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Brüderliche Vereinigung: A Brief Look at Unity in The Schleithem Confession

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A number of Swiss Anabaptists recognized the need for consensus. Increasing persecution required them to articulate their position. More importantly, false teaching among their ranks demanded that they meet, address the problems, and arrive at a consensus of core convictions. Though there was general agreement on many issues, some of the differences alarmed them. They gathered in Schleithem on February 24, 1527 on the Swiss German border to hammer out the seven articles of the Schleithem Confession.¹ These early Anabaptists sought true Christian unity according to God's nature and the revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture rather than according to the whims and ideas of men.

Introduction

According to the introduction of the confession, the teachings and practices of the "false brethren among us" caused alarm. Those present at the meeting in Schleithem felt these people had abused the freedom of the Spirit, being "given over to the lasciviousness and license of the flesh."² As a result, they led many people away from the faith. H. W. Meihuizen posits several likely candidates as the false brothers. Hans Denck exhibited an excessive spiritualism which "attached hardly any significance to the church, and . . . underestimated the significance of the sacraments."³ Another pos-

¹It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the possible origins, influence, and historiography of the Schleithem Confession. It is a very significant document in the study of early Anabaptism and has been heavily examined. For a treatment of the influence and historiography of the Schleithem Confession, see Arnold Snyder, "The Influence of the Schleithem Articles on the Anabaptist Movement: an Historical Evaluation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63: (1989), 323-44 and Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Anabaptist Separation and Arguments against the Sword in the Schleithem *Brotherly Union*," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74: (2000), 381-402.

²John Howard Yoder, transl. and ed., *The Schleithem Confession* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 9.

³H. W. Meihuizen, "Who Were the 'False Brethren' Mentioned in the Schleithem Articles," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1967): 209.

sibility is Hans Hut. Hut had taught his people that swearing oaths was not against God's will. His apocalypticism was viewed with suspicion. Furthermore, his view on the sword caused him to appear as an "extension of Müntzer's views."⁴ Hut may fit part of the profile; however, he did not appear to show libertine tendencies; apocalypticism does not necessarily imply lasciviousness. Meihuizen mentions a third candidate: Balthasar Hubmaier. He indicates that Hubmaier's accomplishment at the church in Waldshut under protection of worldly authorities may have concerned these Swiss Brethren. His baptism of Leonhard von Liechtenstein, a magistrate in Nikolsburg, could also have been unsettling to Sattler and the others.⁵ However, "the lasciviousness and license of the flesh" hardly describes Hubmaier. In addition, Hubmaier could surely not be accused of causing others to turn from the faith.

Others are mentioned as possibilities: Bucer and Capito in Strasbourg and Thomas Hätzer in Switzerland. The problem with equating Bucer and Capito with the "false brothers" is that they were not counted as "among us," that is, they were not among the Anabaptist circle. Also, they do not appear to be guilty of libertine tendencies. The difficulty with Meihuizen's argument is that there are sufficient reasons to doubt many of his candidates. John Howard Yoder tempers Meihuizen's view somewhat by stating that one may agree with Meihuizen's descriptions of the positions "without being convinced that the meeting was this clearly directed against a few particular men who were specifically not invited."⁶ Yoder adds that if one person is meant, Thomas Hätzer would be the most likely candidate since he could be accused of libertine tendencies. The truth is that we do not know specifically who is meant since they are not named. Whoever the false brothers may be, the Anabaptists meeting in Schleithem felt that organization and self-discipline in the church was needed in order to confront "antinomian and charismatic excess on its fringes."⁷

The concerns raised by the false brothers demanded serious attention. The meeting in Schleithem sought to delineate the correct position on these issues. Because of its occasion, the document is not a typical confession of faith. It does not attempt to explain the doctrines of God, Christology, pneumatology, or Scripture. Rather, it focuses exclusively on ecclesiology. These core doctrines form the foundation for the ecclesiology described in the confession. If Michael Sattler, regarded as the primary author of The Schleithem Confession, is considered typical of those gathered in Schleithem, then their theology is orthodox. As will be demonstrated later, they accepted the doctrine of the Trinity as a true description of God's nature. Regarding Christ's person and work, Sattler affirms that "Christ came to save all of

⁴Ibid., 213-14.

