



# Love Is Like Fire

*The Confession of an  
Anabaptist Prisoner*

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Peter Riedemann

*Introduction by Stuart Murray*

# LOVE IS LIKE FIRE

The Confession of an Anabaptist Prisoner

**PETER RIEDEMANN**

*Written at Gmunden, Upper Austria  
between 1529 and 1532*

EDITED BY

EMMY BARTH MAENDEL



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LOVE IS LIKE FIRE –  
when it is first kindled in a person,  
small troubles and temptations smother  
and hinder it; but when it really burns,  
having kindled an eagerness for God,  
the more temptations and tribulations meet it,  
the more it flares, until it overcomes and consumes  
all injustice and wickedness.

*Peter Riedemann*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Stuart Murray*

**U**NLIKE EARLIER radical movements, whose writings were suppressed and eradicated, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists have bequeathed a rich legacy to future generations. The Hutterites in particular have preserved hundreds of hymns, letters written from prison, encouraging responses by church elders, and confessions of faith.

Peter Riedemann's *Love Is Like Fire* falls into this last category. Some years later he would write a much longer and more detailed confession, which would be adopted by the Hutterian Brethren as their community's statement of faith and practice, but this

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earlier confession by a courageous young prisoner reveals very clearly his passions and priorities.

Unlike many sixteenth-century texts, this confession is concise and eminently readable. This is deliberate. Riedemann writes, “I do not want to make my message too long-winded and thus too tedious to pay attention to.” Much of the confession consists of expositions of creedal statements shared by all Christians, amply illustrated with biblical quotations and the rehearsing of biblical narratives. Riedemann’s prose is lucid, passionate, and often poetic.

It is sometimes claimed that the early Anabaptists were non-creedal. They certainly preferred confessions to creeds: creeds were fixed, focused on beliefs rather than practices, and were so often used to anathematize others, whereas confessions were provisional, open to further revelation, and included issues of discipleship as well as doctrine. But many early Anabaptist communities made use of the traditional creeds to instruct their members, and many writers used them as a framework for their tracts and treatises. Riedemann employs this strategy. His confession deviates from this framework on several occasions in order to explore issues

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about which he was especially passionate or to challenge traditional beliefs and practices, but much of the confession is an exposition of traditional creedal affirmations.

ANOTHER FEATURE of Anabaptist spirituality is the role of narrative. Stories have been passed on down the generations and have profoundly shaped Anabaptist communities, and Anabaptists have paid particular attention to the narrative sections of scripture. So it is not surprising that Riedemann, as he expounds creedal statements, does so in narrative mode. Some sections of his confession consist in a straightforward and winsome rehearsal of the biblical narrative—the creation story, the fall of humanity, and the life of Jesus. The section on Jesus Christ is of particular significance. Traditional creeds say almost nothing about the life of Jesus, passing immediately from “born of the virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” with only a comma representing what happened in the intervening thirty-three years. One of the most important legacies of the Anabaptist tradition is its insistence that the life of Jesus is not just an incidental precursor to his death and resurrection but of paradigmatic

## INTRODUCTION

significance for those who would follow him. Riedemann summarizes the narratives in the Gospels and concludes: “He has gone before us so that we may follow in his footsteps.”

In our contemporary postmodern and post-Christendom culture, people prefer narrative over doctrinal claims. Many people still respect Jesus and are intrigued by his life and teaching despite their disdain for the church. And people find the language of “following” (typical of Anabaptist writings) helpfully humble and invitational. Although some of Riedemann’s language may seem rather dated, these central motifs are not.

*Love Is Like Fire* contains potent and evocative images. Commenting on the cosmic conflict that underlies the biblical story, Riedemann declares that “Satan had bound us so tightly with his ropes and stood like an armed man” but God “sent the strong hero, Jesus Christ our Lord, against whom no one can prevail,” who “burst the chain and the prison that held us.” Most Anabaptists have been committed to nonviolence, but their writings do not shy away from the reality of spiritual warfare. Riedemann recognizes that biblical interpretation is also a battleground: “There is a single phrase in scripture that the whole world holds on to and brings up tri-

## SETTING THE STAGE

**T**HE ANABAPTIST MOVEMENT sprang from the Reformation. In the midst of the theological debates that began when Martin Luther published his ninety-five theses in 1517, three men in Zurich, Switzerland, took a radical step in 1525: they baptized one another.

