairness in these matters. In a handwritten postscript, Luther somewhat mitigated the force of these arguments (drafted by Melancthon) with these words, “This is the common rule. However, our gracious lord may also mete out leniency [*Gnade*] alongside punishment according to the situation of each case.”<sup>122</sup> This slight appeal for flexibility, however, should not be used to excuse the support by Wittenberg’s theologians for capital punishment of Anabaptists simply because the Anabaptists held beliefs both contrary to Wittenberg’s own teaching and condemned by imperial law.

## **Lutheran-Anabaptist Encounters in the 1550s**

Formal encounters between Lutherans and Anabaptists were somewhat sporadic in the 1540s. But two events occurring close together in 1557

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<sup>121</sup> The notion that Christian leaders had a duty to address their own magistrates may serve to remind Lutherans that although the reformers may well have been completely wrong about their advice in this instance, they did preserve the notion that Christians in general and pastors in particular (in their calling) have a word to deliver to the powers and principalities of this world, something demonstrated by the lives and work of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Desmond Tutu.

<sup>122</sup> WA 50: 15, note on l. 4.

merit brief attention, not because they introduce new theological insights to Lutheran-Anabaptist relations, but because they bear evidence to a continuation of positions delineated in the 1530s.

In August, 1557, Ottheinrich, the Lutheran Elector of the Palatinate, called for a disputation between the two groups to be held at Pfeddersheim, just outside of Worms. Johannes Brenz—joined by Jakob Andreae, Johannes Marbach and Michael Diller—represented the Lutheran position; Diebold (Theodore) Winter, an Anabaptist elder active in the northern Alsace and Palatine region, spoke on behalf of the Anabaptists. Based on the minutes from the day-and-a-half exchange, however, the sessions resulted in a rather perfunctory restatement of five standard charges. Although framed as a “disputation” the protocol describes the procedures as a “juridical examination” and the frustration on the part of the Lutheran theologians regarding the outcome of the exchange is palpable. At a later disputation in Frankenthal, organized in 1571 by the Reformed elector of the Palatinate, Winter complained bitterly that the Anabaptists at Pfeddersheim were never given a chance to speak freely or to defend themselves.<sup>123</sup>

## The Prozeß of 1557

This failed attempt to win over the Anabaptists in public exchange must have been the context for a subsequent statement, issued two months later by eight prominent Lutheran theologians in Worms, under the heading “Thoughts Regarding the Anabaptists: On Church Courts and the Ensuing Ecclesial and Corporal Punishment of the Anabaptists.”<sup>124</sup> The document, immediately published as a pamphlet (*Prozeß, wie es soll gehalten werden mit den Wiedertäufern*), seems to represent a consensus regarding Anabaptist beliefs and policy for dealing with them in Lutheran territory. The list of charges against the Anabaptists is familiar, echoing the arguments Melancthon made in 1536 that Anabaptist teachings were to be condemned and that civil authorities were

<sup>123</sup> For a transcription and translation of the recorded proceedings, see John S. Oyer, ed. and trans., “The Pfeddersheim Disputation, 1557,” *MQR* 40 (July 1986), 304-351. For Winter’s complaint, see Jesse Yoder, “The Frankenthal Debate with the Anabaptists in 1571: Purpose, Procedure, Participants,” *MQR* 36 (Jan. 1962), 14-35.

<sup>124</sup> “Bedenken der wiederteufer halber. Von kirchgericht und volgender kirchenstraf und leiblichen straf der widerteufer.”—Bossert, 161. On the basis of a manuscript copy located in Berlin, Bossert’s date of Nov. 5, 1557 should be corrected to read Oct. 16, 1557.—MBW, no. 8388 (in *Regesten*, vol. 8, 139-40). The published version of the document appeared as *Prozeß, wie es soll gehalten werden mit den Wiedertäufern* (Worms: Paul & Philip Köpfel, 1557).

justified in executing dissenters on the grounds of blasphemy as well as sedition. The statement is especially significant since it indirectly refers to the Augsburg Confession [i.e., it mentioned *symbola*, a term for creeds and confessions of faith that for Lutherans included the Augsburg Confession], since both Melanchthon and Brenz are among the signatories,<sup>125</sup> and since it elicited a sharply critical response from both the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites.

The document began by calling on the church courts to uphold purity of doctrine (1 Cor 5:1-3; Titus 1:13-14) with God, not humans, serving as the ultimate judge through the authority of God's Word and the confessions of the church. Because the devil could often deceive "with false piety, like an angel of the light," it was important that the central teachings of the Anabaptists were broadly known and carefully considered, so that all would be persuaded that "the Anabaptist sect is not a Christian church, but rather a seduction of the devil." Christian preachers should instruct people in Anabaptist teachings so that "god-fearing people might be strengthened against their deceit."

There were, the document continued, two forms of Anabaptist confusion. In the first group were Anabaptist teachings affecting temporal government that were open lies and seditious. Specifically, the Anabaptists: 1) considered the magisterial office to be sinful and refused to acknowledge magistrates as Christians; 2) believed that all Christians were obligated to hold their possessions in common; 3) held that settling suits in courts is sinful; 4) refused to take oaths; and 5) encouraged a convert to leave his or her spouse for the sake of faith.

Other beliefs held by Anabaptists were false, but not directly relevant to temporal order. Here the statement listed the following errors: 1) the denial of original sin since the time of Christ's passion and that children born since then were without original sin; 2) that infant baptism was wrong; 3) that God was one person, thereby denying the Christian doctrine of the eternal Son and Holy Spirit; 4) that God revealed himself without consideration of the outer Word, the ministerium and the sacrament; 5) that sacraments were only a sign, not an application of grace, and that the Lord's Supper was only an outward sign of their fraternity; 6) that justification was effected by

<sup>125</sup> According to Scheible, the document emerged in the aftermath of meetings between the evangelicals and representatives of the pope, which broke down when the Gnesio-Lutherans refused to join forces with Philip Melanchthon and his supporters. In addition to Melanchthon, the presumed author of the document, other signers include Johannes Brenz and Jakob Andreae [one of the authors of the Formula of Concord], from Württemberg; Jakob Runge of Mecklenburg, Johannes Marbach of Strasbourg, Johannes Pistorius, Sr., from Hesse (Marburg), Georg Karg, Superintendent in Brandenburg-Ansbach, and Michael Diller then professor in Heidelberg and author of the Palatinate's church order. These names are added according to a report of W. Köhler on the basis of a manuscript he had seen.—*Bibliographia Brentiana* (1904), 154f., no. 338.

pious Anabaptist works and suffering and one's own fulfillment of the law, or by special inner revelation; and 7) the doctrine of eternal security.

God-fearing and reasonable people, the writers continued, should recognize that these "gross errors are the mark of the devil . . . and that the Anabaptist sect is the devil's ghost from which one should earnestly flee." Governments were responsible to order pastors and administrators that they instruct common people in the errors of the Anabaptists and tell them to "flee from the sect as from the devil's excrement." "For Anabaptist error in regards to temporal government . . . is sedition against God Himself and should not be taken lightly, and it should be said to the prisoners that [authorities] have the right to punish them with execution because of their sedition." Then followed instructions for church officials in procedures for handling people suspected of Anabaptism: apprehension, questioning, and instruction ("which may take several weeks").

The document then described the "blasphemous errors" of the Anabaptist—which were both "horrific sins" and destructive to religion and good order—and outlined procedures for restoring those who confessed their sins. No one who recanted should be executed, since this would discourage the more stubborn of them from confessing their errors. Those who did persist, however, should be formally excommunicated and then given over to the government for corporal punishment. Others should be imprisoned, for as much as two or three years, and authorities should be vigilant to prevent all Anabaptist gatherings since "wherever they find a space, as in Münster, there the devil can be openly seen in sedition, immorality, robbery and blasphemy." Authors of the document apparently debated over the wording regarding the punishment. The initial draft of the statement argued that leaders and deceivers who still refused to recant "should be judged and punished according to the latest Imperial decree for sedition and blasphemy." A later version replaced the word "blasphemy" with the sentence: "should be judged and executed with the sword for sedition."

Anticipating the argument that no one should be killed on account of their faith, the theologians responded that governments were clearly commanded by scripture to punish the seditious. Moreover,

God has clearly and explicitly commanded temporal government that they should punish blasphemers in their own territory. Thus it is written in Leviticus 24 that whoever speaks blasphemy should be put to death, and this law is binding not only for Israel, but is a natural law that constrains all governments in their order—kings, princes, judges, etc. For the temporal government should not only defend the bodies of their subjects, like a shepherd watches over oxen or sheep, but should also

maintain outward discipline, and governments should bring order to the honor of God, they should punish and do away with public idolatry and blasphemy.

Wise authorities should resist Anabaptist blasphemy with “a correct understanding of their office and take heed that this is God’s work and that they are struggling not merely against human wantonness [*Mutwill*] but against the devil ...”

The theologians then returned to the role of government in ensuring the purity and unity of Christian doctrine. Rulers needed to recognize, they argued, that when there was public idolatry in their lands and people were running to the Anabaptists, they themselves were to blame for this misery. “For the government should plant correct teaching in their churches and do away with idolatry.” They needed to ensure that people were being instructed in the faith, “for all governments owe this service to God.” The well-being of the church and the prevention of divisions clearly fell within the responsibilities of a godly magistrate.

On June 25, 1558 Duke Christoph issued a mandate against “the Anabaptists, sacramentarians, Schwenckfelders and anyone else like them.” The charges against them picked up on most of the items listed in the *Prozeß*, with additional emphasis on the Anabaptist teachings against the sacraments. The mandate even cited the Augsburg Confession as a standard for determining heresy and threatened anyone teaching, associating with or offering aid to those who teach these things with corporal punishment (“which has been established in numerous Imperial decrees”), banishment from the territory, and the confiscation of land and possessions.<sup>126</sup>

## Anabaptist Reactions

In 1557 Swiss Brethren leaders reportedly wrote a letter to Menno Simons expressing concern about the decree and their intent to write a refutation.<sup>127</sup> The text, however, if indeed it ever existed, has since disappeared. At about the same time, Hans Büchel, a Swiss Brethren preacher, composed a hymn of 20 stanzas intended to challenge the arguments of the *Prozeß* and to comfort

<sup>126</sup> Gustav Bossert, ed. *Herzogtum Württemberg, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte*, 13, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Wiedertäufer*, 1 (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1930), 168-171. On p. 171 it reads: “und sonsten unserer fernern ernstlichen ungnad und straf, wölche auch nach gelegenheit unnachleßlichen gegen solchen ubertretern, widerspenstigen und ungehorsamen als abgeschnittenen gliedern der christlichen gemeind.”

<sup>127</sup> Gross, *Golden Years*, 90; *ME* 4:643.

those who expressed fear of renewed persecution.<sup>128</sup> Büchel's hymn—"A New Christian Song about the present fearful last time, in which so many and various factions, sects and false prophets arise, together with bloodthirsty tyrants"—is a distillation of several typical mid-century Swiss Brethren theological and ethical themes. In it, Büchel lamented the religious chaos and disorder of the day, suggesting that part of the problem is that "kings, prince and lords / now wield the spiritual sword." Stanzas 7-9 referred explicitly to the *Prozeß* of 1557. "Papists, sects and godless mobs," he wrote,

have resolved with one accord / to crucify the godly man / according to that which I have read / An edict went out at Worms / where there were gathered / as man counts the seventh and fiftieth year / high priests and religious authorities / whose final decision was / that whoever teaches anything against them / him shall men judge with the sword / his blood man shall spill; / also those who will not go to their church / these shall man take prisoner / and lock them up as mad. / Torture him three or four times a year/ while in prison until he swears an oath / to believe what they want him to. / Is this not tyranny / that one is to confess / that the Truth is a lie? / But who has ever heard the like / that with the sword Christians shall be / converted into God's kingdom / as is now undertaken by the learned one? / You children of God, take heed / Let not the world hinder you, / God will break and recompense / pride and high mindedness / Unto the authorities yield you / body and possessions. / Let yourself be shamed and ridiculed now, / as they also did to the Lord.<sup>129</sup>

The rest of the hymn, drawing frequently on the Lord's Prayer, developed a strong argument for loving the enemy, patience in the face of adversity, and the promise of eternal reward for those who are willing to suffer as Christ suffered. Preserved in the *Ausbund*, the hymn continues to be sung by the Amish today.