⁵Ibid., 216-17.

⁶Yoder, *The Schleithem Confession*, 22-23, n. 9.

⁷George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed., Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, vol. 15 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), 288.

those who would believe in Him alone.”⁸ He adds, “Faith in Jesus Christ reconciles us with the Father and gives us access to Him.”⁹ In the account of his martyrdom, Sattler affirms “that Christ is our only mediator and advocate before God.”¹⁰ Regarding the Holy Spirit, Sattler not only believed the Spirit to be one of the Persons of the Trinity, but also affirms the Spirit’s role as the revealer of divine truth. Addressing Bucer and Capito, Sattler tells them of his prayer that God will “teach us in all truth by His Spirit” and ends the letter by requesting that “God give us His Spirit to lead us in the way.”¹¹

Though the above survey is brief, it serves to illustrate that those gathered in Schleithem generally agreed with the Reformers on theology proper, Christology, salvation, and the other major doctrines. The primary disagreements occurred over the church: its composition, ordinances, and governance. For this reason the Schleithem Confession only deals with the issues in which these Swiss and South German brethren differed with other Reformers.¹² William R. Estep observes,

The term “confession” is somewhat misleading, because the articles contain no strictly doctrinal statements other than a general affirmation of commonly held Christian concepts about God. The confession is concerned with order and discipline within the small, widely scattered congregations.¹³

Though orthodox theology is implied throughout, the Schleithem Confession addressed what they believed to be the core essentials of proper ecclesiology: baptism, the ban, the Lord’s Supper, separation, pastors, the sword, and the oath.

Many of the confession’s elements have attracted quite a bit of attention: the teaching on the ordinances, the view of pacifism, church discipline, discipleship, separation, and the concept of a pure church, just to name a few. One theme often acknowledged, but not given extensive treatment, is the underlying theme of unity. Unity, according to the Schleithem Confession, finds its basis in God’s nature and requires all the church’s members to be of one mind in belief and practice so that the church functions properly. This article will examine the use of three word groups which appear throughout the confession—*vereinigen*, *alle*, and *ein*—to demonstrate that unity serves as the theme which underlies the Schleithem Confession and binds its seven

⁸Michael Sattler, “Parting with the Strasbourg Reformers,” in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, transl. and ed. John Howard Yoder, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 22.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰“Martyrdom,” in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 72.

¹¹“Parting with the Strasbourg Reformers,” 23.

¹²Daniel Akin, “An Expository Analysis of the Schleithem Confession,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1988): 347.

¹³William R. Estep, Jr., *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 200.

articles together.

Vereinigung

Unity is especially prominent in the introduction and the first three articles. The use of three word groups—*vereinigen*, *ein*, and *alle*—describes the unity of those who convened at Schleithem. In the German text *Vereinigung* appears twice, in the title and in the opening sentence.¹⁴ The usual translation is “union,” bringing people or things together to form a unity. In the title of the document, *Brüderliche Vereinigung etzlicher Kinder Gottes sieben Artikel betreffend*, *Vereinigung* indicated that a united body of believers had come together to determine the key issues which distinguished the Anabaptist movement and defined the true church.

