

ANABAPTISTICA



SOUTHWESTERN
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Anabaptistica

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This issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is devoted to the topic of “Anabaptistica,” a term that means “things about or pertaining to Anabaptism and Anabaptists.” The Anabaptists were one major branch of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers.

“What is the essence of Anabaptism?” Questions like the latter one are sometimes difficult to answer because Anabaptism in the sixteenth century is quite complex. “However,” Anabaptist historian W. R. Estep wrote, “although it may not be possible to suggest a single concept by which ‘normative Anabaptism’ can be identified, if the Anabaptist concept of the church with all of its ramifications is properly understood, it may provide a clue to Anabaptism.”¹ In other words, Estep strongly suggested that the Anabaptists’ idea of church and the way they lived it out may be the singular most distinctive identification of this radical movement. I think he was correct. Rather than hold to the authority of the church, Anabaptists strongly held to the Bible’s authority, a conviction which clearly separated them from the Roman Catholics, but it was the putting into practice of their believer’s-church concept which noticeably distinguished them even from the Magisterial Reformers of the period, many of whom also held to biblical authority.² On deeply-held convictions like the authority of Scripture, Anabaptists found the principles for the church and Christian living solely in the New Testament; however, this belief was largely because they did not think that the Old Testament could ever be used to justify state churches or to persecute heretics, actions prominent in their day and viewed by them as absolutely un-Christian.³ For Anabaptists, “the church was made up of committed disciples who bore witness to the new birth in believer’s baptism, which also constituted a pledge of discipleship”; discipleship encompassed the moral and ethical aspects of Christian living.⁴ As a matter of fact, all of the Anabaptist ideas of “church, baptism, and discipleship” pointed to the biblical conviction that one’s supreme loyalty belonged to God and not to the government; and although they did recognize that governments were legitimately given by

¹William R. Estep, *Renaissance & Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 219.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

God, they thought the state should stay out of religious matters. Indeed, they saw religious liberty as a biblical principle found in the gospel and viewed with considerable disdain a religion that coerced a response to the gospel.⁵

“What kind of people were the Anabaptists—at least some of them?” The sketch on the cover for this spring journal issue gives us a considerable hint. This exceptional drawing carries with it a well-known, inspirational story of an Anabaptist named Dirk Willems. Joseph Liechty tells the story of Willems this way:

Late in the winter of 1569, Dirk Willems of Holland was discovered as an Anabaptist, and a thief catcher came to arrest him at the village of Asperen. Running for his life, Dirk came to a body of water still coated with ice. After making his way across in great peril, he realised his pursuer had fallen through into the freezing water.

Turning back, Dirk ran to the struggling man and dragged him safely to shore. The thief catcher wanted to release Dirk, but a burgomaster—having appeared on the scene—reminded the man he was under oath to deliver criminals to justice. Dirk was bound off to prison, interrogated, and tortured in an unsuccessful effort to make him renounce his faith. He was tried and found guilty of having been rebaptised, of holding secret meetings in his home, and of allowing baptism there—all of which he freely confessed.

“Persisting obstinately in his opinion,” Dirk was sentenced to execution by fire. On the day of execution, a strong east wind blew the flames away from his upper body so that death was long delayed. The same wind carried his voice to the next town, where people heard him cry more than seventy times, “O my Lord; my God.” The judge present was “finally filled with sorrow and regret.” Wheeling his horse around so he saw no more, he ordered the executioner, “Dispatch the man with a quick death.”⁶

Whatever reason one ascribes to Willems for doing what he did in this account, one thing seems clear: this Anabaptist had the mind and heart of Christ characterized by, amongst other things, sacrificial love, love for one’s enemies, and the overwhelming desire not to see any lost soul perish and go into eternity without Jesus.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Joseph Liechty, “Why Did Dirk Willems Turn Back?” at <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/175>; accessed: 24 April 2014. This article was originally published in *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 6 (June 1994): 7-12. Liechty notes that the story of Dirk Willems comes from an Anabaptist martyrology published in 1660 compiled by Thieleman J. van Braght, translated as *Martyrs’ Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1950), 741-42. A text-version download of this document is available at <http://homecomers.org/mirror/downloads.htm>; accessed: 24 April 2014.

As mentioned earlier, this journal volume is devoted to “Anabaptistica” and features six insightful articles. The first article is presented by Michael Whitlock, assistant professor of Christian Studies at Truett-McConnell College. In his essay titled, “Balthasar Hubmaier’s Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” he explores the relationship between the leading Anabaptist theologian’s soteriology and the sixteenth-century Protestant understanding of *sola fide*. Nathan Finn, associate professor of Historical Theology and Baptist Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, also contributes a paper called, “Curb Your Enthusiasm: Martin Luther’s Critique of Anabaptism.” He argues that despite imprecision and few works devoted expressly to the Anabaptists, Luther offered an extensive and wide-ranging critical appraisal of this major movement in the Radical Reformation. Ched Spellman, assistant professor of Bible at Cedarville University, provides an article titled, “I Wait upon My God: Exploring the Life and Letters of Michael Sattler,” in which he explores the nature of Sattler’s legacy and asks why his life and letters became so significant in the years after his death. Michael Wilkinson, dean of the College at Southwestern, furnishes an article called, “*Brüderliche Vereinigung*: A Brief Look at Unity in The Schleitheim Confession.” In this thorough examination of unity in the confession, he clarifies that the confession does not try to explain the doctrines of God, Christology, pneumatology, or Scripture, but rather focuses just on ecclesiology, of which unity is understandably an important part. Jason Graffagnino, assistant professor of History and Christian Studies at Truett-McConnell College, contributes a brief introduction and then presents in German and English, “Leonhard Schiemer’s Anabaptist Catechism.” Schiemer’s catechism, which may show the influence of both Balthasar Hubmaier and Hans Hut, was the second Anabaptist catechism penned just one year after the first catechism that was written by Hubmaier. Lastly, Maël Disseau, a recent Southwestern PhD graduate who studied Italian Anabaptism, provides a “Translator’s Preface to Massimo Firpo’s ‘Religious Radicalism: From Anabaptism to Anti-Trinitarianism,’” in which he furnishes an updated translation from the Italian of Firpo’s tenth chapter in the book, *Riforma Protestante ed Eresie nell’Italia del Cinquecento*.⁷ Firpo’s book is important because it presents a well-researched summary of the short-lived Italian reformation. This issue also contains for your perusal several book reviews and abstracts of recent doctoral dissertations completed at Southwestern.

We pray that these articles increase your knowledge and help equip you in your preparation for engagement in ministry. We aim to serve the church and are more than happy to assist you. Further, if God has called you into his service please consider allowing us the privilege of preparing you at Southwestern for a lifetime of ministry. These are exciting times at the seminary! God bless you.

⁷Massimo Firpo, *Riforma Protestante ed Eresie nell’Italia del Cinquecento* (San Donato Milanese: Editori Laterza, 2004), 143-60.