The longest and most forceful response to the *Prozeß*, however, came from the Hutterites, whose missionaries had long been active in the Württemberg territories and who felt especially threatened. Composed by Leonhard Dax, a former Catholic priest, the work appeared around 1561 under the title "Handbook Countering the 'Proceedings.' Issued in 1557 at Worms on the Rhine Against the Brethren who are Called Hutterites, and Signed by Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Brenz, Among Others

<sup>128</sup> *Songs of the Ausbund* (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 1998), 83-92. This is hymn #46.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

from their Midst.<sup>130</sup> The booklet, extending to 150 folio pages, was never published but it circulated in various manuscript copies through the Hutterite communities, several of which are still extant.

Dax divided his response into twelve “books” or sections, each of which attempted to refute a particular charge. The heart of his argument can be summarized in three main points: 1) the Lutherans are misinformed about what it is that Anabaptists, specifically Hutterites, actually teach; 2) Lutherans have misinterpreted Scripture, especially the role and teachings of Jesus; and 3) if governments really want to be Christian, they should follow the teachings of Jesus, which means, among other things, that they should not use the sword against other Christians (here he responded specifically to the reference from Lev 24:16 that governments should execute blasphemers by referring to the new precept of Christ for dealing with sinners as described in Matt 18:15-20 and I Tim 6:5). True messengers of God use only the sword of the spirit.

Several later Lutheran conferences, including a week-long gathering at Stuttgart at the turn of the year 1570-1571 and a document published in 1584, drew heavily on the *Prozeß*. Moreover, one of the signers, Jakob Andreae, was among the authors of the Formula of Concord, the twelfth article of which attacked positions labeled Anabaptist, including some found in the *Prozeß*. Nonetheless, the record suggests that the magistrates themselves refused to heed these 1557 recommendations by Lutheran theologians for capital punishment. Many Anabaptists were captured and imprisoned in Lutheran territories after 1557, but those arrests resulted in few executions, and indeed Anabaptists in Lutheran lands during the second half of the sixteenth century received notably lighter sentences than they did in Roman Catholic territories.

The condemnation of those who held different theological positions from Lutherans took a surprisingly more irenic turn in *The Book of Concord* and the Formula of Concord contained therein. For one thing, in the preface the signatories (princes and cities), at the urging of Pomeranian theologians, excluded from condemnation French and English Protestants and their churches.<sup>131</sup> For another, the authors of the Formula steadfastly

<sup>130</sup> “Handbiechl wider den process der zu Worms am Rein wider die Brüder, so man die Hutterischen nennt, ausgegangen ist, welches war im 1557 jar dessen sich dann Philippus Melancthon und Johannes Barenthius selbst andre mehr aus ihren mittel unterschrieben haben.”—Cod. EAH-155, fol. 1-151, Archives of the Hutterian Brethren/Bruderhof, Rifton, NY. See also Robert Friedmann, *Die Schriften der Huterischen Täufergemeinschaften: Gesamtkatalog ihrer Manuskriptbücher, ihrer Schreiber und ihrer Literatur, 1529-1667*, (Wien: Kommissionsverlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 1965), 80, 144; ME 2:645-646.

<sup>131</sup> The Book of Concord, Preface, 20, in *BC 2000*: 12-3.



refused to name names in their condemnations, despite objections lodged by the theological faculty at the University of Helmstedt. Moreover, the twelfth article of the Formula—where, among other kinds, Anabaptist errors were rejected—mentions no names. Indeed, the reason for including this article was, in the words of the Epitome, “so that such heretical groups and sects may not tacitly be associated with [the Lutherans].”<sup>132</sup> Even when the authors of the Formula state that certain *teachings* of the Anabaptists are “not to be tolerated or permitted in the church, or in public affairs, or in domestic life,”<sup>133</sup> they were not addressing the teachers but rather the assumed ramifications of the teachings.

## Summary

By placing the Augsburg Confession within its historical context, several important aspects of its condemnations of Anabaptists become clear. First, although the condemnations themselves may seem to reflect theological differences and not political consequences, it is quite clear that from the very beginning the condemnations of Anabaptists were framed in the midst of political struggle and, from their very inception, entailed severe consequences for those labeled Anabaptists. To be sure, initial Lutheran responses to what they regarded as rebaptisms were framed as theological debates. However, they very quickly took note of the imperial condemnations and began to discuss matters of punishment, first for what the reformers perceived as political crimes (sedition) but then for blasphemy as well. At the same time, however, debates in Nuremberg, the published opinion of Johannes Brenz and the behavior of George of Brandenburg-Ansbach and Philip of Hesse, provide an important minority voice among the signers and drafters of the Augsburg Confession—people who did not believe that purely religious crimes merited capital punishment. Yet, however important these voices may have been, the fact that by the mid-1530s both Luther and Melancthon had come out clearly in favor of capital punishment for not only sedition but also, in certain cases, blasphemy, means that the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession, when coupled with the princely signers’ own view of their custody over political matters expressed in that

<sup>132</sup> The Epitome of the Formula of Concord, XII.2, *BC 2000*: 520. The Solid Declaration, XII.1-8 (*BC 2000*: 656), gave an even fuller explanation, stating that opponents, “have baited our churches and their teachers.”

<sup>133</sup> The Solid Declaration, XII.9, in *BC 2000*: 657.

Confession, had severe consequences for Anabaptists—not only for those who were executed but also for those whose faith and lives were tested under such threats. The reference to the Augsburg Confession in the 1557 *Prozeß* underscores this point. Although the Formula of Concord disassociated teachers and churches from their teaching, the experience of Anabaptists in Lutheran lands and the support of capital punishment for false teaching by the reformers cannot be gainsaid. In the common telling of the history of Lutherans and Mennonites, these results must be acknowledged and dealt with in the present. For Mennonites, the history of persecution has always remained an integral part of their identity; for Lutherans it is essential to rediscover the history of their complicity in such persecution in order to face it honestly today.

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## Part 3

# Considering the Condemnations Today

### Introductory Comments

The national Lutheran-Mennonite dialogues in France (1981-1984), Germany (1989-1992), and the US (2002-2004) along with the international study group (2005-2008) all had the task of clarifying how the statements of the Augsburg Confession that explicitly or implicitly mention Anabaptists and their doctrines relate to the teachings of present-day Mennonite World Conference (MWC) member churches. These dialogues are important for the relationship between Mennonites and Lutherans today since, on the one hand, Mennonites refer to Anabaptists in the sixteenth century as their forebears who continue to offer spiritual inspiration and theological orientation while, on the other hand, Lutherans are still committed to the Augsburg Confession. Indeed, the Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) states: "It [the LWF] sees in the three Ecumenical Creeds and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especially in the unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, a pure exposition of the Word of God" (Article II).

These national dialogues have made it clear that the task requires both historical investigation and systematic reflection. The meaning of the relevant articles of the Augsburg Confession as well as the Anabaptist teachings of the sixteenth century must be determined in their historical context. Moreover, in the course of the last four centuries, Lutherans and Mennonites have developed an extensive history within the changing context of their churches, societies and states. Thus, the present-day relation of Lutherans and Mennonites—both to their own doctrines and to the doctrines of the other church—are different in some degree today than they were in the sixteenth century. Such changes need to be described historically and evaluated systematically.

This task has two dimensions or levels. The first deals with identifying the precise *content* of Anabaptist doctrine and practices that seem to be in tension or even in conflict with Lutheran understandings, either in the sixteenth century or today. The second level inquires into the *relation* between these conflicting

doctrines or practices and the divisions separating our church bodies. Since the Augsburg Confession uses the word “condemnation” in relation to Anabaptists and their doctrines, we need to ask how deep the disagreements actually are and how much they affect on-going relations between the two churches.<sup>134</sup>

Serious theological disagreement at the first level does not necessarily mean that the beliefs or practices in question must be “condemned.” To be sure, the use of condemnations can be traced back to the Apostle Paul, who in Galatians 1:8-9 states that “if anyone proclaims a *gospel* that is contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed.” The later tradition of the church frequently appealed to these two verses of Paul to reject all manner of heretical doctrines from the orthodox understanding of Christian faith, and quite often also to exclude the people holding these positions from the Christian community. Sometimes this happened through a formal process of excommunication, at times through the ban and shunning, and at other times by making them liable to judicial process including capital punishment.

The problem Lutherans and Mennonites face, however, is more complicated than simply identifying a contradiction between true and false gospel. When members of one Christian church study the doctrines, life and order of another church they often realize that they have much in common with the members of the other church. These commonalities include elements that create, sustain and serve a shared, saving faith in the Triune God and that ground the Christian life and the life of the church in continuity with the Apostles. At the same time, each group also recognizes doctrines and practices in the other church that, according to its understanding, may be in tension with or even contradict what both churches share. In the eyes of one of the two churches, these conflicts may even weaken, damage or destroy the sound elements foundational for Christian faith that both churches have in common. Thus, the first church cannot simply say that there is no Christian faith or true community in the other church. To the contrary, it explicitly acknowledges elements present in the other church that create and sustain, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christian faith and the church. At the same time, however, it also recognizes other doctrinal elements and practices that seem to be in conflict with those shared elements. The situation is the same, of course, for how the second church views the first.

Since Christian doctrine is not only the sum total of discrete elements but a structured whole, in which each element has its specific place, it is sometimes difficult to describe the precise character of the differences in

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<sup>134</sup> The Formula of Concord only “reject[s] and condemn[s] the Anabaptists’ erroneous, heretical teaching” (Art. XII).

specific doctrines and practices. The structure of one church's doctrine as a whole is different from the structure of another church's doctrine, so that individual elements—for example, baptism—may claim a different status and significance in their respective teachings. Therefore, it is a complex task for both churches to identify how deeply what they have in common is affected by those differences. It is also possible that the two churches in dialogue will approach these questions in different ways.

### **Condemnations That No Longer Apply**

Before attempting to analyze the content of the doctrinal conflicts between Lutherans and Mennonites, it is important to identify several condemnations in the Augsburg Confession that never applied to Anabaptist doctrines. Historical research has demonstrated a broad diversity of Christian communities in the sixteenth century that contemporaries labeled “Anabaptist.” Thus, what might have been true of one group was not the case with others. Even when Lutheran theologians had direct contact with Anabaptists through their writings or through judicial interrogations their texts often demonstrate that they actually had very limited knowledge of Anabaptism. It is also clear that Lutheran reformers may have had broader concerns in mind in their condemnations of the Anabaptists: since they themselves were accused by Catholic authorities of being “Anabaptists” (a capital offense), Lutherans may have sought to prove their orthodoxy by explicitly rejecting any doctrine that might be attributed to Anabaptists.

The national dialogues and the international study commission all agree that at least three condemnations in the Augsburg Confession mentioning “Anabaptists” are in fact—to use the words of the 2004 dialogue report from the USA—“based on erroneous judgments about what sixteenth-century Anabaptists believed and practiced.” These are found in Articles V, XII and XVII.

1. Article V states: “Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.”<sup>135</sup> Although so-called Spiritualists like Caspar Schwenckfeld and Sebastian Franck may have held this opinion, the Anabaptists themselves did not.<sup>136</sup> Nor does the condem-

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<sup>135</sup> *BC 2000*: 40; German text.

<sup>136</sup> But see n. 95 above. Melancthon's reference to the “Anabaptists *and others*” probably was an effort

nation in Article V apply to Mennonites today. In the national dialogues, Mennonites and Lutherans jointly affirmed the significance of Scripture and the external word of the gospel. Moreover, on the related question of justification by human actions apart from God's mercy in Christ, the German national dialogue expressed the convergence among Lutherans and Mennonites with particular clarity:

Mennonites and Lutherans are united in the Reformation's stress on the Pauline insight regarding the justification of the sinner by grace through faith alone. Thereby they not only understand justification in the sense of God's judgment that declares the person righteous and that is received in trusting God but also connect God's justifying action to the process of human renewal. Justification is always also a 'making righteous' that frees a person to behave justly, to struggle against sin and to use this world's justice properly. Mennonites and Lutherans together stress that the human being's standing before God remains always completely reliant on the gift of forgiveness and salvation. Justification, understood as the declaration of the sinner as free and accepted [by God], always stands in very close connection with the sanctification and renewal of the human beings, which enable them to follow after Jesus Christ.<sup>137</sup>

2. Article XII of the Augsburg Confession declares: "They [the churches among us] condemn both the Anabaptists, who deny that those who have once been justified can lose the Holy Spirit, and also those who contend that some may attain such perfection in this life that they cannot sin."<sup>138</sup> With the possible exception of Melchior Hofmann, most Anabaptists did not hold this understanding. Although the strong Anabaptist emphasis on themes like sanctification, "yielding to Christ," or "participating in Christ" may have opened them to charges of perfectionism, the fact that they were so attentive

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to refute Johannes Eck's accusation that the reformers were Anabaptists, by turning the argument back against those scholastic theologians who advanced the idea of a "pact of God" [*pactum Dei*] according to which God will not refuse to give his grace to those who perform what is in their power, namely an act of love of God above all. In this respect, some scholastic theologians claimed, the Holy Spirit can be obtained by one's own preparation. This train of thought becomes crucial to the arguments in the Apology II, 7-10 (*BC 2000*: 113-14) and IV, 9-11 (*BC 2000*: 121-22).

