

Anabaptist Confessions

Andrii Zvorygin yN-PH2196 mtH2a1 *& Thomas Finger

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1 Disclaimer

While Anabaptist confessions serve as valuable guides to our faith and its historical expressions, it's important to understand that Anabaptists are not a creedal group. These confessions are often transient documents that reflect the needs, challenges, and aspirations of a particular time, place, and community. As such, disagreement with specific points in any confession should not be seen as a barrier to full participation in the life of the Anabaptist community.

Our ultimate authority is Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, ESV). Therefore, for Anabaptists, the primary commitment is to follow Jesus and His teachings, as modeled in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul also echoes this sentiment when he says, "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11, ESV).

Thus, while confessions can help clarify and articulate our collective understandings of faith, they are not the final word. Instead, they serve as signposts pointing us toward the ongoing, relational journey of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

2 Martyr's Confession

The "Martyrs' Mirror," compiled by Thielemann J. van Braght and first published in 1660, is a seminal work for many Anabaptists. It provides a comprehensive chronicle of Christian martyrs from the time of Jesus Christ through the 16th century. In essence, it documents a perceived continuity of true Christian belief and practice, often in opposi-

tion to established church structures, leading up to the Anabaptists of the 16th century.

Here's a broad overview of that continuity as illustrated in the "Martyrs' Mirror":

Early Christian Era: The book begins with the martyrdom of Jesus and goes on to cover the apostles and early Christians who were persecuted and martyred by the Roman Empire. This era highlights the purity of the early church's faith and the persecution they endured for it.

Post-Constantinian Era: With the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the favored, and eventually official, religion of the empire. The "Martyrs' Mirror" illustrates that, even in this time, true believers (from the perspective of the Anabaptist compilers) were persecuted, now by an institutionalized church-state alliance.

Medieval Period: As the Roman Empire declined and the Roman Catholic Church grew in power, various groups and individuals emerged that criticized the church's excesses, doctrines, and practices. These groups—like the Waldenses, Cathars, and Bogomils—are seen in the "Martyrs' Mirror" as forerunners to the Anabaptists in their desire to return to the pure faith of early Christianity. Their persecution by the Catholic Church is well-documented in the book.

Early Reformation: The early years of the Protestant Reformation are depicted as a time of great religious upheaval. While the mainstream Protestant Reformers sought to reform the church from within, others wanted a more complete break from Catholic tradition. The Radical Reformation, of which the Anabaptists were a part, emerges in this context.

Anabaptist Era: The "Martyrs' Mirror"

*(<https://anabaptist.ca> <https://1being.org> <https://lyis.ca> <https://distributist.org>)

then moves to its primary focus: the persecution of the Anabaptists in the 16th century. Anabaptists, because of their commitment to adult baptism and their rejection of the state church, faced persecution from both Catholic and Protestant authorities. Their stories, testimonies, and letters are documented in detail, emphasizing their commitment to their beliefs even unto death.

The overarching narrative of the "Martyrs' Mirror" is one of a faithful remnant that, throughout history, sought to practice pure Christianity based on the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. In each era, these true believers, as depicted in the book, faced persecution and martyrdom at the hands of a corrupted church-state system. For the Anabaptists of the 16th century, and for their descendants who read the book, this narrative provides a powerful historical foundation and justification for our beliefs and practices.

2.1 First Article: One God

"the first article of the Christian faith, wherein we confess: "I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth," etc. and if the apprehended Christians confessed only this, viz., that they believed in one God, they were condemned to death: for the pagans recognized many gods." from.

2.2 Second Article: Jesus Christ

the second article, wherein we confess: I believe "in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, our Lord, who was conceived of the holy Ghost," etc. When they had confessed this, they had also forfeited their lives for the Jews and the Mohammedans do not acknowledge Christ as the Son of God, much less as His onlybegotten (or own) Son, and that He was conceived of the Holy Ghost.

