

CLASSICS  
OF THE  
RADICAL  
REFORMATION

Confessions  
of Faith in  
the Anabaptist  
Tradition  
1527–1660



**Confessions of Faith in the  
Anabaptist Tradition  
1527–1660**

## *Classics of the Radical Reformation*

Classics of the Radical Reformation is an English-language series of Anabaptist and Free Church documents translated and annotated under the direction of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, which is the research agency of the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, and published by Plough Publishing House.

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# Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660

Translated by  
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Edited with an Introduction by  
Karl Koop



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Published by Plough Publishing House  
Walden, New York  
Robertsbridge, England  
Elsmore, Australia  
www.plough.com

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ISBN: 978-0-874-86277-5

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Koop, Karl, 1959- editor.

Title: Confessions of faith in the Anabaptist tradition, 1527 - 1660 / translated by Karl Koop, Cornelius J. Dyck, James Jacob Fehr, Ivrin B. Horst, Walter Klaassen, Karl Koop, Werner O. Packull, John D. Rempel, Vic Thiessen, Gary K. Waite, John Howard Yoder ; edited with an introduction by Karl Koop.

Description: Walden, New York : Plough Publishing House, 2019. | Series: Classics of the radical Reformation ; 11 | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The volume brings together early statements of belief from across the Radical Reformation"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019044929 (print) | LCCN 2019044930 (ebook) | ISBN 9780874862775 (paperback) | ISBN 9780874862782 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Anabaptists--Creeds--Early works to 1800. | Anabaptists--Doctrines--Early works to 1800.

Classification: LCC BX4931.3 .C66 2019 (print) | LCC BX4931.3 (ebook) | DDC 238/.43--dc23  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019044929>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019044930>

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly,  
but then we will see face to face.  
Now I know only in part;  
then I will know fully,  
even as I have been fully known.”  
(1 Cor. 13:12, NRSV)

Dedicated with affection to students  
at AMBS and CMU,  
who have taught me much  
about my Christian convictions  
and commitments.

—Karl Koop

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>I Confessions of Swiss/South German Anabaptism</b>	
1 Congregational Order (1527?) <i>Translated by John Howard Yoder</i>	19
2 Schleithem Articles/Brotherly Union (1527) <i>Translated by John Howard Yoder</i>	23
3 A Confession of Faith by Jörg Maler (1554) <i>Translated by Victor Thiessen</i>	35
4 Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse (1578) <i>Translated by Werner O. Packull</i>	45
<b>II Confessions of North German/Dutch Anabaptism</b>	
<b>A. Confessions of the Lower Rhine and at Wismar</b>	
5 Kempen Confession (1545) <i>Translated by Karl Koop</i>	95
6 Wismar Articles (1554) <i>Translated by Cornelius J. Dyck</i>	109
7 Concept of Cologne (1591) <i>Translated by James Jakob Febr</i>	115

**B. *Waterlander Confessions***

8 Waterlander Confession (1577) <i>Translated by Cornelius J. Dyck</i>	123
9 Short Confession (1610) <i>Translated by Cornelius J. Dyck</i>	135
10 The Thirteen Articles (1626) <i>Translated by Cornelius J. Dyck</i>	157

**C. *Frisian, Flemish, and High German Confessions***

11 Thirty-Three Articles (1617) <i>Translated by Gary K. Waite</i>	165
12 The Confession of Jan Cents (1630) <i>Translated by Walter Klaassen</i>	267
13 Dordrecht Confession (1632) <i>Translated by Irvin B. Horst</i>	285
14 Prussian Confession (1660) <i>Translated by John D. Rempel and Karl Koop</i>	311

**Appendix**

The Nicene Creed (381)	331
The Apostles' Creed (700)	332

<b>Notes</b>	333
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<b>Scripture Index</b>	341
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# Classics of the Radical Reformation

## General Editor's Preface

We are now solidly into the third phase of the modern publication of sixteenth century Anabaptist source documents. Since the 1920s scholars working with German language texts, both treatises and court records, have issued meticulously annotated editions of seminal texts from the Radical Reformation. Early in the twentieth century and again more recently the similarly impressive publication of Dutch language sources has gained momentum.

Classics of the Radical Reformation (CRR) was inaugurated to make major selections from this literature available in translation with interpretive introductions for a broad English language readership.

Karl Koop's *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition* is the eleventh volume in the CRR series. It breaks new ground both in its subject matter and its span of time. Perplexingly little attention has been paid by twentieth century academics or church leaders to the Mennonite confessional tradition. Koop's masterful study documents this communal form of theologizing at an opportune time, when interest is rising in the development of Anabaptist thought beyond its first, formative generations. The publication of *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition* bodes well for the future of CRR.