<sup>137</sup> "Gemeinsame Erklärung der lutherisch-mennonitischen Gesprächskommission zum Abschluss der Gespräche zwischen Vertretern der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD) und der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland (AMG) von September 1989 bis Dezember 1992," in *Heilung der Erinnerungen—befreit zur gemeinsamen Zukunft*, ed. Fernando Enns (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 2008), 160.

<sup>138</sup> *BC 2000*: 45; Latin Text. The German text has only the first part of this twofold condemnation, without mentioning the Anabaptists.

to the exercise of church discipline makes it clear that Anabaptist Christians continued to struggle with the reality of sin. No contemporary Mennonite confession of faith would endorse a doctrine of perfectionism.

3. Article XVII claims: “They condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned human beings and devils.”<sup>139</sup> Again, the teachings of several isolated Anabaptist writers like Hans Denck (d. 1527) and Clemens Ziegler (d. ca. 1553) may be interpreted as advocating a theory of the “restoration of all things” [*apokatastasis panton*], first proposed by Origen. But this was never a doctrine held generally by Anabaptists, nor is it advocated by Mennonites today.

4. Anabaptists may also be among those referred to in Articles VIII and XXVII by the term “others.” Article VIII, for example, says: “They condemn the Donatists *and others like them* who have denied that the ministry of evil people may be used in the church and who have thought that the ministry of evil people is useless and ineffective.”<sup>140</sup> But even though Martin Luther elsewhere lumps Anabaptists and Donatists together,<sup>141</sup> the concern here regarding the efficacy of the sacraments consecrated by evil ministers (as in Donatism) is quite different from the Anabaptist claim that human beings should only be baptized upon their confession of faith.

Article XXVII of the Augsburg Confession declares: “*Others* err still more, for they judge that all magistracy and all civil offices are unworthy of Christians and in conflict with an Evangelical counsel.”<sup>142</sup> This problem belongs more properly to Article XVI (“On Civil Authority”) and will be addressed in that context. In any case, Article XXVII is focused chiefly on late-medieval monasticism.

## Present Doctrinal Disagreements

In contrast to these articles, substantial doctrinal differences do seem to exist between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites in our understanding of baptism (Article IX of the Augsburg Confession) and in the relation

<sup>139</sup> *BC 2000*: 51, Latin Text.

<sup>140</sup> *BC 2000*: 43. Emphasis added.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, his *Confession concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528 (LW 37:366).

<sup>142</sup> *BC 2000*: 91. Emphasis added.

of Christians to the political and social community (Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession). The American and French reports state this clearly and suggest that further dialogue is needed in these specific areas. The German report, by contrast, goes further and states that Articles IX and XVI do not apply to Mennonites.

Given these varied conclusions from the national dialogues, the LWF-MWC international study commission pursued Articles IX and XVI anew. In addressing the two articles here, we cannot simply ask whether the condemnations of Articles IX and XVI applied to Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, even though the answer to this question is one important element of our task. Rather, the question must also include whether the statements of the two articles are actually applicable to present-day Mennonite understandings. In answering the latter question, it will not be enough for Lutherans simply to repeat the two articles from the Augsburg Confession; nor can Mennonites simply cite statements from their spiritual forebears in the sixteenth century. Instead, both will need to consider their experiences over the past five centuries and take seriously the deep changes in church, state, and society that have occurred since then.

## **Christians and Civil Authority**

Article XVI states: “Concerning civic affairs they [i.e., Lutherans] teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and that Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take an oath when required by magistrates, to take a wife, to be given in marriage. They condemn the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities.”<sup>143</sup> The article offers a list of teachings that the reformers accuse the Anabaptists of rejecting or denying. Here again, not all of the accusations applied to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Only a few fringe Anabaptists, for example, rejected marriage. Most Anabaptists—along with the Mennonites today—emphasized the principle of mutual aid and the sharing of resources within the community, though they did not fully reject private property. One particular Anabaptist

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<sup>143</sup> *BC 2000*: 49; Latin Text.



group, the Hutterites, did practice community of goods and continues to do so today in some 400 communities in the US and Canada.

In the light of the national and international discussions, the most relevant issue was whether or not Christians could hold certain offices “without sin,” as it is worded in the German text.<sup>144</sup> The point here is not that Christians will never be free from sin in the daily exercise of such offices but that participating in an office is not in itself a sin—so that an office bearer does not sin simply by virtue of carrying out the tasks associated with the office. The article notes five main areas of concern: (a) administrative offices of magistrates and princes; (b) juridical tasks, including passing death sentences; (c) execution of punishment; (d) participation in wars; and (e) taking oaths. On all of these points, both sixteenth century Anabaptists and contemporary Mennonites would likely advocate teachings and practices that this article of the Augsburg Confession rejects.

One step toward resolution, particularly on the question of taking oaths, is to recognize the significant political and cultural differences between the sixteenth century and contemporary society. Promissory and assertory oaths were ubiquitous in sixteenth-century Europe—they were the “glue” that held society together. Indeed, someone who refused to swear an oath seemed to undermine the very foundation of political authority and communal life. This is very different, however, in modern secular states. Today many states in the developed West and elsewhere guarantee both the freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience, and have provided their citizens with alternatives for swearing oaths. Moreover, even someone who has sworn to respect and obey the constitution and the laws of a state can still appeal to the freedom of conscience if a conflict should arise, and act according to the principle of Acts 5:29 that Christians must ultimately “obey God rather than humans.” These changes in political philosophy in the modern West and elsewhere do not resolve all the theological problems related to swearing oaths, but the refusal to swear oaths is far less significant today and poses none of the same threats to the foundations of the state as it seemed to in the sixteenth century.

Other issues raised by Article XVI, however, are less easily resolved. On the general question of the Christian understanding of civil authority, both Anabaptists and Lutherans shared the challenge of how to interpret Christ’s commandment to nonresistant love (e.g., “But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer” [Matt 5:39]) in light of Paul’s apparent affirmation of the temporal sword of government (“For it [the governing authority] is

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<sup>144</sup> *BC 2000*: 48.

God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain" [Rom. 13:4]). In interpreting these texts, Anabaptists and Lutherans draw quite different distinctions and come to quite different conclusions.

In an early summary of Anabaptist shared convictions called "The Brotherly Union of 1527" (sometimes referred to as "The Schleithem Confession"), Anabaptists in the Swiss and South German regions summarized their understandings of civil government in the following words:

The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the law, the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death. . . . But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh.

Drawing heavily on the teachings and example of Christ, Article 6 of "The Brotherly Union" went on to reject: the Christian's use of the sword ("Christ teaches and commands us to learn from Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart"); Christians serving as judges ("Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother . . . . So should we also do"); and Christians acting as magistrates ("Christ was to be made king, but He fled and did not discern the ordinance of His Father. Thus we should also do as He did"). For the Anabaptists, the contrast between the fallen world and the gathered community of Christian believers hinged on these points: "The worldly are armed with steel and armor, but Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and with the Word of God."

Contrary to the fears of their contemporaries, the Anabaptists did not call for resistance to government authority, even in the face of persecution. Since, in accordance with Romans 13, the temporal authorities were "an ordering" of God, they were prepared to obey these authorities as long as obedience was not inconsistent with the commands of Christ (like taking oaths, participating in wars, etc.). Thus, the Anabaptists were not anarchists who sought the destruction of political order; indeed, they frequently tried to persuade magistrates that they were exemplary subjects in terms of their moral character. Yet, insofar as they questioned whether Christians could legitimately participate in civil society as soldiers, judges, and magistrates, Anabaptists seemed to be undermining the theological legitimacy of the political community. And the authorities (princes, magistrates and theologians) clearly perceived that the Anabaptist position was calling their own Christian faith into question.

In their own understanding of civil authority, the Lutheran reformers appealed to three inter-related distinctions. God is understood as reigning over the world in two ways. With the left hand, God is preserving the world against falling into chaos through continuing creation, thereby using the law and human cooperation like temporal authorities to maintain order and restrain sin. With the other hand God is reigning over the world through the gospel, using the human preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Through these means God the Holy Spirit creates faith and brings people into communion with him and with each other. This rule of the right hand is related to the human being insofar as he or she has or is called to have a relation to God; the rule of the left is directed to individual human beings insofar as they have relations to other human beings, to the world and to themselves. Concerning those persons whose cooperation God uses, there is a third distinction: a person may act for him- or herself or—as office bearer—for others or on behalf of others.

These three distinctions, first employed by Luther but used more generally within the Lutheran Reformation, never function separately, as unfortunately has sometimes been understood. It is one God who reigns in a twofold way, and it is the believer who lives under God in both realms simultaneously. This also means that there is an inner connection between both ways of reigning. Luther quite often stresses this connection. Concerning the apparent conflict between Matthew 5:39 and Romans 13, Luther uses the third distinction stating: as a private person a Christian has to suffer what an evildoer does to him or her; however, as an office-bearer, the Christian has to resist the evildoer.

Mennonites worry that this distinction may result in a refusal to follow the example and words of Christ in every aspect of one's life or an inability to recognize the inherent evil in certain walks of life. Lutherans would argue that the Christian practices love in both cases mentioned above, but that this love takes on a different shape depending on the situation: if a Christian as a private person is hurt by another, he or she may suffer this and forgive the evildoer; but if a Christian as a judge encounters an offender, the judge has to act on behalf of all and care for the victim. Thus the judge will sentence and punish the evildoer. The judge—as an office bearer, acting not on behalf of his own but for the others—practices love of the victim and the peace of the community by resisting the evildoer, whereas the Christian as a private person would be expected to suffer damage from others and to forgive. Thus the question is whether Christian love can take on different shapes, perhaps, in the case of the judicial process, even the opposite shape from what appears loving.

Even though the teachings of the sixteenth century are still important for both churches, our main task here is not to describe how Anabaptist and Lutheran teachings related to each other in the sixteenth century but to focus on how Mennonite and Lutheran teachings in these matters relate to each other currently. During the past five centuries, Mennonite and Lutheran understandings regarding civil government have changed in light of new circumstances in societies and states. Thus, Lutherans today would not simply repeat Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession. Mennonite thinking has also undergone changes that reflect the context of modern democracies. For example, some Mennonites have moved from a separatist understanding of political witness to a more engaged posture, expressed in active peacemaking, reconciliation, conflict resolution and peace education. Most Mennonites today assume that Christians can and should make an impact on the societies in which they live, working for a world with more justice and for the wellbeing of all people. Mennonites express political responsibility today in many different ways: in their professions; through the life and witness of the church; and, occasionally, by serving in various levels of political office. In all of this, Mennonites are prepared to work together with Christians of other churches and with all people of good will.

Nevertheless, most Mennonites continue to define the limit of their involvement at the point of lethal force, whether this is within states (as police) or in conflicts between states (as members of the military). In their understanding, taking the life of another human being is contrary to the will of God. It violates the gift of life given by God to each person, is contrary to the teachings of Jesus and bears false witness to the triumph of the resurrection over the cross. So although many Mennonite attitudes have changed since the sixteenth century, most Mennonites still expect church members not to participate in acts of lethal violence or to support war in any active form, even if required by their government. They do, however, have a calling to model reconciliation in their own relations with others, to promote peace wherever possible, and to offer material and spiritual support to victims of violence.

The *Shared Convictions*, accepted by the MWC General Council in 2006 include the following affirmations:

The spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice and share our possessions with those in need. (Nr. 5)

As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language and seek to live in the world without conforming to

the powers of evil, witnessing to God's grace by serving others, caring for creation and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. (Nr. 7)

These two paragraphs express how Mennonites strive to live in the world, serving critically and constructively in its institutions, while also witnessing to God's grace in Jesus Christ who loved us while we were still enemies (Rom 5), calls us to love our enemies (Matt 5), and enables us, through the resurrection, to face death without fear.