Vereinigung Grounded in the Cross

From the outset the Schleithem Confession grounds its understanding of unity in God’s Trinitarian nature and his work in redemption. The opening sentence begins, “May joy, peace, and mercy from our Father through the atonement [*Vereinigung*] of the blood of Jesus Christ, together with the gifts of the Spirit . . . be to all those who love God.”¹⁵ John H. Yoder, John C. Wenger, and William R. Estep all translate *Vereinigung* as atonement. Yoder notes,

A most significant concept in the thought of Michael Sattler is that of *Vereinigung*, which, according to the context, must be translated in many different ways. In the title we render it “Union”; here in the salutation it can most naturally be translated “reconciliation” or “atonement”; later in the text, in the passive participle form, it will mean “to be brought to unity.” The same word can be used for the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, for the procedure whereby brothers come to a common mind, for the state of agreement in which they find themselves, and for the document which states the agreement to which they have come.¹⁶

Based on the phrase “through the blood of Christ Jesus” the opening statement could be an allusion to one of three verses in the New Testament. Romans 3:25 refers to Christ as the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.” “Propitiation” translates ἰλαστήριον, which Luther translates *Sühnopfer*. Ephesians 1:7 says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses

¹⁴Beatrice Jenny, “Das Schleithemer Täuferbekenntnis 1527,” in *Schaffhauser Beiträge zur Vaterländische Geschichte*, vol. 28 (Thayngen: Historischen Verein des Kantons Schaffhausen, 1951), 9-18.

¹⁵Yoder, *The Schleithem Confession*, 7.

¹⁶Ibid., 20, n. 1.

according to the riches of his grace.”¹⁷ The word translated “redemption” is the Greek word ἀπολύτρωσις, which Luther translates *Erlösung*. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul writes, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” “Participation” is the translation of κοινωνία, which can also be translated “fellowship.” The Luther Bible translates κοινωνία as *Gemeinschaft*. This verse would be the closest in meaning since *Gemeinschaft* refers to a union or community, the very thing the authors of the Confession were concerned to define.¹⁸ Atonement and reconciliation fall well within the semantic range of *Vereinigung*; yet, undoubtedly, the idea of unity is strongly present as well. Sattler and the others may have intended the double meaning here. Their *Vereinigung* represented not simply a gathered group of similarly-minded people, but a united community; a community formed out of the work of Christ who has redeemed them from sin in order to bring them into union with God. The unity of this synod, and ultimately of the church, was grounded in the unifying, reconciling work of Christ.

This group of Swiss Anabaptists provides an indispensable insight into the meaning of unity: it is Christ’s cross which makes unity possible. However, it is worth noting how this group of Swiss Anabaptists treated Christ’s atoning work: they gave very little attention to developing a systematic theology of the atonement. Instead, they concentrated almost entirely on the effects of Christ’s cross on the believer. In the article on baptism, the authors state that baptism is intended for the repentant who believe “that their sins are taken away through Christ, and to all who desire to walk in the resurrection of Christ”¹⁹ Likewise in the fourth article, on separation from evil, these Anabaptist believers not only affirmed that separation from the world’s evil is by Christ’s command, but it is based on the work of Christ who “has freed us from the servitude of the flesh and fitted us for the service of God and the Spirit whom he has given us.”²⁰ In the conclusion of the document, the confession stresses the need for “agreement,” or unity (*Vereinigt*) in the Lord. This involves confession of sin and forgiveness “through the gracious forgiveness of God and through the blood of Jesus Christ.”²¹ Finally, the confession concludes by quoting Titus 2:11-14, admonishing believers to live pure lives while waiting for the hope and “the appearing of the glory of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to redeem us from all unrighteousness and to purify unto himself a people of his own, that would be zealous of good works.”²²

What is interesting in these citations is the orientation that these Swiss

¹⁷Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are according to the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Yoder, *The Schleithelm Confession*, 10.

²⁰Ibid., 12-13.

²¹Ibid., 18.