It is an honor for me to write this general editor's preface as a successor to Cornelius J. Dyck, long time director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, and formative editor of the *Classics of the Radical Reformation*. His visionary and self-effacing scholarship was crucial to the publication of most of the previous volumes.

Arnold Snyder of Pandora Press, the publisher of the last two CRR volumes, has joined IMS in carrying forward this series in Dyck's

spirit. For this publishing partnership the staff of the Institute are deeply grateful.

John D. Rempel, Editor, CRR  
Institute of Mennonite Studies  
Elkhart, Indiana

## Editor's Acknowledgements

This volume is a collaborative effort involving several persons and institutions. I want to thank, first of all, the translators who worked diligently in producing excellent texts in translation. They are: Vic Thiessen, Werner O. Packull, Cornelius J. Dyck, James Jakob Fehr, Gary K. Waite, Walter Klaassen, Irvin B. Horst and John Rempel. Translation work by the late John Howard Yoder is also included in this volume. The translations were reviewed and revised as needed, but the final outcome in this volume is essentially the work of the translators.

Special thanks goes to Adriaan Plak, Curator of Church History Collections at the University of Amsterdam, and to Joe Springer, Curator at the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College, for helping to locate early print editions of the 1660 Prussian confession of faith. Victor Kliever was also very helpful in transcribing an early manuscript of this same confessional statement.

This volume was accepted for publication in the *Classics of the Radical Reformation* series. I wish to express my appreciation to the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary for its continuing interest and support of making radical reformation texts available in the English language. I am grateful for the encouragement that I have received from John Rempel, editor of the series. AMBS was accommodating in granting me a course release that allowed me to carry on with my own translation work, and also enabled me to give more attention to the managing of this project. Canadian Mennonite University was generous in providing a faculty research grant that made it possible to rework some of the formatting of the translated texts. Finally, I wish to thank Arnold Snyder of Pandora Press, who was willing to publish this achievement, and who provided helpful editorial assistance throughout.

xii *Editor's Acknowledgements*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Confessions of faith have been an integral dimension of Anabaptist expression. Anabaptists affirmed ancient creedal formulas, especially the Apostles' Creed, and produced their own confessional statements summarizing the essentials of the faith. The first adult baptisms took place in January 1525 in Zürich, and already by 1527 Swiss Anabaptists adopted a seven-article statement of faith entitled the "Brotherly Union," sometimes referred to as the "Schleitheim Confession" that included articles on baptism, church discipline, the Lord's Supper, separation from the world, church leadership, the use of force, and oath swearing.<sup>2</sup> Almost two decades later another group of Anabaptists in the Lower Rhine region produced a summary statement referred to as the "Kempfen Confession." Created in 1545, this document included articles on the incarnation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, church leadership, the secular authorities, and the use of force.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1577 and 1632, Mennonite communities in the Netherlands produced an unusually high number of confessional statements, and several of them were brought together in two separate collections published in 1665 and 1666.<sup>4</sup> In subsequent years single confessional statements or collections were reprinted "so that altogether over 100 printings were in circulation by the end of the eighteenth century."<sup>5</sup> These documents were produced during an era following the Reformation that historians have identified as "the confessional age," an era of identity formation when most churches in Europe were seeking to make explicit the central tenets of the faith. Anabaptist groups, especially in northern Europe, were drawn into the spirit of this "confessional age" and many communities in the region formulated doctrinal statements to reinforce internal doctrinal cohesion, to facilitate discussions between groups seeking to unite, and to foster ecumenical

## 2 Introduction

witness. For the Dutch Mennonites, the confessional age came to an end after the 1660s due to the influences of the early enlightenment, the rise of early pietism, and in reaction to a strict confessionalism that threatened the unity of the church. Yet, Anabaptist communities especially in the regions of Prussia, Poland and southern Russia, continued to produce an abundance of confessional statements.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that adherents of Anabaptism produced more confessions of faith than any other Protestant stream.<sup>7</sup>

This volume contains a collection of representative confessions of faith in translation that Anabaptist and Mennonite communities produced from 1527 to 1660, representing an early phase in Anabaptist-Mennonite doctrinal development. While not exhaustive, the present compilation includes some of the most significant confessional statements of Swiss/South German and North German/Dutch Anabaptism. Many of these confessions have shaped and molded the Anabaptist theological tradition far beyond the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Also incorporated at the back of this volume are the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds. Anabaptists often affirmed these statements, especially the Apostles' Creed, in conversation with others when they were asked to explain the content of their faith. They are included as a point of reference for readers wishing to draw comparisons between the Anabaptist confessions and this classical creedal tradition.