This contemporary development of the Mennonite tradition opens new possibilities for encounters between Mennonites and Lutherans, especially since Lutherans also have learned in and from their history. They have recognized that Luther's "doctrine of the two kingdoms" (as it sometimes labeled)—the two ways in which God reigns the world—was often misunderstood, as if both ways could be separated, so that Lutheran churches too easily adapted to the political and social world in which they lived. Too often they regarded the political and social structures of this world as God-given, not asking whether they should engage in contradicting them and contribute to changing them according to the will of God. Furthermore, princes, kings, and other temporal authorities in Germany and other countries exercised oversight of the Lutheran churches in their lands not only in external matters but also in matters of doctrine (*cura religionis*). This sometimes impeded these churches' distinctive Christian teaching and witness vis-à-vis governmental authority. Due to changes in the constitutional structure of many modern states regarding religious freedom, this kind of church government is no longer current in most countries in which Lutheran churches exist.

Especially concerning the participation of Christians in wars, Lutherans have tried to draw consequences from the terrible wars of the last century and the beginning of this century. The character of wars, especially their destructive capability, has changed in the course of the last centuries. This has in turn had consequences for debates over whether a Christian could serve as a soldier "without sin," and whether Luther's distinctions between the office that is good and right and the person who may use it in a bad way (and thus make it a bad thing) are still tenable. Weapons technology continues to change rapidly, and wars now wreak such damage that Lutherans have found it necessary to revisit the question of "just wars." In addition, it has become clear that wars have their own "logic" and that they create devastating effects that no one foresees or intends. Thus, even if a war in defense of innocent people against a cruel aggressor may seem "justified," soldiers may still bear some guilt independently of their personal misconduct.

Nevertheless, Lutherans would ask Mennonites about the ethical consequences of failing to render assistance in an emergency. For example, in their refusal to use lethal violence in defense of innocent people, do they not also become guilty for not offering help to those who desperately need it—especially if, according to all available knowledge, this is the only way to save hostages or other victims from being killed?

At the same time, Lutheran churches hold a wide variety of opinions today, especially concerning participation of Christians in wars. Some of them may be closer to Mennonite teaching, even though the rationale behind their views may be expressed differently. Thus, it is no longer possible for Lutherans to condemn other Christians outright for refusing to use lethal force simply on the basis of Article XVI.

Differences in emphasis (e.g., what is *one* position in Lutheran churches is the predominant position in Mennonite churches and regarded there as a matter of principle), thought structure, theological reasoning, use of the Bible, reference to Jesus Christ as example, etc., clearly still persist. But in this area it is no longer appropriate for Lutherans to express their church's relation to the doctrine of the other by using the word "condemnation," especially as that word was understood in the Augsburg Confession.

## Baptism

Article IX of the Augsburg Confession reads: "Concerning baptism they [the churches among us] teach that it is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through baptism, and that children should be baptized. They are received in grace when they are offered to God through baptism. They condemn the Anabaptists who disapprove of the baptism of children and assert that children are saved without baptism."<sup>145</sup> Regarding infant baptism, the German text states that "through such baptism [infants] are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him."<sup>146</sup> Article IX thus condemns two opinions: (1) that infant baptism is unacceptable; and (2) that children can be saved without baptism (a point that appears only in the Latin text).

In the "Brotherly Union of Schleithem" (1527), the Anabaptists summarized their understanding of baptism in this way:

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<sup>145</sup> *BC 2000*: 43, Latin Text.

<sup>146</sup> *BC 2000*: 42.

Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life and [who] believe truly that their sins are taken away through Christ, and to all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and be buried with him in death, so that they might rise with him; to all those who with such an understanding themselves desire and request it from us; hereby is excluded all infant baptism, the greatest and first abomination of the Pope. For this you have the reasons in the testimony of the writings and practices of the apostles. We wish simply yet resolutely and with assurance to hold to the same.

For the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, the most relevant biblical text regarding baptism was the Great Commission. Jesus instructed his disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,” (Matt 28:19) and “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). Jesus’ words here make it clear, they argued, that preaching and repentance must precede baptism. Since, in their understanding, infants were incapable of repentance or belief, baptism should take place only among those who were able to make a fully conscious commitment to following Christ as a disciple.

In many of their writings, Anabaptists referred to 1 John 5:6-12 to describe baptism as having three components: a baptism of the spirit; a baptism of water; and a baptism of blood. Water baptism is an outward sign of a prior transformation in the believer by which the Holy Spirit has moved the individual to repentance of sin and offered the assurance of God’s mercy and grace. The covenant of water baptism witnesses to this baptism of the spirit and serves as a public affirmation that the believer is prepared to give and receive counsel and admonition within the community of believers. Water baptism also testifies publicly to a readiness to receive a baptism in blood, referring both to the possibility of martyrdom as well as the sacrifice of self-denial and suffering that followers of Jesus should anticipate.

Although a systematic treatment of Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of baptism would require much more careful biblical and theological reflection, most Mennonites today would affirm the following basic themes:

1. Proclamation of the gospel, repentance, confession of faith in Jesus Christ, and a public commitment to a life of discipleship must precede water baptism.
2. Baptism is the response of the baptized to God’s initiative in their lives; it is a public confession of—and a witness to—the saving action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

3. According to Christ's teaching and the New Testament witness, baptism appropriately follows repentance; hence, it should be administered only to those who are fully conscious of the commitment they are making.
4. Baptism marks the incorporation of the believer into the Church of Christ through integration into a local church (i.e., a congregation).
5. Even though the faith of the believer cannot ultimately be judged by another person, the congregation must affirm the request of a person who desires to be baptized by discerning signs of conversion, faith, and commitment to a life in discipleship.
6. Baptism upon confession of faith allows baptism to be voluntary instead of involuntary; it safeguards the freedom of the individual conscience.
7. Children are born with an inward disposition toward sin, but are nonetheless incapable of discerning good and evil or of possessing an active faith. They are therefore innocent, and saved by Christ's atonement (Rom 5:18).

The *Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists* (2006) summarize these understandings as follows: "As a church, we are a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and follow Christ in life."

Today, Mennonite congregations are not always unified in their baptismal practices. Congregations have had varying understandings, for example, about the appropriate age of baptism. Some groups have disagreed about the biblical mode of baptism (e.g., sprinkling, effusion, immersion); and not all congregations have been clear about the relationship between baptism and church membership. Perhaps most relevant for these conversations, member congregations in the MWC are not all of one mind regarding the baptism of new members who were previously baptized as infants in other traditions. In these, and other areas, actual practice in some Mennonite congregations may be at variance with the theological position outlined above.

The basics of the Lutheran understanding of baptism may be described as follows:



1. “What is baptism? Namely, that it is not simply plain water, but water placed in the setting of God’s Word and commandment and made holy by them.”<sup>147</sup> Here “Word of God” means both the command to practice baptism (Matthew 28:19) and the promise that is connected with it and relates to its effect (Mark 16:16).
2. Baptism is essentially an act of God performed through human actions and words. Thus, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Art. XXIV.18), Philip Melanchthon states, “Thus baptism is not a work that we offer to God, but one in which God, through a minister who functions in his place, baptizes us, and offers and presents the forgiveness of sins according the promise [Mark 16:16], ‘The one who believes and is baptized will be saved.’” In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther reflects more fully on this relation between the human act of baptizing and God’s action.<sup>148</sup>
3. Luther’s strong emphasis on what God does in baptism does not mean that faith is not also important. On the contrary, since faith is crucial for salvation, “faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand.”<sup>149</sup> Faith does not create what a person believes but in the process of hearing and seeing, perceiving and receiving, faith trusts in what is given to the person: God himself in his word of promise, visibly and audibly extended to the baptized in baptism.
4. At the same time, faith itself is indispensable for baptism. “Faith alone makes the person worthy to receive the saving, divine water profitably. Because such blessings are offered and promised in the words that accompany the water, they cannot be received unless we believe them from the heart. Without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is an infinite, divine treasure.”<sup>150</sup>
5. Baptism is an event at a certain moment in a person’s life, but receiving baptism and living in it is the lifelong task of a Christian. This response

<sup>147</sup> The Large Catechism, Baptism, 14 (*BC 2000*: 458).

<sup>148</sup> LW 36, p.62f.

<sup>149</sup> Large Catechism, Baptism, 29 (*BC 2000*: 460).

<sup>150</sup> Large Catechism, Baptism, 33-34 (*BC 2000*: 460).

is twofold: (a) Since baptism is the visible word of God's promise to accept a person into communion with him as his child and to forgive all the sin of the baptized, trusting in this promise is the first and basic response to baptism. God aims at this reception of baptism in faith. It is the Holy Spirit who creates this faith in us through God's promise, initially spoken in baptism. (b) In light of the communion with God the life of the baptized appears to be in contradiction to it; his or her desires, longings, affects, thoughts, words and deeds often contradict that communion. Thus repentance will arise: the rejection of what stands against God, mourning this situation, offering one's life to God and asking for renewal and the will to live according to God's purpose. This twofold response to baptism will give the structure to the whole Christian life from baptism to death. In the life of a person, this response may change, it may become stronger or weaker, or it may even be forgotten; nevertheless baptism initiates lifelong response.

6. According to Luther, infants can and should be baptized since the Great Commission sends Christians to "all" people and Jesus' blessing of the children includes the statement that children can participate in the Kingdom of Heaven (Mark 10:13-16). This means that infants can be saved. They are even a model of how to receive that Kingdom: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter in it" (v.15). For Lutherans this shows that infants can also have faith, that is, experience God's assurance (trust). When infants are baptized, they are not baptized simply with reference to the faith of parents or godparents. Instead, parents and godparents pray to God to give and nurture the faith of the newly baptized. This faith must grow as they grow, it will need proclamation of the gospel, catechesis, and Christian life in community. In the course of life the faith of the baptized child can grow and be strengthened or it can diminish and even be lost.

This short presentation of Mennonite and Lutheran understandings of baptism suggests significant divergence that calls for further dialogue. At the same time, we note that several changes in Lutheran perspectives on baptism have taken place since the sixteenth century. In certain churches within the LWF, for example, a growing number of Lutheran parents are withholding baptism of their children until they are old enough to make their own decision about being baptized. Although the theological basis for

this practice is not always elaborated explicitly, these parents seem to assume that their children are saved. Lutheran churches generally do not criticize these parents for a practice that could be taken to “assert that children are saved without baptism” (CA IX, Latin Text). On the other hand, parents in some churches of the LWF do not actively participate in church and yet wish to have their children baptized. Many pastors are reluctant to baptize such children, since no Christian education and catechesis can be expected and the parishes are not in all cases able or willing to take over these tasks. In these cases, it has seemed better to these pastors and church leaders to postpone baptism.

In terms of on-going relations between Mennonites and Lutherans, we acknowledge an asymmetry in our approach regarding the question of baptism of newcomers who join our churches from the other tradition. Whereas Lutherans universally recognize baptisms performed in Mennonite churches, Mennonite churches do not generally recognize the baptism of infants performed in Lutheran churches and often require newcomers who have been baptized as infants to be baptized according to Mennonite practice, something that Lutherans would view as rebaptism. At the same time, however, some Mennonite churches do recognize infant baptisms to the extent that they require only a public confession of faith for membership, which completes whatever may have been lacking in the original “water baptism.”

Both Mennonites and Lutherans agree that baptism cannot be seen as an isolated event. Thus, how baptisms are recognized must be understood within a larger framework that explores how the practice of baptism is related to a larger set of theological doctrines. Since these frameworks are different, Lutherans feel misunderstood by Mennonites when Mennonites assess the Lutheran practice of baptism according to their own framework. Conversely, Mennonites feel misunderstood by Lutherans when Lutherans assess the Mennonite practice according to their own framework. Clearly, both sides experience great anguish in this conflict since the deepest convictions of their faith seem to be at stake and each side can easily feel misunderstood by the other.

The members of this study commission hope that neither the Anabaptist-Mennonite rejection of infant baptism nor the condemnation of Anabaptists in Article IX will remain a church-dividing issue. Nevertheless, we have not yet found a way to bridge the divide between the two churches regarding their teaching and practice on baptism. Further conversations are needed, perhaps especially among our MWC and LWF member churches. Among

other topics, those conversations will have to address our mutual understandings of the relationship between divine action and human (re)action in baptism. Engaging these questions will require deeper biblical accounts of our understandings of baptism and will require that these understandings be considered within a broad theological framework.