²²Ibid., 19.

believers held about how the work of Christ related to the idea of unity. It is tempting to think that they disregarded, or downplayed, the objectivity of the cross, the truth that Christ died “for us.” However, this conclusion seems too hasty. Based on the way that they referred to Christ’s work, they certainly affirmed the “for us” truth of Christ’s atoning work; there does not seem to be any denial of it. Yet, unlike some of the Protestant Reformers, for these Swiss Anabaptists this was not the end of Christ’s work, but rather the beginning. They stressed, instead, the effect of the cross on the lives of believers. The work which Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross took away sins so that one could walk in Christ’s resurrection; it frees the believer from fleshly servitude and fits one for serving God; finally, Christ’s shed blood brings forgiveness of sin, redeems from unrighteousness, and purifies a people for God himself. For these Swiss believers, the theology of the cross was not the problem; rather, the consequences of the cross, or the practice of the cross, is what was lacking among the “false brothers among us”; but it was also lacking among many of their Roman Catholic and Protestant antagonists, whose theology of the atonement was well-developed, but without transforming effect on their lives. The work of Christ has a present effect in that it separates the believer from sin and empowers him to obey the commands of Christ in holy living.²³ The focus on the transforming effect of Christ’s work represents the primary emphasis of the majority of sixteenth-century Anabaptists.²⁴ For this group of Swiss Anabaptists, the atoning work of Christ was not an abstract doctrine, but a transforming reality. In essence, Christ’s atoning work reconciles an individual to God so that he lives a life of holiness, obedience, and service to God.

One other note needs to be added: these Swiss brethren did not view Christ’s work apart from its effect on the community of faith. Reconciliation was not solely between the individual and God, but is also communal in nature. Ephesians 2:11-22 declares that Christ’s death not only brought about reconciliation with God, but it also accomplished human reconciliation and unity.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace,

²³Though this is beyond the scope of this study, most Anabaptists also understood the cross of Christ as entailing suffering with Christ. Some who were more influenced by medieval German mysticism placed very heavy stress on the importance of Christ suffering “in” the believer. A good example of this is Leonhard Schiemer’s treatment of God’s three-fold grace; the second grace, the suffering of the cross, must be experienced inwardly to purge sin from the believer in order to love God truly, as well as to produce a tested faith. Indeed, one cannot experience the comfort of the Spirit (the third grace) apart from suffering Christ’s cross inwardly. See Leonhard Schiemer, “Letter to the Church of God at Rattenberg, Writttten in 1527: Found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the Three-fold Grace (as it is called),” in *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, ed. and trans. Walter Klaassen, Frank Friessen, and Werner O. Packull (Kitchenor, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2001), 67-80.

²⁴For a sampling of this, see Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 3 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 85-100.

who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph 2:13-16).

Christ's death has destroyed hostilities between people. By Christ's death our alienations have ended. Reconciliation to God through Christ's blood brings Jews and Gentiles near to God and also near to each other since all people must approach God through the same Spirit based on the one work of Christ's shed blood. In doing so, he creates a new people, a people whose former differences have been nullified, and who have been united into one body. These seven articles sought to establish a "Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God," as the title of the document indicates. Any discussion of unity among believers and churches must be grounded in Christ's atonement, which alone accomplishes union with Christ and with one another.

***Vereinigung* Founded in the Trinity**

Not only does the reconciling work of Christ provide a basis for unity, so does God's Trinitarian nature. Thomas Finger observes, "The Schleithem Confession, written to forge unity (*vereinigung*) among Anabaptists, found this unity being created by the divine persons. It wished the readers the Father's peace through the "unification" (*vereinigung*) of Jesus' blood and the gifts of the Spirit sent by the Father."²⁵ Later in the introduction, the doctrine of the Trinity again undergirds the Confession: "Herein we have sensed the unity of the Father and of our common Christ as present with us in their Spirit."²⁶ In reference to the false brothers, Sattler and the others express concern that these false teachers were abusing "the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ." A few sentences later the confession states, "Note well, you members of God in Christ Jesus, that faith in the Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ is not thus formed."²⁷ Only the Father, Son, and Spirit can give true freedom; it is not something man can create for himself. Likewise, the proper practice of this freedom originates in God's Triune nature.