### **Confessions of Faith and Anabaptist Scholarship**

It has sometimes been assumed that Anabaptists were non-creedal and non-confessional, that they emphasized ethics rather than doctrine, that their theology was implicit rather than explicit. Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that scholars have often failed to recognize the significance of the confessional tradition. Beyond the introductory encyclopaedic summary of Christian Neff in the *Mennonitisches Lexikon*,<sup>8</sup> the only study on confessions to materialize in the first half of the twentieth century was Emil Händiges' short monograph, *Die Lehre der Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, in which Mennonite doctrines were examined on the basis of several

Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions.<sup>9</sup> In the decades that followed, translations and editions of individual confessions of faith were forthcoming, and brief theological commentaries on some of these statements emerged, but generally speaking scholarly energies in Europe and in North America were focussed elsewhere, or reflected a level of ambivalence toward the study of confessions. For instance, the Dutch historian, Nanne van der Zijpp, upon acceptance of the position of lecturer at the Mennonite seminary in Amsterdam in 1954, found little positive to say about Mennonite confessional statements. While recognizing that Mennonites went through a confessional period, van der Zijpp—along with other Mennonite historians like Wilhelmus J. Kühler and Hendrick W. Meihuizen, who believed that the true Anabaptist-Mennonite legacy was one that emphasized the inner, spiritual, and individual Christian life—claimed that Mennonite confessional statements were intended merely to bring about unity and were applicable only for a particular era.<sup>10</sup> As to contents, the confessions did not present a complete Christian teaching of faith, but reflected mainly the questions that preoccupied the groups that were seeking to unite. Van der Zijpp also believed that the confessions were poorly formulated because “their originators hardly ever were trained theologians.”<sup>11</sup> For him, paying significant attention to Mennonite confessional statements did not seem to be a worthwhile endeavour. Van der Zijpp and others recognized that Mennonites wrote confessions of faith but held that the exercise of writing such statements was not consonant with the genuine spirit of Anabaptism and Mennonitism.

In North America an explicitly negative assessment of the Anabaptist-Mennonite confessional tradition was mainly absent. The *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, published in the 1950s contained a substantial article on Mennonite confessions of faith by Christian Neff, J. C. Wenger and Harold S. Bender.<sup>12</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck contributed to the field of study through his translation work of several confessions of faith produced by the Waterlander Mennonites.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars contributed studies on the Schleithem articles of the Swiss Brethren. Still, the notion that Anabaptists were “noncreedal,” “antireedal” or had an “anti-confessional bias,” also persisted among North American scholars.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4 Introduction

The Dutch historian and theologian, Sjouke Voolstra, has attributed the anti-confessional attitude among Dutch Mennonites in previous years to a number of historical factors such as a mixture of early pietism and Enlightenment rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, as well as liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Similar influences affected North American Mennonites, but anti-confessional attitudes in the middle of the twentieth century may be best explained by examining Anabaptist historiography following World War II.

It is widely recognized that Harold S. Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" influenced historical writing and theological reflection during this period. Bender, a professor of history at Goshen College in Indiana, set out to rehabilitate the Anabaptists in a vigorous and public fashion, and he achieved this principally through his now well-known essay entitled "The Anabaptist Vision," published in 1944.<sup>16</sup> Instead of viewing Anabaptism as a heretical movement—which is how it had been seen by most non-Mennonite historians since the sixteenth century—Bender argued that Anabaptism was the culmination of sixteenth-century reform. The Anabaptists fulfilled the original visions of Luther and Zwingli, and sought "to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles."<sup>17</sup> "Anabaptism proper" had its genesis and locus in Switzerland, and from there it expanded to other regions of Europe.<sup>18</sup> The central features of the movement were, first, "a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance."<sup>19</sup>

Bender's "Vision" was compelling particularly for Mennonite historians and leaders of Mennonite churches. Not only was it a description of sixteenth century Anabaptism but also a treatise that re-defined contemporary Mennonite identity in new, attractive ways. In trying to stay clear of what seemed to be the prevailing options for North American Mennonites—fundamentalism, revivalism, and liberalism—Bender provided an alternative: a return to Anabaptism with attention to the concept of discipleship and a focus on values such as community and peace.

It was perhaps the liberation from fundamentalism that was most appealing in Bender's "Vision." In the first decades of the twentieth-century, in both Canada and the United States, Mennonites were influenced by a fundamentalist mood that was alienating especially for those who were becoming part of the North American mainstream. Bender's thesis allowed Mennonites to break free from what was perceived to be an oppressive dogmatism, while still remaining true to their own heritage.