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## Part 4

# Remembering the Past, Reconciling in Christ

### Moving Beyond Condemnations

As we look to the future of Lutheran-Mennonite relations, it is clear that further rapprochement between our two churches will need to acknowledge not only the theological differences that still divide us but also the different ways in which the past continues to inform our contemporary identity. By the twentieth century Lutherans had forgotten, or perhaps even repressed, much of the history of persecution by adherents to the Augsburg Confession only to “rediscover” this history in the context of renewed ecumenical discussions. Mennonites, by contrast, have generally cultivated a more active memory of this part of their past. Although Mennonites have often looked on Martin Luther as a positive figure in church renewal,<sup>151</sup> they have also regarded the history of persecution at the hands of church and civil authorities—Protestant and Catholic alike—as a central theme in their story. A commitment to rightly remembering our shared story in the future can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, help to heal this part of the broken Body of Christ and offer an authentic witness to the freedom that comes through Christ in mutual vulnerability and forgiveness.

This part of the report, therefore, has three elements. The first sections acknowledge the way in which Lutheran reformers (Luther and Melancthon included) and their teaching, which they understood as maintaining the theological positions of Lutheran confessions, were complicit in the persecution of Anabaptists, and suggest steps that the Lutheran World Federation now may take to provide a new and healthier basis for continued dialogue with the Mennonite World Conference. The following sections discuss the role that memories of persecution have played in Anabaptist-Mennonite identity,

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<sup>151</sup> See, for example, Walter Klaassen, “Das Lutherbild im Täuferium,” in: *Martin Luther: Leistung und Erbe*, ed. Horst Bartel, et al. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1986), 396-401 or Irvin B. Horst, “Menno Simons: ‘Luther Helped Me,’” in: *Bibliotheca Dissidentium*, Nr. 3, ed. Jean-Georges Rott and Simon Verheus (Baden-Baden: Editions Valentin Koerner, 1987), 189-190. In 1850, Leonhard Weydmann, a Mennonite pastor at Monsheim, published an appreciative biography of Luther called *Luther: Ein Charakter- und Spiegelbild für unsere Zeit*.

reflect on several areas in which Mennonites have also been complicit—however unwittingly—in the divisions that have separated our church bodies, and suggests next steps the Mennonite World Conference may take. On this basis, the conclusion proposes several specific recommendations to our two communions for moving forward in a journey of forgiveness and reconciliation. This part of our report is dialogical, providing opportunities for both communions to speak to one another on the basis of our common retelling of the story in order to reflect on the import of these matters for our churches today. Thus, Lutheran members of the study commission wrote the sections 1 and 2 which follow; Mennonite commission members wrote sections 3 and 4. In the introduction and conclusion we reflect on our work together.

## **1. Lutheran Integrity of Teaching and the Persecution of Anabaptists**

In the view of the Lutheran members of this commission, retelling the history of relations between Lutherans and Mennonites must lead Lutheran churches, which continue to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession, to view their commitment to maintaining “pure doctrine” in a new light and to take responsibility for remembering how their forebears in the faith persecuted Anabaptists and even used this very confession to advocate that persecution. This problem is heightened by the fact that the Lutheran confessions themselves, especially the Augsburg Confession, single out Anabaptists for condemnation. Because churches of the Lutheran World Federation continue to subscribe to these confessions and confess their faith today in light of these confessions, they must develop ways to negotiate these condemnations without undermining the authority of the confessions themselves at the same time. Unlike those other churches whose confessions have significance more in their history than in their present, Lutherans continue to identify with and to derive part of their identity from these confessions of faith.

When Lutherans today study the history of Lutheran-Anabaptist relationships in the sixteenth-century and beyond, they are filled with a deep sense of regret and pain over the persecution of Anabaptists by Lutheran authorities and especially over the fact that Lutheran reformers theologically supported this persecution. What happened in the past cannot be changed. Nevertheless, the presence of the past—our memories—can change. Many Mennonites have a lively memory of what happened to their forebears in faith. Listening to their stories we can hear how the memory of their mar-

tyrs has shaped their identity. Quite often, Lutherans have not recognized their complicity in this history, or they have forgotten or even suppressed this memory. Lutherans pray to God to grant the healing of memories in Mennonite-Lutheran relations, and they are committed to contribute to this by striving for right remembering.

Clearly, Lutherans have Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and the other reformers to thank for so much, especially for disclosing the liberating truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of justification by grace alone that is received by faith alone, the distinction between law and gospel and between different “uses” of the law, the understanding of the sacraments as means of the grace used by the Holy Spirit, and the clear distinction between Scripture and human traditions. Lutherans are still committed to these Reformation insights. Nevertheless, they also have come to realize that in some aspects of their work the reformers could err. Even though the reformers emphasized so strongly the distinction between Scripture and human traditions, they shared some convictions with their contemporaries that Lutherans today would consider to contradict the gospel. These convictions led many Lutheran reformers to support the Anabaptist persecution. In the present day, one can easily identify a few of these convictions, in part because they have generally disappeared from our societies and churches. Fairness to the reformers requires, as has been done in Part Two above, that we take carefully into consideration their motives and presuppositions in order to understand them fully. Nevertheless, understanding them does not imply excusing them. The example of Johannes Brenz shows that a Lutheran reformer of the sixteenth century could defend a point of view that rejected severe persecution and capital punishment for Anabaptists. This demonstrates that the Lutheran understanding of both baptism and the relationship between Christians and the state *by itself* does not lead to persecution of Anabaptists. On the other hand, the fact that Luther and Melanchthon were familiar with Brenz’s position increases their responsibility for their respective statements.

Many in the sixteenth century believed both that there needed to be unity within the church and that a political community could tolerate only one religion. Concerning the former, the reformers shared the conviction that this unity was a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed through the Word, not through the imposition of political force. However, that did not always stop Lutherans from trying to use the state’s powers to attain ecclesial unity. Along with this mistaken attitude, they shared the prevailing understanding of the time that the existence of different religious groups would inevitably lead to a civil war and the destruction of the community itself. From the perspective of a

modern state with a pluralistic society comprised of different confessions and religions, these ideas seem quite unconvincing. But the principle of religious tolerance and, later, the declaration of the human and civil right of religious freedom emerged to some degree as a result of religious wars, mainly in Europe (with consequences for the United States), when religious uniformity could no longer be achieved by military force. Before the idea of the civil right of religious freedom prevailed over the idea of religious uniformity as the *vinculum*, or bond, that keeps a society together and at peace, the latter idea paradoxically seemed to support social unity, since the very existence in sixteenth century Europe of *different* confessions (Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic), actually led to terrible civil and religious wars. The observation that the bonds of a religiously engaged person to God are stronger than any bond or loyalty to temporal authorities or the institutions of the state provided strong support for the necessity of such uniformity. At the same time, religious bonds were seen to bind people together more strongly than other bonds, whereas religious differences seemed more powerful than the unifying bonds of human traditions, culture, and economic interest. Even today, the phenomenon of so-called civil religion suggests that states adopt certain “religious” elements in order to sustain the solidarity and coherence of their citizens (yet without needing to use sanctions or offer rewards). In the sixteenth century, temporal authorities were convinced that they had to take measures in order to eliminate religious differences from their territories—for the sake of the stability of their towns, principalities, or kingdoms.

In his treatise *On Temporal Authority* (1523), Luther took a different stance from what he and Melanchthon would later argue in 1536. In the second part of this treatise, often cited by Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and initially praised by Melanchthon, Luther raised the question of the extent of temporal authority. He emphasized the significance of this issue: “we must now learn how far its [the temporal authority’s] arm extends and how widely its hand stretches, lest it extend too far and encroach upon God’s kingdom and government. It is essential for us to know this, for where it is given too wide a scope, intolerable and terrible injury follows.”<sup>152</sup> Luther then clearly defined the limits of temporal authority:

The temporal government has laws that extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, where the temporal authority

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<sup>152</sup> LW 45: 104.



presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them. We want to make this so clear that everyone will grasp it, and that our fine gentlemen, the princes and bishops, will see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that.<sup>153</sup>

Luther offered several reasons for this statement: "No one shall or can command the soul," he wrote, "unless he is able to show it the way to heaven; but this no man can do, only God alone. Therefore, in matters which concern the salvation of souls nothing but God's word shall be taught and accepted."<sup>154</sup> Luther also referred to Matthew 10:28 according to which temporal government can only destroy the body. Thus the realm of its authority does not extend to the soul.<sup>155</sup> In addition, since God alone is able to look into a human being's heart, he alone may command the soul. "For faith is a free act, to which no one can be forced. Indeed, it is a work of God in the spirit, not something which outward authority should compel or create. Hence arises the common saying, found also in Augustine, 'No one can or ought to be forced to believe.'<sup>156</sup>

Pursuing an argument that would also appear in the treatise of 1536, Luther insisted that Anabaptists should not be forced to believe what the reformers considered was right; instead they should only be prevented from spreading their heresy.

Again you say, "The temporal power is not forcing men to believe; it is simply seeing to it externally that no one deceives the people by false doctrine; how could heretics otherwise be restrained?" Answer: This the bishops should do; it is a function entrusted to them and not to the princes. Heresy can never be restrained by force. One will have to tackle the problem in some other way, for heresy must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword. Here God's word must do the fighting. If it does not succeed, certainly the temporal power will not succeed either, even if it were to drench the world in blood. Heresy is a spiritual matter which you cannot hack to pieces with iron,

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<sup>153</sup> LW 45: 105.

<sup>154</sup> LW 45: 106.

<sup>155</sup> "Soul" means the human being in relation to God in contrast to the human being in relation to other human beings or to himself or herself.

<sup>156</sup> LW 45: 108. See Augustine's *Contra litteras Petilianii* II, 184 (J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1861) 43, 315).

consume with fire, or drown in water. God's word alone avails here, as Paul says in II Corinthians 10[:4–5].<sup>157</sup>

These arguments, which may well still carry weight today, suggest that Luther's theology has resources capable of supporting the civil right of religious freedom. Thus, Lutherans, simply by virtue of living in a modern state, need not view such a civil right as contradicting their own basic theological principles. On the contrary, modern political developments may even have helped Lutheranism reclaim Luther's early understanding of how Christians may struggle "against heresy": "God's word, however, enlightens the heart, and so all heresies and errors vanish from the heart of their own accord."<sup>158</sup>

As it turned out, Luther was forced to recognize that the Word of God did not inevitably have the effect of eradicating "all heresies and errors ... from the heart." Instead, many heard this Word differently from him and continued to hear it in their own way. Yet if the Word of God is clear and unambiguous, and if it enlightens the heart, then it seemed to Luther that those who heard it in ways irreconcilable with his own did so only because of a special stubbornness or even the work of the devil. This made it conceivable for him to call on the temporal authorities to intervene in stopping the spread of such "heresies" as those of the Anabaptists.

But Luther's later arguments and behavior did not overturn the insights of his treatise *On Temporal Authority*. Indeed, in the words of the Small Catechism, Lutherans confess:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith.<sup>159</sup>

If all this is the work of the Holy Spirit, then temporal authority cannot play a role in preserving the true faith.

Thus, Lutherans today seriously regret that Luther and Melancthon did not continue to adhere to the understanding of the limits of temporal government that Luther had so clearly explained in 1523. Even though we

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<sup>157</sup> LW 45: 114.

<sup>158</sup> LW 45: 115.

<sup>159</sup> BC 2000: 355f.

will never be able to reconcile all conflicting understandings of Christian faith in this earthly life, it is clear that resolving this problem by calling for or accepting the intervention of state authorities in matters of faith must be rejected for all time.

Luther's arguments were also relevant with regard to the second conviction that he shared with his contemporaries, namely the idea that persons who committed blasphemy were liable to capital punishment. Princes and magistrates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe were afraid that blasphemous acts, left unpunished, would stir the wrath of God, who might punish a country or a town with plague, famine, earthquake, etc. The governments felt obliged to try people accused of blasphemy in court to prevent such catastrophes from occurring in their territories.