The Catholic Church of the sixteenth century was powerful and corrupt. Common people were unable to read the Bible for themselves, and the clergy grew rich on their tithes and taxes. The first Anabaptist leaders were well educated and able to read the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. They concluded that much of Catholic doctrine – including infant baptism, transubstantiation, worship of saints, and the sale of indulgences – was false teaching.

The movement spread rapidly through the German-speaking world. Rulers in church and government saw their authority threatened. They arrested

Anabaptists, banished them, and forbade them to preach, but were unable to quell the movement. It wasn't long before "rebaptism" was punishable by death. Yet in spite of persecution the movement continued to spread.

PETER RIEDEMANN was one of the early apologists of Anabaptism. He is best known for his "Confession of Our Religion, Teaching, and Faith,"<sup>1</sup> written in prison in 1540, which remains the most complete doctrinal statement of the Hutterian church. The shorter document contained in this book was written during an earlier incarceration, before Riedemann joined the Hutterites. About this imprisonment the Hutterian *Chronicle* reports simply:

In this year of 1529 many brothers were arrested in Upper Austria, and some were executed. Among those arrested was Peter Riedemann, born at Hirschberg in Silesia, a cobbler by trade, who was taken prisoner at Gmunden on St. Andrew's Eve (Nov. 29) in 1529. Although he was tortured through many and various means almost to the point of death, he remained faithful. Finally,

## THE LOVE OF GOD

**G**OD IN HIS ALMIGHTY POWER and *Gen 1:2*  
divine nature hovered in the wind before  
there was a place to stand and before the  
foundation of the world was laid; he, the infinite  
being, was alone in his glory. It seemed to him not  
enough to be alone, however, as there was nothing  
to praise and glorify his name, for he wanted praise.  
So in his wisdom, which endures forever and never  
changes, he created heaven and earth and filled *Gen 1:1*  
them with his glory – that is, with all creation, the  
work of his hands in which we recognize his invis- *Rom 1:20*  
ible being and eternal power, if we note and observe  
it. On looking at it, he declared that everything was *Gen 1:31*  
very good, made according to his will and without  
blemish. But among them all there was no creature  
able to give him the praise he wanted, so he said,  
“Let us make human beings in our image,” that *Gen 1:26*

is, beings who are perfectly pure and completely without blemish.

Then he made a man and a woman and gave them dominion over all the work of his hands, except the tree of life and of the knowledge of good and evil. Regarding this tree, he said, “When you eat of it you shall die.” But the human beings whom God had made for his praise soon turned away and forgot their Creator’s command and all the good things he had given them. They exchanged obedience for disobedience and ate of the forbidden fruit. This caused them to fall, and their descendants also, for the wrath of God came over them. As a result the earth, too, came under a curse, and as a punishment bore thistles and thorns where they had hoped for good. God had expected goodness and obedience from them, but they had been disobedient and caused thistles and thorns to grow. Therefore eternal death and damnation came over them and all their descendants, and it became impossible for any of them to attain what the one man, Adam, had lost – that is, God’s favor and grace; for the wrath of God had come upon them and they lay in the power of death under sin, as under a heavy load that none of them could lift. Only the one eternally powerful

*Gen 1:27-28*

*Gen 2:17*

*Gen 3:6*

*Gen 3:17-18*

God, against whom they had sinned, could do so through his dearly beloved Son.