As A. James Reimer has pointed out, Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" was couched in ethical terms.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, "the early Anabaptists emphasized not primarily intellectual understanding, doctrinal belief, or subjective experience, but rather a regenerate life best described by the term 'Nachfolge Christi'".<sup>21</sup> This description reflected the position of a generation of scholars, who saw the Anabaptist tradition making a contribution in ethics rather than doctrine. The Anabaptists were hailed for their willingness to challenge Constantinian Christianity, their willingness to form egalitarian communities, and their willingness to obey Jesus Christ and follow him in life. They were studied and admired for their orthopraxis—their concern to live rightly—not their orthodoxy.

Not surprisingly, scholars affected by this climate of opinion viewed Anabaptist confessional developments with little interest. They considered confessions to be a part of a genre that seemed to contradict the early Anabaptist emphasis on practical living. In addition, it was recognized that the confessions had emerged primarily at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth centuries in the Netherlands—an era and even a geographical location perceived to be exhibiting characteristics of spiritual decline, judged to be far removed from the golden age of Anabaptist origins. Hence, for North American scholars, fed by the presuppositions of the "Anabaptist Vision," studies in Mennonite confessional developments from the Netherlands were not very relevant or interesting.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, Anabaptist research, reflecting larger trends in Reformation historiography, shifted somewhat away from denominational interests and moved in the direction of understanding Anabaptism in social-historical terms. Historians, appropriating tools of scientific research, developed what came to be known as a "polygenesis"

## 6 Introduction

paradigm that described Anabaptism as a heterogeneous movement with distinctive origins: the Swiss, the south German-Austrian, and the north German-Dutch.<sup>22</sup> Anabaptism was understood not only or even primarily in ecclesiastical-religious terms, but in social-political ones, linked closely to the aspirations of the commoner. The polygenesis paradigm served to correct earlier assumptions dominating the Bender era, for example, that Anabaptism was primarily a monolithic reforming movement begun in Zurich Switzerland, or that Anabaptism was the culmination of the Reformation, fulfilling the original vision of Luther and Zwingli. The new approach was a fruitful corrective, in that studies were directed to more specific geographical areas, resulting in more nuanced and differentiated conclusions. No longer could historians describe Anabaptism credibly, without first making careful distinctions concerning which branch and specific period was under consideration. Neither could historians ascribe primacy or normativity to any one tradition. During the Bender era, the Swiss tradition was often viewed as the most pristine or genuine form of Anabaptism. With the passing of the “Anabaptist Vision” paradigm the north German and Dutch heritage could stand in its own right.<sup>23</sup>

As helpful as the polygenesis paradigm was in terms of describing Anabaptist origins and diversity, however, it did not encourage scholars to reflect on Anabaptist-Mennonite confessional developments.<sup>24</sup> Students of the paradigm were more inclined to address the social and historical causes lying *behind* Anabaptist theological suppositions, than the theological suppositions themselves. In addition, polygenesis research focused mainly on examining Anabaptist origins but did not contribute significant insight beyond the developments of the beginning years. While fascinating and crucial for an understanding of radical reform in the sixteenth century, this kind of concentrated investigation was not useful in understanding change and development among the various Anabaptist reforming movements over time. In fairness to the historians of this era, it must be pointed out that the polygenesis paradigm was never meant to be a comprehensive approach. Yet, it sometimes functioned like one, with the result that the Anabaptist field as a whole continued to be weak in producing scholarly material beyond the first decades of the movement.

In recent years, leading exponents of the polygenesis paradigm have moved beyond the study of origins, and have given more attention to developments among second generation Anabaptists. There has also been a renewed interest in theological questions with some studies considering the Anabaptist and Mennonite confessional legacy. In the mid 1980s, Howard John Loewen produced a compendium of North America Mennonite confessions in a volume entitled *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith*. In his work, Loewen sought to move beyond polygenesis scholarship and suggested that there was a consistent theological centre in the confessions that contributed “to a truly integrative pluralism in the Mennonite family of faith.”<sup>25</sup> Karl Koop came to similar conclusions in his historical and systematic investigations of early seventeenth century confessions entitled *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition*, emphasizing that, while diverse and evolving, early seventeenth century Mennonite confessions of faith represented an identifiable and coherent theological trajectory that was in continuity with sixteenth century Anabaptism.<sup>26</sup>

Motivated by these earlier studies, the present volume seeks to bring together for the first time a representative collection of confessions produced by Anabaptist groups from 1527 to 1660. Included are confessions from the Swiss Brethren, the Marpeck circle, the Rhinelanders, and various Mennonite communities in the north referred to as Waterlanders, Frisians, Flemish, and High Germans. Unlike Loewen’s compendium that focused on confessional statements used principally by North American communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the present collection attends to the earliest phase of Anabaptist and Mennonite confessional writing in Europe, laying bare the foundations that set the stage for later confessional developments. The volume also includes introductions to each of the confessions, bringing into view the specific context out of which each doctrinal statement emerged.