2.3 Other Articles

Those who suffered among the false Christians, especially among the Romanists, were examined concerning nearly all the articles of faith, in regard to which difference of opinion existed between us and them, viz., the incarnation of Christ, the office of the secular authorities, the swearing of oaths, etc.,

but above all others, the article of holy baptism, namely, whether they were denied infant baptism? or, whether they were rebaptized? which latter principally caused their death; as sentence of death was immediately passed upon them, and their life taken.

3 Anabaptist Radical Reformation

3.1 Timeline

1300s

1382: Wycliffe's Bible is translated into English, promoting ideas that would later influence the Protestant Reformation.

1400s

1440: Johannes Gutenberg invents the movable-type printing press in Mainz, Germany.

1455: The Gutenberg Bible is printed, becoming the first major book printed using movable type.

1500s

1517: Martin Luther nails his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's theses are quickly printed and distributed throughout Germany.

1521: Luther is excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church. He translates the New Testament into German while in hiding, and it is subsequently printed and distributed.

1525: The Anabaptist movement begins in Zurich, Switzerland. Including Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock.

1526: Felix Manz becomes the first Anabaptist martyr when he is drowned in Zurich.

1527: Schleitheim Confession: This document, often considered the earliest Anabaptist confession of faith, is adopted in a meeting in Schleitheim, Switzerland. Michael Sattler is a primary author.

1530: Augsburg Confession is presented to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, itself is a Lutheran document, its presentation and the events surrounding it had significant implications for the Anabaptist movement, highlighting the distinctions and tensions between these two branches of the Reformation.

1530s: Balthasar Hubmaier: A well-known early Anabaptist leader, he wrote many tracts defending Anabaptist beliefs, especially adult baptism.

1534: The Act of Supremacy is passed in England, making the monarch the head of the Church of England. This further cements England's break from the Catholic Church. While the Act itself didn't directly address Anabaptism, the overall religious turmoil and the establishment of state churches in Europe often led to persecution of Anabaptists and other minority religious groups who did not conform.

1534-1535: Münster Rebellion: Radical Anabaptists, sometimes referred to as Münsterites, seize control of the city of Münster in Germany. Key figures include Jan Matthys and Jan van Leiden. The episode, marked by extreme beliefs and practices, ends violently with the capture and execution of its leaders.

1536: Menno Simons: A former Roman Catholic priest in the Low Countries, he becomes an Anabaptist leader. He focuses on nonviolence and becomes the namesake of the Mennonites. His writings and leadership help the movement survive and grow, especially after the negative fallout from the Münster Rebellion.

1536: John Calvin publishes the first edition of his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" in Basel, Switzerland.

1540s: Jakob Hutter: Leader of the Hutterites, another significant branch of Anabaptism focused on communal living.

1545-1563: The Council of Trent meets in response to the Protestant Reformation.

1550s: Dirk Willems: Known for his act of compassion when he saved a pursuer who fell through thin ice, only to be captured afterward. He becomes an iconic martyr for the Anabaptist movement.

1560s: The spread of Anabaptism continues in the Low Countries, Germany, and other parts of Central Europe despite widespread persecution.

1563: Foxe's Book of Martyrs is published in England, detailing Protestant martyrdoms, primarily during the reign of Queen Mary I of England.

1600s

1609: The Baptist movement begins in Amsterdam inspired by Anabaptist Mennonites.

1611: The King James Version of the Bible is published in England.

1618-1648: The Thirty Years' War ravages Europe. Its religious underpinnings, the resulting socio-political chaos, and widespread persecution had significant repercussions for the Anabaptist communities and their history in Europe.

1632: The Dordrecht Confession of Faith, another significant Anabaptist confession, is adopted in the Netherlands.

1660: The Martyrs' Mirror, detailing Anabaptist persecution and martyrdom, is published by Thieleman J. van Braght.

