

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Anabaptists in the Jura Mountains, 1816.

IN the year that followed Waterloo, John Sheppard, a Baptist layman of means and education, began a life-long interest in foreign travel with a visit to the Continent. He later described some of his experiences in a travel book of no small merit.¹ It has some worth as containing the first-hand impressions of an Englishman seeing Europe so soon after the end of the Napoleonic war, and viewed simply as descriptive writing it still holds one's attention. There is, however, special interest in a chapter devoted to the Anabaptists whom Sheppard met in the valley of Moutier, some twenty-five miles north of Bern.

Though he offers no estimate as to numbers he gained the impression that the community was a considerable one. He had found an elderly peasant near the village of Malleray (presumably the modern Malleray-Bévilard) who told him that though he himself was not of their persuasion he knew many of them and was ready to take Sheppard to the mountain where one of their pastors lived. They met the pastor's brother but got little information from him and as the pastor himself was busy haymaking "at nearly an hour's walk above us, on the mountain side," Sheppard sought out another man, an elder amongst them, who was said to speak good French. He too was a farmer, at work in the fields, a bearded figure wearing a black straw hat. With him, as with the pastor's brother, Sheppard had to disarm suspicion and was of the opinion that they suspected espionage. In fact they were not at this time under official persecution but doubtless a long community-memory of harsh treatment made them cautious with an enquiring stranger and, as we shall see, there were reasons even now why they would be on their guard.

His suspicions allayed by the assurance that Sheppard agreed with them regarding baptism, the elder was willing to open up a little but his French proved inadequate to explain much of their faith and practice. The normal age for baptism was fifteen and the method was affusion. Marriages were performed by their own ministers and in their own houses; burials were also performed by their ministers but in the grounds of the Reformed Church. They exercised no compulsion on their children in matters of faith and the latter were at liberty to join the Reformed Church if they desired to do so. Beyond this the elder could tell Sheppard but little for Swiss-Deutsch

¹ *Letters descriptive of a Tour through some parts of France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany in 1816.* (Edinburgh, 1817), pp. 241-254.

was the only language in which he had ever read or spoken on matters of religion and Sheppard's servant who had some knowledge of it could not cope with these technicalities. The elder, nonetheless, produced some treasured possessions for inspection: a fine folio Bible printed by Christofell Froschouer, Zürich, 1536; a new Testament, Frankfurt, 1737; and some books of hymns or psalms in Swiss-Deutsch.

Sheppard was impressed by the Anabaptists he had met and much taken with their patriarchal habits and dress. With whetted appetite he sought out another preacher near La Reuchenette on the road to Bienne (Biel). He was again met with suspicion when introduced, by mistake, to the preacher's father but he eventually elicited directions which brought him to the son. About fifty years of age, this man, David Baumgartner, had been a minister or preacher from the age of twenty-four but had not baptized or administered the Lord's Supper "till within four years." (If Sheppard was told the reason for this he does not record it.) Ministers were first chosen by the vote of the people fixing on two of their body, and then "by the decision of lot between these two." The casting of lots was accompanied by the payer, "Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show of these two the one whom thou hast chosen." The whole procedure was evidently based on that used when the place of Judas among the apostles was made up, as described in *Acts* i. Worship was held in different homes "alternately." Preaching normally consisted of the exposition of chapters of Scripture rather than of individual texts. Prayers were usually "delivered by memory" from written forms and Baumgartner said that in domestic worship also, which he practised morning and evening and sometimes also at noon, it was his custom to use a book. When Sheppard suggested that there were merits in extempore prayer it transpired that Baumgartner had already discussed this with some of his friends "who felt incapable of thus addressing the Deity." The Lord's Supper was celebrated once a year. At some date which is not mentioned there had been a secession and Sheppard was told of the existence of two groups, "high" and "low," the former insisting on literal obedience to certain precepts such as foot-washing (*John* xiii. 14). He draws no distinction between the two when he sums up their doctrine: "They are believers in the Trinity and in the atonement of Christ." He noted with interest that Baumgartner had sometimes been to hear preachers of the Reformed Church and was not dissatisfied with them except that they dwelt too exclusively on *la morale*. The main objection which the Reformed people had to the Anabaptists was "their agreement with the Quakers in denying the lawfulness of oaths and of war."

Sheppard believed that the Moutier Anabaptists had originally come from the Emmental, further south in the canton of Bern, and

that they derived their views from the Dutch Mennonites. He was correct in the former but mistaken in the latter. There were Anabaptists in the city of Bern from the earliest days of the movement in Switzerland. It was from here that Berthold Haller, in a state of much agitation, sent to Zwingli a copy of the Schleithem Confession (it had been discovered in a house search) and asked him for help in answering it. The Confession must have reached Bern very quickly after it had been approved at Schleithem in the canton of Schaffhausen in February, 1527. From the outset, according to Horsch, the Swiss Brethren Church in this city and canton (Bern) prospered and expanded under severe persecution as nowhere else in Switzerland or Germany.² In the Emmental area they were particularly numerous and there were even villages in which a majority of the inhabitants were Anabaptists. In 1671 the authorities adopted most stringent measures in order to drive them from the canton and there was a wholesale emigration. Most of them went to Alsace and the Palatinate but it may have been at this point that some made their way to the Moutier valley which was then in the canton of Basel. Sheppard certainly gained the impression that the community had been there since the seventeenth century.