Robert Friedmann observes that the Anabaptists in general "were Trinitarians beyond doubt, in fact they were quite sensitive when confronted with anti-Trinitarian ideas."²⁸ William Estep agrees, "From Conrad Grebel to Menno Simons there is an abundance of evidence which suggests that

²⁵Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 423.

²⁶Yoder, *Schleithem Confession*, 9.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, vol. 15 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 53.

the Anabaptists found the Triune God an inescapable reality.”²⁹ The Swiss Brethren held the same view on the doctrine of the Trinity as Zwingli, under whom they had previously studied and whose Trinitarian theology was thoroughly orthodox.³⁰ Michael Sattler in particular, as the primary author of the Schleithem Confession, assumed the truth of God’s Triune nature. In his letter to the church in Horb, he reminded them of his admonition to shine like heavenly lights “which the Father has kindled with the knowledge of Him and the light of the Spirit.”³¹ Later in the same letter, Sattler closes, “May the peace of Jesus Christ, and the love of the heavenly Father and the grace of Their Spirit keep you flawless . . . that you might be found among the number of the called ones at the supper of the one-essential true God and Savior Jesus Christ.”³² Yoder comments that the word “one-essential” is the technical term *eingewesen*, the word used to translate ὁμοουσιᾶς in the Nicene Creed.³³ While not expounding the meaning of the Trinity, the Anabaptists in general, and Michael Sattler in particular, accepted its truth without qualification.

The doctrine of the Trinity provides the foundation for unity in several of the articles in the Schleithem Confession. The article on baptism lists Matthew 28 as one of the Scriptures supporting its position on baptism. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is assumed as the norm. The doctrine of the Trinity provides the underlying basis for the Lord’s Supper. The emphasis on one calling of God, one Spirit, and one body of Christ is assumed for the proper teaching and practice of the Lord’s Supper. Even the article on separation has a Trinitarian basis. Separation from the world and its evil practices is only possible in Christ, “who has freed us from the servitude of the flesh and fitted us for the service of God and the Spirit whom He has given us.”³⁴ God’s Trinitarian nature makes the *Vereinigung* of the Swiss and south German Anabaptists possible.

***Vereinigung* Established by the Holy Spirit**

The particular role of the Third Person of the Trinity should not be overlooked. In the fourth paragraph of the introduction, the confession implies that the Holy Spirit guided the discussion of the articles and asserts that he produced the necessary oneness of mind. The article on the ban teaches that the Spirit should regulate church discipline. The fourth article states that separation is necessary and possible not only because Christ has freed the believer from slavery to sin, but also because the Holy Spirit has fitted the believer to serve God.³⁵ The Confession closes by declaring that

²⁹William R. Estep, Jr., *The Anabaptist Story*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1975), 134.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹“Letter to the Church of God at Horb,” in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 56.

³²Ibid., 63.

³³Ibid., n. 41.

³⁴Yoder, *Schleithem Confession*, 12-13.

³⁵Ibid.

they had to “be brought to agreement [*vereynigt seint worden*] in the Lord” to correct the problems caused by the false brothers, namely the damage done to those with weak consciences which caused God’s name to be slandered.³⁶ Unity was essential because these seven articles represented “the will of God as revealed through us at this time.”³⁷ Snyder explains, “The clear implication is that the synod at Schleithem has been acted upon by the Holy Spirit, who Himself has brought the meeting into unity. . . . The achievement of unanimity and peace is considered a sign and seal of the presence and leading of the Spirit of God.”³⁸ The confession described God’s will revealed by the Holy Spirit, thus, oneness in belief and practice was obligatory.