## **Function**

Some general observations about how confessions of faith in general have functioned is worth noting. In the first centuries of the church's existence, Christian communities used confessional documents in the context of worship, confession of sin, catechetical preparation and baptism. As theological controversies intensified, confessions were also used to define right doctrine. The church felt compelled to define the parameters of orthodox belief especially for the clergy. It was no longer sufficient simply to confess that one believed in Jesus Christ; it became necessary to confess in a more specific manner, what it was that one believed about this Christ. This concern for doctrinal orthodoxy was further heightened in the Middle Ages when ecclesiastical authorities became more centralized, and when Church and Empire moved closer together. In this context statements of faith took on not only an ecclesial but also a political function with universal authority, while the liturgical uses of the confessions became less important.

In the sixteenth century, Protestants likewise used their confessions to define right doctrine and in some cases their church statements became legal documents sanctioned by the state, to serve as instruments of political and ecclesial unity. Historians have used terms such as "confessionalism" and "confessionalization" to describe the incisive development that penetrated virtually every aspect of European society and propelled Europeans forward into the modern age. While some historians have identified this period as occurring between 1560 and 1650, it is evident that the beginnings of the confessional age were observable as early as the 1520s and that its development extended well beyond the seventeenth century.<sup>27</sup>

The confessional age shaped the churches above all. Heinz Schilling has noted that where the Reformation succeeded, the confessional era "witnessed institutional reconstruction of doctrine and liturgy in a great burst of church ordinances, confessional statements and confessional alliances."<sup>28</sup> These developments were apparent especially in central Europe in Protestant territorial states and free cities where the boundaries between Lutheranism and Calvinism were yet to be clarified. The confessional age saw changes in church structures and

practices, and influenced the way in which doctrine functioned within the churches. After years of creativity and change, the churches felt driven to consolidate, to explicate and elaborate the essentials of the faith. Not only by means confessions of faith and catechisms, but also through the spoken word, the production of martyrologies, hymn writing and devotional materials, Christians of the various Reformation traditions sought to define who they were vis-à-vis one another. This approach to communications fit well during the Renaissance and early modern period when symbolic and visual approaches of communication were often put aside in favour of more word-oriented modes, supported by the invention of the Gutenberg printing press and the rise of literacy among Europeans. The drive for consolidation during the confessional age was conserving in character, and the outcome was not always constructive in that the strategies employed by the churches often drove a wedge between Christian communities. Yet, confessional writing could also lead to a process of creative theologizing that could help communities face the challenges of their time.

In this larger milieu Anabaptists drafted and adopted confessional statements as a way of bolstering internal cohesion and preserving theological distinctives. Sometimes confessional statements were also used as instruments of unity between groups that were seeking to overcome differences. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch, more than any other Anabaptist group, felt the need to write confessional documents (hence the relatively long list of Dutch confessions included in this volume). The churches had split into numerous factions and the need for reconciliation and reunion was urgent. In addition, Dutch Anabaptists were no longer persecuted, unlike their forebears or their Anabaptist relatives in other parts of Europe. While this growing acceptance of Anabaptism was preferable to an earlier age of intolerance, the new world with its pluralisms and competing worldviews was fraught with difficulties. In response, the Anabaptist communities in the north saw the need to summarize the essentials of the faith beyond the summary statements of Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Definable communities of discourse had emerged, led by leaders who had the skills to reflect systematically about the faith. The writing of confessions was thus a natural unfolding

of a movement that was fast becoming established, requiring instruments of support necessary for survival in a changing social, political, and religious context.