But God in his very great wrath over us could not restrain and hide his love. This was impossible, for he himself is love. So he had to show himself and make himself known, and extend love to the human race, and after the curse give comfort once more through his promise. In order that man might have comfort and hope, he said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between your seed and the woman’s seed, and her seed will crush your head.” This seed is Christ our Savior, who crushed the serpent’s head, that is, robbed the devil of his power and dominion. *Gen 3:15*

What great love that is! God comforts us, his greatest enemies, with such a glorious and wonderful promise to free us from death (which we had willfully deserved) and give us everlasting life freely, without our earning or deserving it. So loving is his compassion! Like a spring that overflows, his mercy flows over all who desire it, calling them to this grace and saying, “Everyone who is thirsty, come to the water, and those of you who have no money, come buy wine and milk without price!” Who has ever shown anyone such love as the ruler of all has shown, even to those who despised him? He still *Heb 2:14*  
*Rom 5:10*

cares daily for them, and gives them food and drink, clothing, and all they need, also strength of body.

Truly, what can we have that we did not receive from him? And what could we achieve that was not done

*1 Cor 4:7*

by God beforehand and given us? Yet who is thanked less for a gift than the One from whom everything

comes, the One who cares for us as a mother does for the child at her breast, and wants nothing evil to

befall us, but wants to save us from it all, if only we listen to his voice? For as a bird cares for its young,

he watches over us to help us, saying, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will hear you and help you."

*Ps 50:15*

*Ps 91:15*

He is a faithful God who soon forgets all our transgressions and favors us with his noblest gifts.

God's love is seen in that he did not spare his dearly beloved only Son, but sent him into the world

*Rom 8:32*

and gave him up to death as atonement for our sin. What great love that is! He makes his only Son

*1 John 4:10*

whom he loves alive again in us who were dead, and leads us to his kingdom. What more should he have

done than he has already done, or what more should he have shown us than he has already shown? God

*Rom 8:32*

wants to give us everything with him. But not only that; he has already given himself to us to be our

Father and accepted us as his children by freely for-

*John 1:12*

*T H E L O V E O F G O D*

giving our sins. We have not repaid him for this, nor does he want any recompense except that we believe in his name and in Jesus Christ his Son, whom he sent to be the Savior of the world. *1 John 4:14*  
*John 6:29*

## THE LOVE OF CHRIST

**C**HRI<sup>S</sup>T JESUS, the eternal Word of God Most High, was with the Father before the creation of the world and made all things together with his Father. As it is written, “Before the world was, I was, and rejoiced in his presence continually, and when he prepared all things I helped him, for through him all things are made, and nothing was made without him.” Everything that has been made, however, has being and remains in him and through him will once more be perfected. He came from above to what was his own, but they did not receive him; but to those who received him he gave the power to become children of God. What great love that is! Christ Jesus, the eternal Father’s Son, left the glory beside the Father which he had had before the world was made and came into the world in the form of a servant, endured poverty, temptation, and suffering to set us free from the yoke of

*John 1:1-3*  
*Prov 8:23*  
*Prov 8:30*  
*John 1:11-12*  
*Phil 2:7*

misery and servitude. The lord of all lords and king of all kings became poor for our sake that we might become rich in him. We see the love of Christ in that he gave his life for us and suffered death to free us, who were guilty of death. For it is written, “No one has greater love than to give his life for his friend, and you are my friends, if you do all that I command you. I lay down my life in order to receive it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down myself.” Christ had such love for us that he gave his life and suffered the most humiliating death, namely death on the cross. Thus he became a curse for our sakes, for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

*2 Cor 8:9*

*1 John 3:16*

*John 15:13-14*

*John 10:17-18*

*Gal 3:13*

How could he have a greater love than this: he suffered so much poverty and misery, and shed his blood in death and so broke down the middle wall of partition and wiped out all that was written against us. He made a sure path to the Father for us and earned for us the Father's favor. See how he spared no effort but did all that was necessary for our blessedness simply so that we might find joy with God and that he might cast off the heavy load that had lain upon us. We could rid ourselves of this in no other way than through him, since Satan had bound us so tightly with his ropes and stood like an armed man,

*Eph 2:14*

*Col 2:14*

*Eph 3:12*

*Luke 11:21*