Returning to the specific use of the *vereinigen* word group, six of the seven articles begin with the present perfect passive of *vereinigen* (*sind vereynigt worden*). Only the first article on baptism does not include this verb, possibly because the authors had just used it in listing the articles to be discussed. Yoder translates the verb expression “we have been united” in all but one instance.³⁹ Wenger and Estep both translate it as “we are agreed” or “we agree,” and once as “we were of one mind.”⁴⁰ *Vereinigen* basically means “to unite, to make one.” The Confession begins its discussion of the seven articles by affirming that all those who had gathered “have been united.” The third article, on the Lord’s Supper, mentions twice that they are in agreement on this issue. The fourth article, dealing with the need for separation, contains three uses of *vereinigen*. The first instance occurs at the beginning of the article to state that they are united on the need for separation from the world and its evil practices. The second use of *vereinigen* declares that those who do not walk in obedience are not united to God. In the final reference, the authors state that whatever is not united “with our God and Christ is nothing but an abomination which we should shun.”⁴¹ Sattler uses *vereinigen* emphatically, if not artistically: they are united in separating from those who have not united themselves to God and from anything that is not united with God.

Alle

The second word group stressing unity in the German text is *alle*. The word appears mostly in the introduction and first three articles. Each use further emphasizes the idea of unity. In the introduction, the authors mention that the Holy Spirit is given “to all believers to [give] strength and consola-

³⁶Ibid., 18.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, vol. 26 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 122.

³⁹Yoder, *Schleithem Confession*, 7-19.

⁴⁰John C. Wenger, “The Schleithem Confession of Faith,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945): 243-53. William R. Estep, Jr., ed. “The Schleithem Confession,” in *Anabaptist Beginnings 1523-1533: A Source Book*, ed. William R. Estep, Jr., Bibliotheca Humanistica et Reformatiorica, vol. 16 (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1976), 100-05.

⁴¹Yoder, *Schleithem Confession*, 12.

tion and constance in all tribulation to the end.”⁴² The greeting is addressed to all the children of light, that is, all those who love God. All who are believers in Christ have received the Spirit, no exceptions. All who love God are made children of light, no exceptions. Their common identity as God’s children and their common reception of the Spirit create unity among them.

Alle in the article on baptism emphasizes unity.

Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and 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 we might rise with Him; to all those who with such an understanding themselves desire and request it from us.⁴³

Baptism is for a limited group of people, namely those who have placed faith in Jesus Christ. Only believers have experienced the forgiveness of sin and expressed the desire to walk in the new resurrected life which Christ gives. Sattler and the others stress unity because baptism is common to all of them. Furthermore, the pledge offered in baptism, to walk in the resurrection, was pledged by all of them. Every one of the members of the church had made the same commitment to follow Christ as his disciple. Hence, they are united in baptism.

The unity of baptism and discipleship carries over into unity for church discipline. The article on the ban uses *alle* three times to underscore the theme of unity. “The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves over to the Lord, to walk after [Him] in His commandments; to [*alle*] those who have been baptized into the one body of Christ.”⁴⁴ Baptism and discipleship allow the church to discipline her members; and discipline applies to every member of the church, without exception. The article concludes by stating that discipline and the ban must be exercised before the Lord’s Supper “so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and drink from one cup.”⁴⁵ The interplay of “all” and “one” places a heavy emphasis on the need for oneness of mind regarding discipline in order to observe the Lord’s Supper correctly.

The interplay of “all” and “one” continues in the third article on the Lord’s Supper. Concerning the Lord’s Supper,

all those who desire to break the one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ and all those who wish to drink of one drink in remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ, that is the congrega-

⁴²Ibid., 7.

⁴³Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 11.

tion of God, whose head is Christ, and that by baptism.⁴⁶

Here all three words stressing unity appear together: *vereinigen*, *ein* and *alle*. Once again, the unity established in baptism is foundational for the unity of the Lord's Supper. Unity also separates. Whoever has not been united with Christ through faith and the church through baptism is an unbeliever. Unbelievers have no part in the Lord's Supper. All of those who practice the "dead works of darkness" have no participation in the light. One cannot sit at the devil's table and the Lord's table; the two are mutually exclusive. Therefore, all those who are united in unbelief can have nothing in common with those who are united to Christ in faith, who walk in obedience to his commands. The Lord's Supper is exclusively for those who have separated from the world and become one in Christ.