It was not until the 1720s, however, that several Baumgartner families left the Emmental and made their way to Péry, a few miles south of Malleray and close to La Reuchenette. Their name was to become well known in Mennonite history. There had been Baumgartner Anabaptists in the Emmental since the beginning of the seventeenth century and across the years several members of the family had suffered for their faith by imprisonment and fine. Péry was under the jurisdiction of the Prince Bishop of Basel when they went there and shortly after their arrival a mandate was issued banishing Anabaptists. It was never seriously enforced, however, and this fact probably owed something to the protests of farmer landlords who objected to losing such excellent tenants. Some of the Anabaptists left but the Baumgartners were among those who stayed and settled.

David Baumgartner senior (1737-1819) was a deacon for many years in the Péry congregation. When Sheppard met him, a silver-bearded patriarch, he was about his trade as a bookbinder. His son, David (1765-1853) was the pastor with whom Sheppard had most conversation. According to the *Mennonite Encyclopaedia*³ he emigrated to America in 1837 and two years later organized the first Mennonite church in Indiana. He was a long time in coming to the decision to emigrate for he was considering it in 1816 when Sheppard spoke with him. Some of their young men had already gone, he said, and they were going to report to those who remained

² *Mennonites in Europe*, 1950, p. 93.

behind. The reason behind this was not persecution, though their district had recently been annexed to the canton Bern under whose jurisdiction their forefathers had suffered so much. Unlike the Prince Bishop of Basel, however, and unlike Bonaparte under whom they had more recently been subject, Bern was insisting on military service or substitutes in lieu of it. This "had cost about twelve of their number eighteen louis each." Presumably it was this new turn of the screw, acting as a reminder of Bern's harshness in bygone days, that made the Anabaptists so guarded when Sheppard arrived as a stranger asking questions. He himself found it "a curious fact, and almost a satire on protestantism, that a catholic prince and prelate, and a tyrant who lived by conscription should have successively left this poor handful of their non-resisting subjects unmolested, and that a government of such different principles, both political and religious, should immediately have withdrawn their human indulgence." Nevertheless he counselled caution on the matter of emigration and found indeed that Baumgartner, who had a numerous family, was by no means enthusiastic. Once again farmer landlords were expressing their concern at the prospect of losing Anabaptist tenants. Sheppard found that the latter were highly respected in the district and not only as tenants. People thought them peculiar but all bore testimony to their moral standards and their peaceable and charitable habits.

Baumgartner, as we have seen, eventually made up his mind and emigrated. He was over seventy when he did so. How many others of the Moutier Anabaptists also went to America I have not ascertained. Most of the Baumgartners went but the community does not seem to have been too seriously depleted. At any rate Horsch could say (1950) that "today most of the Mennonite congregations in Switzerland are located in the western part of the canton Bern, in the Jura mountains, though there is a strong congregation also in the Emmental."⁴

One of the interesting side-issues in the history of the Anabaptists lies in the attitude of others towards them. Sheppard's account is no exception. In a footnote to p. 242 he says it is well known that "there were infamous and seditious men among the first leaders of this sect, whose crimes cannot be palliated and who, whether mad or not themselves, infused a mad fanaticism into a part of their followers. No event, perhaps, in the history of the Reformation can be so plausibly urged by Romanists to show that the principles of religious freedom are dangerous to social order." But, he goes on, they were reclaimed to "sobriety and civil obedience" shortly afterwards "by the influence of their own teachers." Menno's ministry "led to the exclusion of those who dishonoured the communion,

³ Vol. I, p. 250.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 113.

and agreement in renouncing all tenets that were detrimental to the authority of civil government." Münster and Menno Simons appear to be Sheppard's only landmarks in early Anabaptist history. As we have seen, he believed that the community in the Moutier valleys must have derived their ideas from the Dutch Mennonites; he betrays no knowledge of the Swiss Anabaptist movement.

No less interesting is a contemporary Baptist comment on Sheppard's account. *The Baptist Magazine* of February 1818 printed a lengthy extract from it which had been submitted by a non-Baptist contributor, W.I. W.I. thought the editors would dislike Sheppard's use of the term Anabaptist. In their own comment which follows the extract the editors did not take this point up and it is worthy of note how they themselves spoke of these Anabaptists. They were not in the least anxious to wash their hands of them. They were "our brethren in the Valley of Moutier." "Compared with many even of the 'Reformed,' whether as to their evangelical principles or their strict morality, they are indeed as 'a lily among thorns,' or 'an apple tree among the trees of the wood.'" It is a piquant thought that the earlier form of the name Moutier was Münster! If the editors were aware of this it evidently did not diminish their sense of cordiality towards "these simple-hearted followers of the Lamb." Were they prepared to take them simply on their merits, as described by Sheppard, or was the Anabaptist name no longer a universal term of reproach?

Sheppard himself they evidently did not know. W.I. deduced from the extract that "he holds the same opinion with yourselves on the subject of baptism" but they in their own comment simply allude to him as "this intelligent Christian traveller." He seems in fact to have missed the attention of most Baptist historians though there is an entry for him in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the list of his books in the *Catalogue of the Angus Library* makes his one of the lengthier entries in it. Many of his relatives were Baptists and with his widowed mother he became one in 1806. He came into money on the death of his uncle and this enabled him to leave the wool trade and go as a student to Edinburgh University. There he began to study medicine but then turned to philosophy and Hebrew; in Edinburgh too he formed friendships with Thomas Chalmers and Pinkerton the antiquary. His life-long friendship with John Foster began in Frome where he was born in 1785 and where he died, a much-travelled man, at the age of ninety-three. Apart from travel his main interests were lay-preaching and religious authorship. His *Thoughts preparative or persuasive to Private Devotion*, first published in 1823, was well-received and quickly went through five editions. I hope to contribute a fuller account of him in some future issue of this journal.

G. W. RUSLING