

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL SATTLER

At nearly two years old, the Anabaptist movement threatened to collapse.

Quarrelling individuals manifested bizarre behavior and theology. Catholic and Protestant authorities persecuted the movement ruthlessly. It must have seemed unlikely that Anabaptism could survive much longer. It was a moment of great crisis—and a great opportunity.

In the months following the first baptisms in January 1525, the Anabaptist movement spread like wildfire across the Swiss countryside and into southern Germany and beyond. But fierce repression followed and accompanied the vigorous growth, and the three most prominent leaders—Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, and George Blaurock—spent their share of time sitting in prison. They eventually found that they could not control the movement they had begun.

With growth came a divergence of multiple visions for the church. Balthasar Hubmaier and his followers supported the use of the sword for Christians. Some denied the validity of “outward signs” such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and some even claimed that since the Spirit set them free from the “letter,” the Bible itself was now superfluous—and they threw their New Testaments into the stove. Some—perhaps influenced by Protestant theologians such as Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito—claimed that since they were “believers” and had “faith and love,” they could do whatever they pleased without harm to their salvation. Without the unifying force of a compelling and Scriptural vision, the movement threatened to degenerate and collapse.

Thankfully, God sent a man to champion that vision, to bring unity around it, and to embody it. His name was Michael Sattler.

Born about 1490, Michael Sattler joined the Benedictine Order of monks as a young man and eventually became prior, the second-highest position of authority in the monastery. However, he eventually grew disillusioned with the monastic life. “When God called me to testify to His Word,” he said at his trial, “and I read Paul, I considered the unchristian and dangerous estate in which I had been, in view of the pomp, pride, usury, and great fornication of the monks and priests. I therefore obeyed and took a wife according to the command of God.”^[1] Unfortunately, we know very little of the circumstances of Sattler’s departure from the monastery and the Roman Catholic Church, but we do know that he married a woman named Margaretha, who herself had been a member of the Beguines, a semi-monastic women’s group, and that he found his way to Zürich in late 1525.

Why Sattler came to Zürich is unknown, as is what he did when he arrived. He may have attended the second disputation on baptism, November 6–8, 1525. In any case, his activities must have indicated an interest in Anabaptism since he was arrested and put on trial with the Anabaptists after the disputation. Apparently not yet baptized, Sattler swore an oath of loyalty to the Zürich government, paid the costs of his imprisonment, and was released.

Sattler seems to have maintained an interest in Anabaptism throughout the next several months, and sometime in the summer of 1526, he submitted himself to the cross of believer’s baptism. By June 1526, he was evangelizing and baptizing and proved a capable and articulate Anabaptist theologian.

Near the end of 1526, he went to the German city of Strasbourg (now in France), where he interacted with the Zwinglian reformers Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito. Anabaptists were being held in prison for their faith in the city, among them Sattler’s friend, Jacob Gross. Sattler pled with the preachers for mercy for his friends, seeking their release from imprisonment. The Zwinglian preachers treated Sattler with respect, and they even admired him even though they disagreed with his beliefs. “He demonstrated at all times an excellent zeal for the honor of God and the church of Christ, which he desired to see righteous and honorable, free of vices, irreproachable, and to be by their righteous life a help to those who are without,” Capito later wrote. “This intention we never reprimanded but rather praised and encouraged.” Sattler tried to convince them of the validity of a pure church, separated from the world and its wickedness. It was entered into by a voluntary commitment in believers’ baptism and kept pure by church discipline. To the reformers, this sounded like legalism. To Sattler, the corrupt life of the state church made it unthinkable that its preachers could possibly be right. Capito wrote, “But since besides in addition to our faithful teaching and that of other preachers there may well be shortcomings

among the people who claim to be Christian, a life found to be offensive, it was for this reason, if I understand, that he took so little to heart what we basically argued to clarify the truth.”^[2]

In response to all his pleas for obedience to the words of Scripture with regards to baptism, nonresistance, and separation from the world, the Strasbourg reformers argued that since love is the end of the law (1 Tim. 1:5), thus “love” must govern all things and all observance of Scriptural commands. By this, they meant that if some were yet offended by discontinuing infant baptism, it should be continued for the sake of “love.”

Sattler could not accept such a plea. He saw in the Scriptures that believers are to be Christ-like; thus, what He did and commanded, they should also do. God’s kingdom is in opposition to the kingdom of the world and the devil; the two are separate and can have nothing to do with each other. Thus, to follow Christ in nonresistance, for example, is not something *optional*; the members of Christ’s body *must* be minded as the Head, Christ, is.