The article concludes by stating that unbelievers are excluded from the table because they do not share what believers have in common, "the calling of the one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one spirit, to one body together with all the children of God."⁴⁷ Again, the doctrine of the Trinity is alluded to here—one God, one Spirit, one body of Christ—which grounds unity in God's nature. Believers experienced the same call of God to salvation, received the same Spirit from the Father, were united to the same body of Christ, and experienced the same baptism. The Lord's Supper is an expression of true oneness. The authors of the Schleithem Confession stated emphatically that unity had to exist in order to observe the Lord's Supper as Christ commanded.

Ein

Ein represents the third word group promoting the theme of unity. Though used often as an indefinite article, *ein* in the Schleithem Confession is used most frequently to mean "one." Toward the end of the first paragraph the authors stress unity as they wish God's blessing to all God's scattered children whenever they gather together "in unity of spirit [*einmütiglich*] in one [*einem*] God and Father of us all."⁴⁸ *Einmütiglich* can also be translated as "full accord, of one mind, or unanimity." This word further emphasizes the unity which they had stated in the opening sentence. Just before mentioning the problem of the false brothers, the authors acknowledged that their meeting was characterized by "the unity of the Spirit of the Father and of our common Christ as present with us in Spirit."⁴⁹ Because they felt that the articles discussed were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, difference of opinion on any of these articles was not an option; unanimity in belief and practice was critical.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 8.

⁴⁹Ibid., 9.

Oneness of spirit was especially important for the Lord's Supper. A form of *ein* is used eleven times in reference to the Lord's Supper. At the end of the article on the ban, the confession teaches that the church must exercise discipline prior to observing the Lord's Supper "so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and drink from one cup."⁵⁰ Discipline was exercised to maintain the purity and the unity of the church. As Daniel Akin concludes, the ban "was to be practiced according to Scripture (Matt 18) and the Spirit (Matt 5) prior to the observance of the Lord's Supper, so that the Lord's table might be observed in unity (one mind) and love."⁵¹

Oneness regarding the Lord's Supper is heavily emphasized in the third article.

Concerning the breaking of bread, we have become one [*eins*] and agree thus: all those who desire to break the one [*ein*] bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ and all those who wish to drink of one [*einem*] drink in remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, they must beforehand be united [*vereiniget syn*] in the one [*einem*] body of Christ, whose head is Christ, and that by baptism.⁵²

Only those who have truly been regenerated through faith in Christ and baptized by believer's baptism can partake of the Lord's Supper. Because the true church is comprised of believers, unbelievers could not partake of it. Those who are not truly believers in Christ are partakers of evil and have no part in Christ; therefore, allowing unbelievers to sit at the Lord's table would profane the Supper.

The article concludes,

So it shall and must be, that whoever does not share the calling of the one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one spirit, to one body together with all the children of God, may not be made one loaf together with them, as must be true if one wishes to break bread according to the command of Christ.⁵³

In addition to baptism and a blameless life, unity is also a necessary component for properly partaking of the Lord's Supper. Snyder observes that "unity is the all-important consideration with regard to the Lord's Supper."⁵⁴ There is only one Lord's Supper and it is reserved for those who have been united to Christ in faith and united to his body through baptism. Many people have

⁵⁰Ibid., 11.

⁵¹Akin, "An Expository Analysis," 357.

⁵²Yoder, *Schleitheim Confession*, 11.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Snyder, *Michael Sattler*, 117.

rightly admired the confession's emphasis on the purity of the church; yet it should not be overlooked that unity provides an underlying foundation for the church's purity.

Conclusion

Unity runs through the Schleithem Confession binding everything together. Each article expressed something in direct conflict with the teachings of Roman Catholicism as well as most of the Protestant Reformers. Identifying these distinctions was critical. More importantly, they had to address the problems created by other Anabaptists whose errors they felt were damaging lives. For these Swiss and South German Anabaptists, the articles discussed in the Schleithem Confession represented the defining characteristics of the true church. These Anabaptists understood how critical unity would be for each of these issues.