3.2 The Confessions

1. The Schleitheim Confession (1527):

As one of the earliest Radical Reformation Anabaptist confessions, this document was adopted by Swiss Anabaptists in a meeting led by Michael Sattler in Schleitheim. It addressed seven points: baptism, the ban, the Lord's Supper, separation from the world, pastors, the sword (non-violence), and oaths. The confession aimed to solidify the emerging Anabaptist identity, especially in contrast to other Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The Strasbourg Discipline (circa 1568):

Not as well-known as the Schleitheim Confession, this disciplinary document came from the Strasbourg Anabaptists and emphasized community discipline, non-violence, and practical matters related to living out the faith.

3. The Concept of Cologne (1591):

Written in Cologne by high German Mennonites, this confession was an attempt to articulate their beliefs in the face of persecution. It touches on essential Anabaptist beliefs, like non-violence, non-swearing of oaths, and adult baptism.

4. The Ris Confession (1601):

This confession originated from South German/Austrian Anabaptists and was authored by Peter Riedemann, a Hutterite leader. It provided a comprehensive theological overview and was essential for the Hutterite communities.

5. The Olomouc Articles (1620):

A Moravian Anabaptist confession, it reflected the beliefs of Anabaptist communities

in the region, and like others, it detailed the beliefs on baptism, the communion, and non-resistance.

6. The Dordrecht Confession of Faith (1632):

This Dutch Mennonite confession became one of the most widely adopted among Mennonites, especially in North America. With 18 articles, it covered key Christian and Anabaptist beliefs, like the nature of God, salvation, the church, and non-resistance.

7. The Martyrs Mirror (1660):

While not a confession in the strictest sense, Thieleman J. van Braght's "Martyrs Mirror" is a significant compilation of Anabaptist documents, including various confessions, testimonies, letters, and hymns. It remains a seminal work in Anabaptist literature, chronicling the persecution and theology of Anabaptists throughout the 16th century.

8. Confessions of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) is adopted by Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

Throughout the years, there have been other confessions and writings, but the ones mentioned above are among the most influential in shaping Anabaptist theology and identity. Each emerged from different contexts and challenges, reflecting the diversity of thought within the broader Anabaptist movement.

4 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective

"Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective" is a formal statement of beliefs held by the Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Adopted in 1995, this confession provides a summary of core Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs and is intended as a guide for teaching, discipline, and shaping practices within the church community.

Here's a brief summary:

God: Emphasizes the belief in one eternal God, who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

Jesus Christ: Highlights the centrality of Jesus Christ, His life, teachings, death, and

resurrection. Jesus is both divine and human, and He embodies God's love and salvation.

Holy Spirit: Focuses on the Spirit's role in empowering believers, guiding the church, and being the ongoing presence of God in the world.

Scripture: The Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, is the authoritative written word of God, serving as a guide for faith and practice.

Sin: Recognizes human fallenness and the universal need for salvation.

Salvation: Stresses that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ, leading to repentance, regeneration, and a new life in the Spirit.

The Church: The church is the body of Christ, comprised of believers who gather for worship, fellowship, service, and witnessing to Jesus' teachings.

Discipleship: Emphasizes following Jesus in daily life, promoting peace, justice, and loving one's enemies.

Sacraments: Recognizes baptism upon confession of faith and the Lord's Supper as central sacraments.

Marriage: Marriage is seen as a covenant between one man and one woman, reflecting the relationship between Christ and the church.

The Lord's Day: Sunday is a day for worship, rest, and community engagement, celebrating Jesus' resurrection.

Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance: A strong emphasis on pacifism, seeking justice, reconciliation, and the refusal to participate in warfare.

The Oath: Encourages upholding truth while avoiding swearing oaths, reflecting Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Reign of God: Affirms the hope in Jesus' return and the establishment of God's full and eternal reign.

Last Things: Affirms beliefs about the return of Christ, resurrection, final judgment, and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom.

Throughout, "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective" underscores the importance of community, mutual accountability, and the mission to live out Jesus' teachings in all aspects of life. The confession serves both as an affirmation of faith and a guide to the lived expression of that faith in the world.