Finally, Sattler realized that neither side was going to give in, and he felt he needed to leave the city. He wrote a farewell letter to the Zwinglian preachers, giving twenty reasons that “hinder me, dear brothers, from understanding your general assertion on every subject which you advocate with the words of Paul cited above,” referring to their use of 1 Timothy 1:5. Beginning with how faith in Christ reconciles us with God and gives access to Him, Sattler put forward baptism as the act which incorporates believers into Christ’s body, the church, of which He is the Head. The members of this church must be minded as the Head is minded and conformed to His image. The world, under the rule of the devil, is against the kingdom of Christ, and its citizens hate Christ’s citizens. Christians are those who have *gelassenheit*, full submission, and yieldedness to God; thus, they trust Him rather than physical weapons. True Christians, Sattler says, are those “who practice in deed the teaching of Christ.” The world cannot comprehend the kingdom of Christ; “There is nothing in common between Christ and Belial.”^[3]

The two-kingdom concept and the separation of these two kingdoms from each other comes out in this letter as central to Sattler’s thought. The kingdom of Christ is defined by faith, yieldedness (*gelassenheit*), and a growing into Christlikeness and obedience to Christ’s teachings. The devil’s kingdom, on the other hand, is defined by darkness, force, persecution, destruction, and a lack of comprehension of Christ’s kingdom.

Sattler left Strasbourg and continued evangelizing. Yet by this time, the disunity and confusion among those who had accepted believer’s baptism could not have escaped his notice, and he could not have been the only one concerned by the situation. Someone—perhaps Sattler himself, perhaps someone else—came up with the idea of calling a conference of Anabaptists to meet and come to agreement on their basic beliefs and come to unity on controversial issues like nonresistance. Schleithem on the Border, north of Zürich and not far from the former Anabaptist strongholds of Waldshut and Schaffhausen, was chosen as the location for the meeting.

Sadly, almost nothing is known about the events of the Schleithem Conference, nor do we know who attended it. We do know that the delegates came to agreement and unity, and that their shared convictions were written down as the Schleithem Confession—which they titled *Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles*.

Michael Sattler probably wrote the confession itself, but it reflects the conclusions of the group. Sattler also wrote a cover letter for the confession, explaining the meeting and its purpose for those who had not attended. The cover letter said that “A very great offense has been introduced by certain false brethren among us, so that some have turned aside from the faith, in the way they intend to practice and observe the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ.”^[4] This freedom, however, was not the freedom of Christ: “such have missed the truth and to their condemnation are given over to the lasciviousness and self-indulgence of the flesh. They think faith and love may do and permit everything, and nothing will harm them nor condemn them, since they are believers.”

In seven articles, the assembled group described its agreement and unity. The first three articles describe the composition of the church; last three, the actions and ethics of the church. The first article, on baptism, states that baptism would be given only to those who had “learned repentance and amendment of life” and who “walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him.” This made entrance into the church via baptism

available only to those who had been truly born again, rather than, as in the case of infant baptism, to everyone—whether they would eventually follow Jesus or not.

Article 2 is on the ban, or excommunication. An examination was to be made before the Lord's Supper, "so that we may break and eat one bread, with one mind and in one love, and may drink of one cup." Those who "are baptized into the one body of Christ . . . yet who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin" should be admonished and, if unrepentant, should be excommunicated. This allows the congregation to share the Lord's Supper in unity. Article 3, on the Lord's Supper, allowed only baptized members of the "one body of Christ which is the church of God" to partake.

Articles 5–7 describe the ethics and actions of the church. Article 5 describes the qualifications and responsibilities of "shepherds" in the church. Article 6, "On the Sword," forbade officeholding, jury duty, and use of the sword to members of the church, since those responsibilities were "outside the perfection of Christ." Article 7 forbade the swearing of oaths.

Article 4, on separation from the world, comes in the center of the Schleithem Confession, and it philosophically and theologically undergirds the entire structure. The rest does not make sense without the foundational concepts of Article 4.

Central to Article 4 is the conviction that there are only two types of people in the world—believers and unbelievers.

A separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; in this manner, simply that we shall not have fellowship with them [the wicked] and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. This is the way it is: Since all who do not walk in the obedience of faith, and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do His will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who [have come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other.

Because of this, "To us then the command of the Lord is clear when He calls upon us to be separate from the evil and thus He will be our God and we shall be His sons and daughters."