### **Authority**

Historians have variously assessed the extent to which Anabaptist confessions of faith were authoritative in the sixteenth and seventeenth century period. With reference to the confessions in northern Europe, Nanne van der Zijpp maintained that Mennonite confessional statements were merely instruments of unity, while Cornelius J. Dyck gave the confessional statements broader significance, noting that even among the liberal Waterlanders, confessions of faith were given serious consideration.<sup>29</sup> Arnold Snyder observed that the doctrines of the Schleithem Confession played a formative role in the development of Swiss Anabaptism.<sup>30</sup>

That Anabaptists took their doctrinal statements of faith seriously, however, is not to suggest that the statements carried the same authoritative weight in their churches as the confessions of faith did in the Catholic or Protestant churches. In Reformation times the confessions adopted by the mainstream churches were eventually sanctioned and enforced by political authorities. In contrast, the Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions of faith never had this kind of political or ecclesial status. Without centralized ecclesial authority and without political approval, confessional statements depended on congregation assent. As historian Piet Visser has noted, the confessions of one particular Anabaptist group, the Waterlanders, had representative, rather than constitutive authority. They were authoritative only in so far as they were consonant with Scripture and reflected agreement in the congregations, often requiring widespread approval.<sup>31</sup> The Waterlanders appear to have recognized the potentially abusive power of their confessional statements. They did not want to take their statements lightly but were adamant in some of their writings that confessions of faith should be placed under the authority of Scripture and subordinate to the unity of the Christian community.<sup>32</sup>

This positioning of the confessional statements in relation to Scripture and Christian unity was not always maintained in northern Europe, and less moderate voices gained prominence, which led to an unfortunate conflict that some observers labelled “the War of the Lambs.” This conflict erupted at a time when questions concerning identity were at the forefront of the Dutch Mennonites. Fearing cultural assimilation and growing secularization, some leaders saw the need for greater discipline within the churches and called for greater accountability and loyalty to the confessions of the church. In 1649 a major faction of the Flemish leadership met several times to discuss issues of leadership and authority. While maintaining that ultimate authority resides in the Word of God, they came to the conclusion that unity with groups such as the Waterlanders could only proceed on the basis of the confessions of faith that had been adopted in previous years.

Yet, not everyone was comfortable with the exclusion of the Waterlanders, and not everyone wanted to define the church in such narrow terms. In 1657, two leaders in the Flemish Mennonite church in Amsterdam, Galenus Abrahamsz. and David Spruyt, presented a nineteen-article manuscript which denied that any church could be the one true church. They argued that church leaders should conform solely to New Testament principles and not demand absolute conformity in doctrinal and other church matters.

An attempt to resolve the dispute was made in 1660 under the chairmanship of Thieleman Jansz. van Braght whereupon the Flemish determined that a single, new and authoritative confession of faith based on the older confessions should be formulated, and that Galenus Abrahamsz. and David Spruyt should be asked to conform to the teachings of the church or give up their ministry. The two Amsterdam preachers, however, refused these alternatives, arguing that only their local congregation, not a meeting of congregations, had the authority to make such decisions. An attempt to influence the Amsterdam congregation failed since many members did not share the views of the larger body. The acrimony reached new heights when David Spruyt proclaimed from the pulpit that “synods and the like were the work of the Antichrist.”<sup>33</sup>

The confessionalists held their ground and soon took further action. Thieleman Janz. van Braght released his martyr book, the *Bloedigh Tooneel* (the *Bloody Theater*) known in the English-speaking world as the *Martyrs Mirror*.<sup>34</sup> He had been working on his martyr-project for some time, which was essentially a work building on the martyr tradition a century earlier, begun by Jan Hendricks van Schoorewoerd and substantially revised by Hans de Ries.<sup>35</sup> Van Braght's edition was intended to call the church back to the faithfulness of the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs at a time when, in his view, Mennonites were succumbing to worldly pleasures and distractions. But in issuing his martyrology, van Braght was also advancing the confessionalist cause. His introduction in the *Martyrs Mirror* included the Apostles' Creed as well as three Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions of faith. By placing the creed and the confessions together in this way, van Braght was making the point that Mennonite confessional statements were in continuity with the first Christians and with all the faithful throughout the centuries, including the Anabaptist saints who had died for their steadfast faith. The confessions, van Braght argued, "might seem in superficial ways to be different, but, as was the case with the whole tradition of Christianity since the time of the first persecutions, all orthodox confessions elaborated on the same unchanging beliefs."<sup>36</sup>

This use of the martyr tradition did not impress van Braght's opponents, and the dispute and the theological debate widened. Eventually the conflict spread throughout much of Holland and into other Dutch provinces. When in the spring of 1664 the differences of opinion could not be resolved the two factions moved apart; the confessionalists came to be known as Zonists, the anti-confessionalists came to be known as Lamists. The Zonists worked toward church unity on the basis of the confessional tradition, a new constitution, and a five-article document requiring preachers and deacons to conform to the principles of the confessions; the Lamists sought unity through common adherence to the Bible. Over time the tension between the two factions diminished, although the Zonists and the Lamists remained divided until the early nineteenth century. Evidently, while confessions could sometimes be quite helpful in facilitating unity between groups

that wanted to unite, the unfolding story of the Mennonite confessions suggests that they could also become instruments of division.