Although there is no inherent connection between rejecting the Anabaptist understanding of baptism and declaring it to be blasphemous, several Lutheran reformers did assert that Anabaptist understandings of baptism were blasphemous and thus called for punishment. Nevertheless, it was still an open question as to whether or not Lutheran reformers would develop theological justification for temporal governments to take action against such blasphemers. In the document of 1536, Melancthon referred to the second commandment ("Whoever dishonors God's name shall not remain unpunished") and to Leviticus 24:16 ("Whoever blasphemes God is to be killed"), arguments Luther had previously proposed in his exposition of the Psalm 82.<sup>160</sup> This was a second step the reformers took. Both decisions—equating Anabaptist baptism with blasphemy and calling on secular authorities to punish blasphemers—contributed to the theological support of Anabaptist persecution.

Again, this line of argument is quite surprising when compared to what Luther explicitly wrote in his 1525 pamphlet *How Christians Should Regard Moses*. The text, based upon a sermon delivered in August 1525 shortly after the Peasants' War, was directed against so-called "enthusiasts" who appealed directly to Moses' law. But here Luther clearly stated that the Law of Moses:

is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or

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<sup>160</sup> Cf. LW 13: 62.

murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts.<sup>161</sup>

Nevertheless, a decade later, Luther and Melanchthon did the very thing for which Luther had criticized the enthusiasts, namely, they based their arguments directly on a quotation from Mosaic law without proving that the same action against blasphemers prescribed in the Mosaic law obtained in their day.

The assumption that temporal governments needed to punish blasphemers, even with the death penalty, was deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of people during the Middle Ages and Reformation. Nevertheless, Luther had offered good arguments for not following this line of reasoning. Thus, we see again that Luther and Melanchthon's theological support for the persecution of Anabaptists was not necessarily rooted in the core of their theology; on the contrary, it contradicted it. Nevertheless, both reformers later provided a theological rationale for that persecution, which had terrible consequences for Anabaptists. Then, when the Augsburg Confession became more and more a standard for measuring correct teaching and heresy, it, too, became swept up in this persecution.

Lutherans today regret that Luther and Melanchthon were so deeply embedded in these widespread assumptions of their time that brought harm to the Anabaptists and that they did not follow their own insights more consistently. Even so, these circumstances allow Lutherans today to adhere fully to Luther's understanding of the gospel of Christ while *at the same time* rejecting vigorously and without reservation any arguments in favor of persecuting the Anabaptists.

A third aspect of Melanchthon and Luther's arguments against the Anabaptists concerns the accusation of sedition. It may seem surprising that theologians leveled this charge, given the fact that the political authorities were the appropriate judges in this matter. And, indeed, some Lutheran princes and magistrates were far more moderate on this point than the reformers themselves. Luther or Melanchthon argued that since Anabaptists did not believe that true Christians could serve as a magistrate or a prince or in any political office, they had therefore delegitimized theologically the authority of the state. In contrast to the political authorities the reformers refused to recognize that most Anabaptists were prepared to

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<sup>161</sup> LW 35: 164.

obey the authorities (except in swearing oaths and serving as soldiers) and that most Anabaptists believed that the political institutions were indeed instituted by God (Romans 13), albeit outside the “order of perfection” in which Christians should live (cf. Matthew 5:39). Granted, swearing oaths was a decisive element for the functioning of sixteenth-century European societies—refusing to take oaths was seen as a form of self-exclusion from society. Theologians like Melanchthon, however, developed arguments from generalized, abstract principles. They did not have concrete situations in mind but instead raised the question of what would happen if Anabaptist convictions “should become generally accepted.” “Then indeed,” Melanchthon wrote, “would the magistracy, the oath, personal possessions, etc. all be abolished” (below, appendix A). Thus “they [the Anabaptists] are direct destroyers of civil government”. In order for civil government to preserve itself, it had to punish people who held such convictions and expressed them publicly.

Melanchthon therefore regarded not only acts of disobedience but also certain theological convictions concerning the institutions of a political community as seditious. Although this logic is completely foreign to modern understandings of the civil right of freedom of speech, nevertheless, in a political community of people who all understood themselves to be Christians, it had serious consequences for how this community and its institutions would be interpreted theologically. Thus, Melanchthon’s insistence that the convictions of the Anabaptists in this respect “are not solely matters of faith, but they are directly, in and of themselves, an obvious threat to civil government” may be somewhat understandable. Nevertheless, one may also wonder why the Lutheran reformers did not seem to have greater confidence in their own theological understanding of political government as being well-grounded in Scripture and convincing to their contemporaries. One may ask why they were so eager to call for coercive measures to eliminate a theological position that in their eyes was wrong.

Yet another aspect of this debate arises from Luther’s well-known explanation of the eighth commandment (“You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor”) in his Small Catechism: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”<sup>162</sup> Unfortunately, Lutheran reformers did not always seem to apply this inter-

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<sup>162</sup> *BC 2000*: 353.

pretation of the commandment in their struggle against the Anabaptists. Instead they condemned them in the Augsburg Confession and accused them of blasphemy or sedition, while quite often demonstrating that they did not have very much detailed information about the Anabaptists and their different convictions. In the Large Catechism, Luther says that his comment on the Eighth Commandment refers to private sins.

But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may testify publicly against them. For when something is exposed to the light of day, there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness [...] Where the sin is public, appropriate public punishment should follow so that everyone may know how to guard against it.<sup>163</sup>

Several aspects of Luther's statement here raise questions. As Luther himself acknowledged about his own writings, such books, pamphlets and public statements can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, taken out of context, exaggerated or suppressed. Thus, even regarding public statements, "slander or injustice or false witness" can and does occur quite often. Even if one grants—as both Luther and the Anabaptists assumed—that pure doctrine can be identified and expressed, it does *not* follow that theologians can correctly understand and evaluate doctrines that oppose their own and propose appropriate measures regarding their opponents. In their statements on the Anabaptists, Luther and Melancthon did not show that they took seriously the possibility that they could err in perceiving Anabaptist teachings, that particular interests or distorted emotions could play a role in their ability to judge, or even that one could sin "in thought, word, and deeds" while defending pure doctrine. It is true that Luther could not avoid entering into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church and later with other groups about the pure understanding of the gospel. Nevertheless, struggling for the truth of the gospel is a human undertaking that is never completely free from error and sin. As Luther himself testified, even the good works of a justified person are not exempt from sin.

Lutherans today deeply regret the lack of awareness of this dimension in Luther and Melancthon's statements about Anabaptists. The acknowledgment in Part Three of this document (that some of the condemnations of Anabaptists contained in the Augsburg Confession never applied to

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<sup>163</sup> *BC 2000*: 424.

Anabaptists, at least not to “the” Anabaptists) could also be judged as a serious breach of the command against bearing false witness.

To be sure, as noted in Parts Two and Three, the Augsburg Confession was addressed to the imperial authorities and not directly to Anabaptists or to their understanding of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, given that the Roman Catholic opposition associated the reformers with Anabaptism, several articles in the Confession attempted to clarify the reformers’ confession of faith over against positions associated with Anabaptists, whose practice of “rebaptizing” had been deemed to transgress imperial law and thus to be a capital offense. In several instances—for example, CA V, VIII, XII, XVII, and XXVII—the drafters of the Augsburg Confession rejected positions hardly ever associated then or now with most Anabaptists. Indeed, the reformers showed very little awareness of the actual positions of Anabaptists on these matters. Thus, Lutherans today have rightly declared that these condemnations no longer stand between them and Anabaptist-Mennonite churches.<sup>164</sup> The condemnations in CA IX (on baptism) and CA XVI (on civil authority), however, do remain central areas of theological disagreement among our churches, as was made clear in Part Three.

Had the disagreements and condemnations remained strictly theological, the history of the relations between Anabaptist churches and Lutherans would have differed greatly from what was described above. Instead, this telling of our common story revealed the degree to which many, though not all, Lutheran theologians (including Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon) and their princes (including the rulers of Saxony) came to advocate persecution, physical torture and even capital punishment for Anabaptists, who held positions that differed from their teachings as witnessed to in the Augsburg Confession. To be sure, the continued existence of theological differences between Anabaptists, on the one hand, and the theologians and princes of the Augsburg Confession, on the other, led to varying responses by sixteenth-century Lutherans. Most regrettably, however, the result of these differences sometimes led to persecution and death, where not only imperial law but also the teachings of the Augsburg Confession itself were used to justify such punishment.

Especially in the joint memorandum by Wittenberg’s theological faculty in 1536, we saw how charges of sedition and treason were mixed with the charge of blasphemy. It is especially this connection—which never gained the approval of all Lutheran pastors and princes of that day—that Lutherans

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<sup>164</sup> See, for example, the national dialogues and the statements of churches in Germany and the USA.

today repudiate. Lutherans must provide clear alternatives from within their own tradition for interpreting the biblical texts used by the reformers to justify such persecution. For example, the lives of Israel's monarchs or believing Gentile rulers may finally be fulfilled in Christ but are certainly not to be used indiscriminately as models of behavior for later Christian magistrates. Lutherans today may thus also repudiate how, in order to defend pure teaching, their spiritual forebears condoned persecution in the 1530s and in the 1550s even associated the Augsburg Confession with such a defense.

## **2. Looking Forward: Moving Beyond the Condemnations**

The preceding has helped Lutheran participants to identify where Luther and Melancthon went wrong in dealing with Anabaptists and to describe more precisely what Lutherans today deeply regret about Anabaptist-Lutheran relations in the past. But it does not seem fully appropriate only to regret what Anabaptists had to suffer. The Christian way of dealing with guilt is the request for forgiveness. To be sure, there are serious objections to this request. Can Lutherans today ask for forgiveness for the harm that their confessional forebears did to the Anabaptists? Can Mennonites today grant forgiveness for something that their spiritual forebears had to suffer hundreds of years ago? On the other hand, both sides share a deep sense of solidarity with their respective forebears. Lutherans today are still very grateful for the teaching of the gospel they received from Martin Luther, and they are still committed to his understanding of the Word of God, especially as expressed in their commitment to the Augsburg Confession and the other Lutheran confessional documents. But present Lutherans also bear responsibility for addressing the "dark sides" of the reformers' thought and actions, especially since the descendants of the victims have not forgotten them. When Mennonites read and meditate on the "Martyrs' Mirror" or similar books, they identify with their forebears and feel their suffering.

So Lutherans, following the example of the returning exiles in Nehemiah 9, dare to ask for forgiveness for the harm that their forebears in the sixteenth century committed against Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and academic publications, to the present day. Lutherans dare to ask for forgiveness because they are aware that finally God alone forgives sins. The Word of God proclaims: "While



we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19). May it also become true of Lutherans and Mennonites what the letter to the Ephesians states about the Gentiles and Israel: “Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14). Reconciliation with God and among Mennonites and Lutherans is, from the beginning to the end, only possible and real in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Lutherans and Mennonites are continually reminded of this reconciliation of humankind with God in the prayer that they pray every day: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In this light, Lutherans today ask forgiveness for all the harm that Lutherans have done to Anabaptists and Mennonites since the time of the Reformation. Lutherans direct their request for forgiveness to Christ in whose hands, as they believe, are both the Anabaptist martyrs and the Lutheran reformers, princes and magistrates, and from this perspective they also ask their Mennonite brothers and sisters for forgiveness.

Important first steps in ecumenical rapprochement are an acknowledgment of the harm that one group of Christians may have perpetrated upon another in the past and a willingness to begin anew to listen to and appreciate the other’s witness to the gospel. Repudiation of past behavior and a more judicious understanding of sixteenth-century Anabaptist beliefs, however, do not constitute the only fruits from such listening to our common history and analyzing our confessions of faith. There is no longer any place for a selective retelling of the history of Lutheran relations with Anabaptist and Mennonite churches. We have much to learn from one another about the centrality of Christian baptism and faith and about the proper relation of Christians to their societies. Lutherans have also become convinced of and are committed to rejecting all attempts to use the coercive means of the state in order to marginalize or even persecute any other religious group and thus repudiate all past use of the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession to this end. Already in the preface to *The Book of Concord*, Lutherans explicitly rejected using the confessions of that book against the persecuted Reformed churches in France.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>165</sup> See the Preface to *The Book of Concord*, 20, in: *BC 2000*: 12-13.

This common telling of our history calls Lutherans away from basing either their current relationship with Anabaptist-Mennonites or their commitment to reconciliation with Anabaptist-Mennonites, now or in the future, upon deeply flawed and failed theological and political positions of the past. It is now clear that the use of the state to promote or defend Lutheran teaching and to persecute those who held opposing beliefs often led to dire consequences. In light of this tragic story and acknowledging the vagaries of history, however, Lutherans must continue to reflect on how they may best prevent their confession of faith from ever again becoming part of a theological or legal pretext for punishing others for their beliefs. Lutherans now know more fully the history of this persecution and to what extent it was based on the Augsburg Confession and its teachings and was approved by some of its most prominent theologians. As a result, the churches of the Lutheran World Federation need to consider how best to acknowledge their historic complicity in this persecution perpetrated upon the spiritual forebears of the churches of the Mennonite World Conference, and how best to ask forgiveness for these actions. We ask the Lutheran World Federation to take appropriate action in these matters.