Thus, the creation of a church like that described in the first three articles makes sense—composed of people who have been born again, have repented and changed their lives, who mutually admonish each other to avoid sin, and who live in peace, love, and unity (as symbolized in the Lord's Supper).

The meeting worked, bringing unity to the delegates and producing a document which they could use to bring their communities into unity with each other. "In this," Michael wrote, "we have perceived the oneness of the Spirit of our Father and of our common Christ with us." The conference had ended "completely at peace," and agreement had been made "without the contradiction of any brethren."

The Schleithem Confession was Michael Sattler's greatest contribution to the Anabaptist movement, but he did not have long to live after the conference. Following the meeting, he made his way to the town of Horb on the Neckar River, where he seems to have been accepted as the group's "shepherd." Within days of his arrival, however, he was arrested, along with his wife and several other Anabaptists in the town. While in prison, Sattler was questioned under torture and waited for months for a trial. During this time, he wrote a farewell letter to the congregation at Horb, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith and to avoid "false brethren." "Let no one shift your goal," he wrote, "which has been set in the letter of the Holy Scripture, which is sealed by the blood of Christ and of many witnesses of Jesus." He hoped they would "be found to be the humble, fruitful, and obedient children of God."^[5]

On May 17 and 18, 1527, nearly twenty Anabaptists were put on trial, including Michael and Margaretha Sattler. Sattler answered the charges bravely, but the sentence was never in doubt. Michael Sattler would be chained to a wagon, his tongue cut out, his flesh torn with red-hot tongs, and then he would be burned to death. Margaretha was sentenced to be drowned.

Before his punishment began, Sattler prayed aloud for his persecutors and encouraged others to pray for them as well. Finally, he prayed aloud, "Almighty eternal God, Thou who art the way and the truth, since I have not been taught otherwise by anyone, so by Thy help I will testify this day to the truth and seal it with my blood."^[6] When the ropes had burnt off his hands and they came free, he lifted them

up, pointing with the first two fingers toward heaven—a sign that had been agreed upon before, probably signaling his faithfulness to the end. He then cried out loudly, “Father, into thy hands I commend my soul!” [7]. [8]

On the evening of Monday, May 20, 1527, thin wisps of smoke rose from the small pile of ashes that was all that was left of Michael Sattler. His death—one of the most horrific which depraved and twisted human imagination can invent—would have made any future would-be Anabaptists think twice before accepting baptism, and any would-be teacher think twice before preaching or writing. To an outside observer, it could be expected that the movement would collapse. While the brilliance of his leadership could not be denied, he had only been a leader for less than a year, and now the movement was once again without him—in the same situation as it had been before he had come to prominence. Surely, the Anabaptists would once again be quarreling and would eventually come to nothing.

But Sattler’s leadership left behind something which far outlasted his bodily presence. His leadership had laid the foundation for stability and faithfulness for centuries to come, and his heroic and fearless defense and martyrdom lent credibility and validity to his convictions. In the following centuries, the Schleithem Confession and Michael Sattler’s writings have continued to be influential, but more significantly, Schleithem’s two-kingdom foundation endured to shape the worldview of the Swiss Brethren and thousands of Anabaptists since. Both in the convictions it articulated and the concepts it promoted, the Schleithem Confession gave definition to the movement which produced it, and defines the continuing descendants of that movement to this very day.

When as conservative Mennonites today we read the Schleithem Confession, at first glance, there is nothing there that really surprises us. That may be the strongest testimony to Sattler’s influence. His vision of the pure and holy church of God, separate from the world, eschewing the sword and oaths, and maintaining purity with believer’s baptism and church discipline, has survived the centuries and come down to us. It does not draw its power from the force of Sattler’s personality; it draws its power from the fact that it is founded upon the Scriptures.

“I appeal to Scripture!” Sattler had told his judges at his trial. Those words ring down the centuries and challenge us to maintain, promote, and pass on this scriptural vision.

~Andrew V Ste Marie

[1] John Howard Yoder, translator and editor, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, © 1973, Herald Press (Scottsdale, PA 15683), p. 72. Used by permission.

[2] Ibid., p. 87.

[3] Ibid., pp. 21-22

[4] All Schleithem quotes from John C. Wenger, “The Schleithem Confession of Faith,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19(4) (October 1945):243-253.

[5] Yoder, p. 60.

[6] Ibid., p. 75.

[7] Ibid., p. 78.

[8] Apparently only a part of his tongue, not his whole tongue, was cut out.