### **Theological Orientation**

Like most other confessional statements of the Reformation period, the Anabaptist confessions include an abundance of Scripture references as a way of validating doctrinal views. An investigation into the way in which Scripture is used in the confessions of faith indicates that Anabaptist communities of this time period had a profound knowledge of biblical literature. It is also the case that they often appropriated biblical references as “proof texts” in ways that might seem highly questionable in our time.

Most of the confessions in this volume include the whole range of Christian doctrine and reflect views generally held by other Christians. Nevertheless, in the common loci of Christian belief and in specific areas of Christian conduct, Anabaptists often appropriated their own particular language and produced their own distinct theological accent. For instance, while acknowledging the sovereignty of God, the confessions generally emphasize that human beings have a free will and therefore have the capacity to choose between good and evil. The experience of salvation includes personal regeneration and a new birth which is expressed concretely in daily discipleship. Discipleship, in turn, is based not only on the teachings but also the life of Christ; it is not an option for a select few but an essential characteristic of all Christians.

The church is understood to be the body of Christ, called into being by God. It is a voluntary gathering of spiritually regenerated Christians, who follow Christ’s teaching and example. Entry into this body takes place through baptism, based on personal faith in Christ; it is a rite that symbolizes the new birth that the individual experiences inwardly through faith. The Supper, which takes place in the presence of Christ, is a memorial of Christ’s death and sacrifice, and symbolizes the unity and fellowship of the Christian community. Accountability within the Christian community is maintained through church discipline, which is intended primarily to bring the sinner to repentance

and renewed fellowship with other believers. Christians are to relate to the world in a peaceable manner; violence and warfare is reject, as well as the swearing of oaths.

That the Anabaptist confessions reflect these theological accents is not to suggest, however, that they are uniform. The confessions diverge on topics such as revelation, the incarnation, the inner and outer dimensions of the sacraments, the visibility and invisibility of the church, and the practice of church discipline. In addition, changes in language and doctrinal perspective over time, even within particular communities, indicate that the confessions represent not a fixed, but rather a dynamic and developing theological tradition. Later editions do not always mirror the contents of earlier editions. Evidently, Anabaptist communities have not hesitated to change or “improve” earlier formulations. While many of the essential commitments of the Anabaptist community have not changed, the contexts in which the confessions were used were in constant flux and clearly led to certain revisions.<sup>37</sup> This calls attention to the provisional quality of Christian theology, even as one may choose to acknowledge its divine revelatory character or the universal nature of its truth. Christian theology is always context-dependent, shaped by historical developments and beset by human limitation.

A central question that has divided scholars has to do with the nature of Anabaptist theology as it relates to the wider Christian tradition. In his study of early sixteenth century Anabaptism, Harold Bender placed the Anabaptists primarily in Protestant company. He argued that Anabaptism was a radical break with Catholic history and culture, and that it was in fact “the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli”<sup>38</sup> and thus represented a consistent evangelical Protestantism that sought to faithfully recreate the original New Testament church. Bender’s argument was in part directed against interpretations of the past that proposed that the Anabaptists represented a continuation of late-medieval mystical or ascetic traditions, or that they perpetuated humanist sentiments.

The connection between the wider Christian tradition and Anabaptism has been revisited by historians such as Kenneth Davis and Arnold Snyder, who have argued that there was a close connection between Anabaptism and medieval asceticism. Davis has maintained

that Christian Erasmianism mediated the ascetic principles of the *Devotio Moderna* to Anabaptism. To a lesser degree, a more “practical, activist, ascetic tradition was also mediated to Anabaptism through the influence of the *Theologia Germanica* and indirectly (perhaps even directly in Anabaptism’s initial urban thrust) through the Franciscan Tertiary movement.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Arnold Snyder, in an essay on Anabaptist spirituality, has observed that Anabaptism was “*fundamentally* ascetic and Catholic, and only *superficially* Protestant.”<sup>40</sup> More recently, Snyder has noted that while the Anabaptists did not feel at home in either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, spiritual ideals common in monasticism and late medieval piety as well as Protestant reforming ideas shaped Anabaptist views.<sup>41</sup>

An examination of the confessions of faith in this volume should call attention to the fact that it is impossible to unhinge Anabaptism from the broader Christian world—both Catholic *and* Protestant. Anabaptist communities were never able to jump back 1,500 years of history and reject the mediation of tradition, nor were they able to develop their theology in isolation from the surrounding religious milieu, which was both Catholic and Protestant in character. And, of course, no confessional statements were produced by Anabaptist groups without the influence of wider historical, social and cultural factors. The confessions were products of their time, fashioned by multiple issues and specific concerns.