### **3. Mennonite Memories of Anabaptist Persecutions by Protestants**

As Mennonite members of the study commission reflect on these matters, they recall that in the standard Mennonite telling of the story today, Anabaptists were sober-minded, earnest followers of Jesus who were inspired by a fresh reading of Scripture and the movement of the Holy Spirit to live according to Christ's teachings following the model of the early church. Contrary to the violent response that they evoked, their distinctive practices—believer's baptism, the separation of church and state, a rejection of the oath and the sword, sharing of earthly possessions—posed, from this Mennonite perspective, no threat to political order. At the same time, 2000-3000 Anabaptists were executed between 1525 and 1550, and thousands more tortured, imprisoned, or forced to flee their homes—their properties confiscated.<sup>166</sup> In the centuries that followed, the Anabaptists and their Mennonite, Hutterite, and Amish descendants lived at the margins

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<sup>166</sup> For an overview of Anabaptist martyrdom, especially in its comparative context with Catholic and Protestant martyrs, see Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 197-249.

of European society, often forbidden to build churches or to proselytize, subject to a wide range of arbitrary “toleration taxes,” and frequently forced to move at the whim of the prince or reform-minded church authorities.

From the very beginnings of the movement, Anabaptists interpreted their persecution as a confirmation of faithful Christian discipleship. “True Christians,” wrote Conrad Grebel in the fall of 1524, “are sheep among wolves ... and must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation and persecution, suffering and death.”<sup>167</sup> Followers of Christ, they taught, should expect opposition from the world. Indeed for many, suffering was a concrete sign of Christian faithfulness.<sup>168</sup> Over the centuries, stories of faithful suffering—preserved in numerous pamphlets, hymns, and visual images—became a vital part of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity.

In 1660, for example, a Dutch Mennonite pastor by the name of Thielemann van Braght compiled these martyr accounts into a massive 1300 folio page volume.<sup>169</sup> Known as the *Martyrs Mirror*, the book is organized into two parts: a century-by-century chronicle of Christian martyrs, beginning with Christ himself, that narrates the history of the church from the perspective of dissenters persecuted for advocating adult baptism and Christian defenselessness; followed by an enormous collection of stories, letters and devotional material related to the Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century. The stories, combined with a series of copperplate engravings that accompanied the second edition of 1685, provided later generations with dramatic and memorable accounts of Christian faithfulness in the midst of suffering: the image, for example, of Anneken Jans handing her infant son to bystanders as she goes to her execution; or the moving letters of Maeyken Wens pleading with her children to remain faithful to Christ and to love their enemies in spite of her suffering; or the depiction of Simon the Grocer refusing to bow in the marketplace before the bishop’s elevated chalice and the story of his subsequent death by fire. The archetypal figure

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<sup>167</sup> Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 290. Anabaptist adherents frequently described baptism as a three-stage process: an inner baptism of the spirit, followed by the outer baptism of water, which was then sealed for the true Christian by a third baptism of blood.

<sup>168</sup> Nowhere is this clearer than in the hymns preserved in the *Ausbund*, many of which are martyr ballads or songs of encouragement in the midst of persecution. The *Ausbund* was reprinted dozens of times in Europe and it continues to be used in worship by the Old Order Amish. See also, Ethelbert Stauffer, “The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” *MQR* 19 (July 1945), 179-214; Alan Kreider, “The Servant is Not Greater Than His Master: The Anabaptists and the Suffering Church,” *MQR* 58 (January 1984), 5-29; and C. J. Dyck, “The Suffering Church in Anabaptism,” *MQR* 59 (January 1985), 5-23.

<sup>169</sup> Thielemann J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or, Martyrs’ Mirror Compiled from Various Authentic Chronicles, Memorials, and Testimonies*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 15th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

in the *Martyrs Mirror*, second only to Christ, is Dirk Willems.<sup>170</sup> Imprisoned in 1569 for his beliefs, Willems managed to escape his cell and to flee across an icy pond. A soldier gave chase but, burdened with his heavy weapons, he broke through the ice and called out desperately for help. An etching associated with the story depicts Willems returning to rescue his drowning pursuer from the icy waters. Despite his compassion, Willems was recaptured and burned at the stake.

Most Mennonites today, of course, live in an entirely different context to that of their sixteenth century spiritual ancestors. Yet for many, the martyr stories continue to be a living and vital source of group identity. The English edition of the *Martyrs Mirror*, reprinted nearly twenty times in the past century, continues to sell several thousand copies each year. The etching of Dirk Willems rescuing his enemy is unquestionably the most popular iconographic image in use among North American Mennonites today, appearing frequently on posters and banners, or in church bulletins, brochures, newsletters, and books. In recent decades a traveling exhibit on the *Martyrs Mirror* itinerated in more than seventy Mennonite and Amish communities across North America, accompanied by local lectures, children's activities and discussion groups. And a collection of Anabaptist martyr stories written to accompany the exhibit has been translated into nine different languages and has found an eager readership within the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church.<sup>171</sup>

Anchored in the model of Jesus, and rooted in a long train of witnesses who suffered for their commitment to follow Christ, the Anabaptist martyrs remind contemporary Mennonites that they have a faith worth dying for. Furthermore, the martyr stories caution contemporary Christians against the persistent temptation to justify violence in the name of Christ; they witness to the possibility of non-violence and "enemy love" even in the most extreme circumstances; and they call Mennonites to a life of compassion and humility, while recognizing that nonresistant love is not likely to be rewarded.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>170</sup> *The Martyrs Mirror*, 741-742.

<sup>171</sup> For a website on the traveling exhibit, see [www.bethelks.edu/kauffman/martyrs/](http://www.bethelks.edu/kauffman/martyrs/). The book written to accompany the exhibit is by John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990).

<sup>172</sup> As historian James Juhnke has written, the martyr stories "prepare us for the possibility of persecution and marginalization in our own time—especially as our pacifist convictions become unpopular in a war-crusading America."—James Juhnke, "Rightly Remembering a Martyr Heritage," (unpublished paper presented to the ELCA-Mennonite Liaison Committee dialogue held in Sarasota, Florida, Feb. 28, 2003), 1.

For many contemporary Mennonites, especially in areas where there is a greater awareness of Anabaptist history, keeping these stories alive is an affirmation that those who relinquished their lives did not do so in vain. Remembering the martyrs is a way of giving voice to those whose tongues were torn out before their deaths, or were forced into silence by an iron tonguescrew. Remembering those who died for the principle of nonresistance testifies to the Christian conviction that the resurrection will ultimately triumph over the cross.

#### **4. Looking Forward: Moving Beyond Condemnations**

Yet even as those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have actively worked to preserve the memory of Anabaptist martyrs, these conversations have also illuminated ways in which nurturing these memories can be problematic. Framing our history in the context of martyrdom has sometimes led Mennonites to a caricatured understanding of the sixteenth-century reformers. Frequently, for example, Mennonites have failed to distinguish among Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran theologians and princes in describing the persecution of Anabaptists. In so doing they have overlooked the fact that comparatively few Anabaptist martyrs were executed in Lutheran territories.

We also confess that at times Mennonites have reduced the theological contributions of the Lutheran reformers to their hastily composed arguments against the Anabaptists, thereby overlooking the broader contributions of the reformers to the Christian church and, indeed, to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition itself. By the same token, at times Mennonite versions of their martyr stories—told with the goal of establishing group identity—have reduced the complex story of the sixteenth century to a simple morality tale of good and evil, in which historical actors are easily identified as either Christ-like or violent.

In a similar way, we confess that Mennonites have sometimes claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority and have sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that has fostered a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance and has blinded us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition.

We also acknowledge with deep regret that in the contested religious climate of the sixteenth century, some Anabaptists used language that caricatured their opponents in extreme language, sometimes calling into

question their Christian integrity or even associating them with the Antichrist.

In their concluding reflections, the Lutheran members of the International Study Commission issued a request for forgiveness “for the harm that their forebears in the sixteenth century committed to Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and academic publications, to the present day.” In light of our collective work, and with particular appreciation for this overture of Christian reconciliation, we recommend the following:

1. That the joint report of the LWF-MWC International Study Commission be received by MWC and sent to its member churches for discussion and response.
2. That the MWC undertake discernment of the issues raised by the joint report, especially regarding Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching on and practice of baptism, and the possibility of further dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation. Among other topics, those conversations will have to address our mutual understandings of the relationship between divine action and human (re)action in baptism. Engaging these questions will require deeper biblical accounts of our understandings of baptism and will require that these understandings be considered within a broad theological framework.
3. That if the LWF Council should issue a statement asking forgiveness for the Lutheran persecution of the Anabaptists, the MWC initiate a process to acknowledge that request, with the goal of a mutual granting of forgiveness in a spirit of reconciliation and humility.

## **Conclusion**

The past cannot be changed, but we can change the way the past is remembered in the present. This is our hope. Reconciliation does not only look back into the past; rather it looks into a common future. We are grateful that in many places where Mennonites and Lutherans live together, cooperation as brothers and sisters in Christ has already been occurring for

many years. Mennonites and Lutherans recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. The national dialogues in France, Germany, and the USA have shown how much Mennonites and Lutherans have in common. This has often been realized and put into practice through common service projects, shared worship and even eucharistic fellowship. In these encounters, Mennonites and Lutherans offer the witness of their lives and give witness to their faith. These forms of bearing witness and being open to the witness of others deepen the bonds of community. In this way, both sides may become increasingly aware of the special gifts that God has bestowed on both churches.

Yet, even though Lutherans and Mennonites have much in common, they nevertheless remain different traditions. In the past, they have been divided by a terrible conflict. We are deeply convinced that this has changed in recent times and that it will continue to change, so that both traditions may begin to challenge each other to become more faithful to the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have often experienced that the strengths in our respective traditions also bring with them certain weaknesses. So, even as we recognize each other's strengths, each community may also assist the other in addressing their respective weaknesses.

Today, living in the forgiveness and reconciliation given by Christ, Mennonites and Lutherans may make observations and raise questions concerning the doctrine and life of the other community in a brotherly and sisterly way. Such conversations will assist each church in developing a self-critical attitude toward its own doctrine and practice. Learning to view those who belong to other Christian traditions truly as Christians will also help all of us to develop a sense of the catholicity of the church. For example, when Lutherans practice infant baptism they should have in mind the Mennonite question about whether this practice actually is in line with the theology of baptism that they teach and have explained to Mennonites. And, of course, they will have to be prepared to respond to the enduring Mennonite question about whether Lutheran doctrine of baptism is in line with Scripture. This is a healthy challenge for Lutherans that motivates them to refer back to Scripture. Similarly, whenever Mennonites question the validity of a Lutheran's baptism as an infant, comparable reflections are in order for Mennonites. There will be similar mutual challenges when it comes to questions of war and peace, the use of violent means by state officials to defend innocent people, and the like. In a world that changes so rapidly, these questions are constantly evolving, so that both Lutherans and Mennonites must look for answers that are in line with the word of

God, take into consideration the insights of their respective traditions, and take seriously the complexity of the world in which we live, act, suffer, and confess our faith in Christ.

We offer the results of our study for discernment within our respective church bodies, trusting that readers might find here both evidence of the movement of the Holy Spirit for the unity of Christ's church and concrete witness to Christ's prayer "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).



## Appendix A

### That the Civil Magistracy Is Obligated to Apply Physical Punishment Against the Anabaptists: A Few Considerations from Wittenberg (1536)

[The original letter signed by Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, Johannes Bugenhagen and Caspar Cruciger, Sr.]  
Leonard Gross, translator<sup>173</sup>

#### **Whether Christian princes are obligated to apply physical punishment and the sword against the unchristian sect of the Anabaptists**

First of all it is to be noted that with this question, the office of preacher (Predicanten) is not being spoken of, for the preachers and servants of the gospel do not wield the sword. Therefore, they are not to use any physical force whatsoever, but are to fight against error solely through correct teaching and preaching. Where they, however, delve into another office and want to wield the sword, as did [Thomas] Müntzer, and as happened at Münster, such is incorrect and seditious. Here, however, the question deals with the civil magistracy, whether it is obligated to proceed with physical force and punishment against the false teachings of the Anabaptists and other similar sects.