No church can function without unity. The church is a union, a community, made up of believers who have been united to Christ through faith and to each other through baptism. Neither common human goals nor man-made effort can produce unity; oneness finds its basis in God's Trinitarian nature and his redemptive work. Restoring the true church to its apostolic purity requires believers to be of one accord. Jesus prayed specifically for unity among his people in John 17:20-23:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

Though twenty-first century churches may not fully agree with every one of the articles of the Schleithem Confession, there are at least two important lessons to be learned from the Swiss Anabaptists who gathered at Schleithem. First, true unity must be grounded in God's Trinitarian being and redemptive work. Based in God's very nature and accomplished through Christ's cross, unity is what God creates, or establishes, among his people. Ephesians 4:4-6 spells out the nature of this unity: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all . . ." Verse three states our responsibility in unity—we are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Unity is the Spirit's creation (τοῦ πνεύματος as a subjective genitive means unity is "produced by the Spirit"). In these verses unity's source is the triune God: one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all.

Unity which derives from God's being also has content; it cannot be reduced to emotional affections, some kind of ineffable experience, or simply the lowest common denominator. "One faith, one hope, and one baptism" imply doctrinal content and confessional affirmation of that content. If there is no common faith, unity cannot exist. Many calls for ecumenism today seek to establish unity by jettisoning any theological truths which are not held in common. However, unity by the least common denominator is not really God-established unity, just cordiality and shallow relationships based on a humanly established foundation. The Swiss Anabaptists who wrote the Schleithem Confession understood this. The unity they described is based in the triune God who has acted to reconcile humanity to himself (and to one another) through the suffering and resurrection of Christ; a reconciliation and unity effected by the Spirit of God. It is highly unlikely that these Swiss Anabaptists would have viewed those as true Christians who denied these fundamental truths.

There is a second lesson about unity to be learned from the Anabaptists gathered at Schleithem, a lesson that is exceptionally challenging: unity among those professing to be Christ's followers should be evidenced by holiness and obedient service to God. Unity in holy living and devoted service to God is not usually associated with discussions of unity within the body of Christ. Most discussions of unity in a church focus on mutual love and care among the members. Certainly, this group of Swiss Anabaptists understood the importance of mutual caring love among the brethren as essential for a true church; however, they did not separate holiness and obedience to Christ's commands from the love of one another. Indeed, personal and corporate holiness reinforces love for one another because it seeks the blessings of the resurrection life for one's brothers and sisters in Christ.

In addition, while it is easy to stress unity in terms of the previously mentioned doctrinal content, the Schleithem group will not allow us to rest comfortably there. Instead, they press us on to understand that God-established unity expresses itself in lives of moral purity and service for the good of the body of Christ. Even beyond this, living a life of holiness is done in service to the gospel, which proclaims that God has provided reconciliation through Christ. If, as the charge is often made, the morality inside the church differs little from that outside of it, there is not much possibility of unbelievers recognizing that the reconciling work of Christ makes any difference for life in the concrete world of the here and now. The Schleithem believers remind us that holiness is positive in its orientation; the life of Christ's disciple, rather than being simply a matter of avoiding certain things, is concerned with walking in the resurrection of Christ, of being buried with him in death to sin in order to be raised with Christ. Even the idea of separation from evil and wickedness is not merely about ceasing from certain kinds of activities, but about being reconciled to God in order to be his people, of serving God in goodness, light, faith, and in union with Christ. Thus, the Christian's life is no longer about the individual, but about Christ, about a life of devoted

service to God. Such a life cannot be experienced apart from holiness. Furthermore, just as unity within a church cannot exist apart from the being and work of the triune God, so also can it not exist apart from personal and corporate holiness in obedient service to God. This may be the hardest lesson to learn from the Anabaptists gathered at Schleithem, certainly not the hardest to understand, just far more challenging to practice.