When reading these statements that reflect the views of several different Anabaptist communities we would do well not to overestimate their importance. Confessional statements may tell us something about the ideal convictions of a community or its leadership, but doctrinal statements, by themselves, do not tell us how people actually lived. We ought to recognize, moreover, that Anabaptist communities, like most communities of the Reformation era, produced other kinds of literature besides confessions of faith, such as catechisms, martyrologies, hymns, liturgies, devotional writings, and various other theological treatises, from which much insight can be gained from the past. Nevertheless, confessions of faith should not be underestimated either. They are a significant genre of literature with many of the confessions representing core convictions that Anabaptist communities have held

## 16 *Introduction*

for centuries. Collectively, the confessions of faith in this volume bring into view the Anabaptist theological tradition in its early phase, and have the potential to shed light on the character of contemporary Anabaptism.

# I

## **Confessions of Swiss/ South German Anabaptism**

# 1

## Congregational Order (1527?)

### Introduction

Congregational orders in Anabaptism usually reflected patterns of practical living and church discipline. Probably the oldest Anabaptist congregational order, this Swiss document may well have predated the Schleithem Articles. Details, such as frequent gatherings, a common meal, and celebration of the Lord's Supper, point to a congregational life that was relatively public, which would have been possible only briefly, at the very beginning of the Anabaptist movement, before persecution drove Anabaptists underground or into exile.

No authorship is given, nor is it possible to identify in certain terms which congregations might have adopted this document, although conditions for practicing the faith in accordance with this Swiss Congregational Order may have been suitable for a time in towns such as Zollikon, and in territories such as St. Gall and Appenzell.

While John Howard Yoder has suggested an historic linkage to the Schleithem Articles, it is likely that it circulated as an independent document. Unlike Schleithem, the Order does not include any details about baptism, the ban, or about separation, and it appears to advocate a different leadership structure. Further, the document appears to promote a different set of economic practices with its emphasis on community of goods based on a reading of Acts 2 and 4. In this connection, James Stayer believes that Swiss Anabaptists who followed the practices of the Order not only pioneered the practice of community of goods, but also inspired other groups to follow similar economic practices.

Werner O. Packull, in his study of various congregational orders, has shown that this Order became the basis of *The Church Discipline* (1529?) used among Hutterites in Moravia, and the *Common Order* (1540?) used among Anabaptists associated with Pilgram Marpeck. Both of these documents appear to have been adapted and modified in their respective contexts, but originally influenced by this Swiss Congregational Order. That it was adapted in this manner underscores the fact that the Swiss influenced Anabaptists in the regions of Upper Germany, Austria and Moravia.

The Congregational Order is a practical document emerging from a young community that appears to be strongly democratic, open to the Spirit's leading, and optimistic about the reformation of church and society.

This translation, by John Howard Yoder, is based on unpublished materials received from Heinold Fast.

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## [Congregational Order]<sup>1</sup>

*Translated by John Howard Yoder*

Since the almighty eternal and merciful God has made His wonderful light break forth in this world and [in this] most dangerous time, we recognize the mystery of the divine will, that the Word is preached to us according to the proper ordering of the Lord, whereby we have been called into His fellowship. Therefore, according to the command of the Lord and the teachings of His apostles, in Christian order, we should observe the new commandment in love one toward another, so that love and unity may be maintained, which all brothers and sisters of the entire congregation should agree to hold to as follows:

1. The brothers and sisters should meet at least three or four time a week, to exercise themselves in the teaching of Christ and His apostles and heartily to exhort one another to remain faithful to the Lord as they have pledged.

2. When the brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it, the others should be still and listen, so that there are not two or three carrying on a private conversation, bothering the others. The Psalter shall be read daily at home.

3. Let none be frivolous in the church of God, neither in words nor in actions. Good conduct shall be maintained by them all also before the heathen.

4. When a brother sees his brother erring, he shall warn him according to the command of Christ, and shall admonish him in a Christian and brotherly way, as everyone is bound and obliged to do out of love.

22 *Congregational Order (1527?)*

5. Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need, and as in the apostles' time permit no brother to be in need.

6. All gluttony shall be avoided among the brothers who are gathered in the congregation; serve a soup or a minimum of vegetable and meat, for eating and drinking are not the kingdom of heaven.

7. The Lord's Supper shall be held, as often as the brothers are together, thereby proclaiming the death of the Lord, and thereby warning each one to commemorate, how Christ gave His life for us, and shed His blood for us, that we might also be willing to give our body and life for Christ's sake, which means for the sake of all the brothers.