Second, before punishment is meted out, misled people are first of all to be presented with clear Christian instruction and admonition that they might be induced to renounce their errors. If they desire so to do, it is Christian to show them mercy. If they, however, remain obstinate and do not want to renounce their errors, then punishment is obligatory.

Third, it is obvious that the magistracy is obligated to protect against sedition and the destruction of civil government, and to punish the seditious with the sword, as Paul says, "Whoever opposes the magistracy is to be punished."<sup>174</sup>

<sup>173</sup> The translation by Leonard Gross appeared in: *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (July 2002), 315-321. A photomechanical reproduction of the 1536 tract immediately follows on pp. 322-335.

<sup>174</sup> Probably a loose rendering of Rom. 13:2, "...those who resist [authority] will incur judgment."

Now the Anabaptists hold to two types of articles. Some have to do especially with the outward, civil government, whereby they maintain that Christians are not to hold that office which wields the sword. Likewise, Christians are to hold no office except that of servant of the gospel. Likewise, Christians are not to swear oaths. Likewise, Christians are not to own property. Likewise, Christians may forsake their wives if they do not want to embrace Anabaptism. These and similar articles are held by all Anabaptists. Now it is obvious that these articles directly undermine the outward, civil government: the magistracy, the oath, personal possessions, marriage, etc. For if these articles and teachings were to be held to throughout the land, what destruction, murder and robbery would follow!

Therefore, without a doubt the magistracy is obligated to counter these articles as seditious and punish with physical force—and, depending on the circumstances, also with the sword—obstinate individuals, whether Anabaptists or others, who hold to one or more of these articles. For these articles are not solely matters of faith, but they are directly, in and of themselves, an obvious threat to civil government.

And it is not to be taken into consideration that the Anabaptists say in response, “We desire to harm no one.” This is *protestatio contraria facto* (a declaration, contrary to fact)—tearing apart governments, yet saying, “We desire to harm no one.” For if their teachings should become generally accepted, then indeed would the magistracy, the oath, personal possessions, etc., all be abolished.

Now since Holy Scripture clearly teaches that the noted articles of the Anabaptists are wrong and devilish, and it is clear and obvious that they are direct destroyers of civil government, it follows without a doubt that the magistracy is obligated to counter such false and seditious teachings, and in keeping with the authority of its office, to apply punishment, mild or severe, as it sees fit.

If someone were to contradict this, saying, “The magistracy is not able to give anyone faith, therefore it dare not punish anyone for the sake of faith,” to this there are many proper answers. But we shall limit ourselves to this one answer: The magistracy does not punish on account of opinions and views as held in the heart, but on account of outward wrongful speech and teachings, through which others are also led astray. Therefore, just as the magistracy is obligated to punish others who talk seditiously and menacingly, through which rebellion is truly incited, in the same manner it is also obligated, using as much force as it can muster, to punish those who proclaim these seditious [Anabaptist] teachings, since through this the people are also truly incited to rebel. For [the Anabaptists] wish to eliminate the magistracy, the oath and personal possessions.

And even if they might color and excuse some of these articles with hypocrisy, interpreting them otherwise, the above is still their basic view. For our feeling

is not that one should subject the Anabaptists to subtle questions, but instead should seek out and note the correct, clear foundations as found in their own teachings, and enter into discussion about such—thereby, however, not being duped by the devil’s hypocrisy. Some [Anabaptists] are able to embellish things that, upon closer analysis, are found to contain the above-noted errors, wherein their seeming holiness is pure hypocrisy and a devilish apparition. For Paul clearly teaches that they who hold to such erroneous articles concerning civil government, and present them as examples of a new holiness, are from the devil. Therefore, let the Christian magistracy not be frightened by the make-believe and hypocritical holiness or patience of such spirits, but rather consider their erroneous articles as a witness, that these obstinate people are a devilish sect.

Enough has been said about the seditious articles. For it is not difficult to understand that, concerning these articles, it is incumbent upon the magistracy to use its office to preserve the government. Those [Anabaptists] at Münster also maintained that there must be a physical kingdom preceding Judgment Day, composed solely of the holy, etc. Also, they practiced polygamy. Such erroneous ideas are seditious and must be defended against in earnest.

Second, the Anabaptist articles, in spiritual matters, present interpretations—namely, concerning infant baptism and original sin—which lie outside of and counter to God’s word. Others, such as those in Münster, have also acknowledged that Christ did not take his own body from Mary’s body, and that there is no forgiveness for mortal sin, etc. Regarding such articles, here is also our answer: Just as the civil magistracy is obligated to restrain and punish public blasphemy and perjury, it is also obligated to restrain and punish individuals in its own judicial district, for public false teachings, improper worship services and heretical acts. And this God orders in the second commandment, where he says, “Whoever dishonors God’s name, shall not remain unpunished.”<sup>175</sup> Everyone is obligated, in keeping with his station and office, to avoid and to deter blasphemy. And on the strength of this commandment, princes and magistrates have the power and duty to abolish improper worship services, and in their place, to establish true teaching and correct worship services. This commandment also instructs them to deter public false teaching, and to punish the obstinate. Leviticus 24[:16] speaks to this: “Whoever blasphemates God is to be killed.”

The magistrates must give themselves to constant and correct instruction, so that they are sure of their cause and do not treat anyone unjustly. For it is not right, solely according to custom, to judge against God’s word and

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<sup>175</sup> Ex 20:7, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”

against the old and pure church's understanding and teaching. Custom is a great tyrant. Therefore one must ground himself upon God's word and the old, pure church. For one is to accept no teaching which has not been attested to by the old, pure church, since it is easy to understand that the old church must have possessed all the articles of faith, namely, all those needed for salvation. Consequently the ruler is obligated to give himself to a thorough study of God's word and the old church's teachings.

Now there are certain articles of the Anabaptists, already noted, which would certainly lead to confusion, such as not baptizing children. What would the end result of this be, other than an obviously heathen spirit?

Likewise, infant baptism is so well established, that the Anabaptists have no legitimate reason to overturn the same.

Likewise, that they say children do not need the forgiveness of sins, that original sin does not apply [to them]—such are public errors of a very dangerous character.

In addition the Anabaptists separate themselves from the church, also at those places where pure Christian teaching is at hand and where abuses and idolatry have been eliminated—establishing their own ministry, church and gathering—which also is against God's command. For where the teaching is correct, and idolatry is not practiced in the churches, all people are obligated before God to remain with the official public ministry, and not to establish any separation. And in such a case, whoever establishes a separation and a new ministry is acting most certainly against God, as was the case long ago with the Donatists who also established rebaptism and a separation, having no cause except this alone: There were priests and people in the other churches who were not godly, [therefore the Donatists] wanted to create a church that was completely pure. This we have also heard from a number of Anabaptists as to why they were establishing a separation from those churches whose teaching and worship services they could not object to. They said that we are leading an evil life, are greedy, etc. They wanted, however, to create a pure church.

In this case the law was established in *Codice*, through Honorius and Theodosius, wherein it is stated that Anabaptists [German *Widertauffer*, “re-baptizers”] are to be killed.<sup>176</sup> For separation, and the establishing of a new ministry solely on account of other evil moral practices is most certainly against God, and since this is very vexing, and precipitates eternal unrest, the civil magistracy should deter and punish this practice with serious measures.

<sup>176</sup> *Codex Justinianus* (6th century) formalized what up to that time had been the practice of Constans, Theodosius and Honorius, etc., in putting apprehended Donatists to death on the basis of their practice of “repeating” the sacrament of baptism.

Some people argue that the civil magistracy in no way ought to be concerned with spiritual matters. This argument is stretched too far. True, both offices—the office of preaching, and that of the civil government—are distinct from one another. At the same time they both are to serve unto God’s glory. Princes are not only to protect their subjects, along with their possessions and physical lives, but the most important task of their office is to further God’s honor, and to oppose blasphemy and idolatry. Thus also did the kings in the Old Testament—and not only the Jewish kings, but also the converted kings of the Gentiles—who executed those who established false prophets and idolatry. Such examples belong to the office of the prince, as Paul also teaches, “The law is good for punishing the blasphemers,” etc.<sup>177</sup> The civil magistracy does not exist solely to serve people in the area of physical welfare, but most of all for God’s honor, for it is a servant of God, whom it, through its office, is to acknowledge and glorify. Ps 2[:10]: *Et nunc Reges intelligite* (Now therefore, O kings, be wise).

Concerning the words about the weeds, “Let both grow,” used to counter [the above argument], here it is not the civil magistracy that is spoken of, but the office of preacher—that the preachers, upon the authority of their office, are not to exercise temporal power. From all this it has now become clear that the civil magistracy is obligated to deter blasphemy, false teachings and heresy, punishing the adherents physically.

Now where the Anabaptists have articles against the civil government, this is all the easier to judge. For there is no doubt that in such a case the obstinate are to be punished as seditious. Where, however, someone has articles solely on spiritual matters, such as regarding infant baptism, original sin, and unneeded separation, to be sure, these articles are also significant. For casting children out of Christendom, putting them into an uncertain situation, indeed, bringing them into damnation, is of no small import. Likewise, establishing two peoples among ourselves: the baptized, and the unbaptized. Thereupon one indeed sees and understands that there are grossly false articles held to by the Anabaptist sect. We conclude that in this case the obstinate may be killed. Beyond this, where both types of error, regarding civil and spiritual matters, are found among the Anabaptists, and they do not renounce such, the judge may be all the more certain, and shall punish in all severity.

In every case, however, moderation must prevail, so that the people first of all are instructed, and admonished to renounce their errors. Likewise, the judge shall also differentiate [among the different classes of Anabaptists]. Some have been misled solely out of simplemindedness and are not obstinate. With

<sup>177</sup> Source not found. Possibly Rom 2:23-24, in the form of a very loose paraphrase.

these, one should not proceed in haste. Also, these people may be given a lesser punishment, such as expulsion from the land, or imprisonment, so that they do others no harm. Some are beginners<sup>178</sup> and at the same time obstinate. Here the judge shall demonstrate severity. And if they hold to errors regarding the civil government, then one must assume that they are pregnant with a Münster-like government. Therefore he punishes them as insurrectionists.

Likewise, if we hold God's honor in high respect, we must in all seriousness take preventive measures, so that blasphemy and damaging errors are not carried far and wide.

And in order to instruct and confirm our inner conscience, the following is especially to be noted: We should at all times take note of a few, clear articles wherein the sect is in gross and obvious error. Through this we should know that the obstinate are blinded by the devil. And this is certain, that they possess no good spirit, even though they have a great appearance of the same. For one well knows that false prophets have sheep's clothing—that is, a certain good appearance. But by their fruits we shall know them. Now the most certain testing of these fruits is, namely, that one attempts obstinately to defend false articles against the clear and obvious word of God—with this the judge can instruct and strengthen his conscience. For thus he knows that the sect is from the devil. Therefore he knows that the sect must be opposed, even though there may be needy and ailing individuals among them, in need of mercy; he still knows that they must be opposed as a group.

And in sum and substance, understanding *examinatores* (examiners) well know how to proceed in these matters. In addition they also well know that among these Anabaptists, much abominable error resides. For, after all, it is a Manichean sect and a new monasticism. For outward, unruly barbarity, having no personal possessions, and not submitting to [civil] government—such matters are their holiness, by which one may conclude that they are far from Christ, and do not have the correct understanding of Christ.

Just as an understanding preacher instructs other estates about their vocations, just as he teaches a mother that bearing children is pleasing to God, etc., in this same manner he is to instruct civil magistrates how they are to serve unto the honor of God, and counter manifest blasphemy.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>178</sup> The German "anfenger" here has more the sense of "instigator" or "agitator." (Theodor Dieter)

<sup>179</sup> The following paragraph, part of the original letter (now in MBW 1748, *Texte* 7: 157), was omitted from versions published in 1536: "And because our gracious lord [Philip of Hesse], the landgrave, reports that some leaders and teachers of rebaptism are now in custody who were admonished and yet did not keep their promise [not to spread their teaching], h[is] p[rin]cely g[race] may in good conscience allow them to be punished with the sword also for this reason: that they were disobedient and did not keep their promise or oath." Added by Luther: "This is the common rule. But our gracious lord may at all times act leniently regarding the punishment according to the specifics of the case."

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