

Michael Sattler and the Schleithem Confession, 1527

WHEN, in 1910, W. J. McGlothlin, of Louisville, published his important collection of documents entitled *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, the earliest document he included was "a set of seven articles drawn up by the Swabian and Swiss brethren at Schlatten am Randen, near Schaffhausen, in 1527." This is now more usually called "The Schleithem Confession" or—in accordance with sixteenth century custom—"Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God concerning Seven Articles."

During the past forty years this Confession has been closely studied both on the Continent and in the United States. New material connected with it is now available and it is recognised as one of the most important source documents for a study of the thought of the early Anabaptists. A German monograph on the Confession has recently appeared—*Das Schleithemer Täuferbekenntnis*, 1527, by Beatrice Jenny (Druck und Verlag Karl Augustin, Thayngen, 1951). This provides the opportunity for making some of the results of recent study available in this country. In what follows I have not confined myself to Beatrice Jenny's monograph, though a good deal of the information given is to be found there.

McGlothlin stated that "so far as known" the Schleithem Confession was never printed in the sixteenth century, but that written copies circulated quickly and widely. He drew attention to a manuscript copy found in the Cathedral Library at Pressburg, Slovakia, and printed in shortened form by Joseph Beck in 1883. McGlothlin also made reference to another manuscript copy in the State Archives of Bern, printed in part by Ernst Müller in 1895. One or two other manuscript copies are now known. McGlothlin's English translation was made from neither Beck nor the Bern copy, but from the Latin version incorporated by Zwingli in his *In Catabaptistarum Strophas Elenchus*, 1527, which replied point by point to the Schleithem Articles within a few months of their first appearance.

The Bern MS. is still, perhaps, the oldest extant form in which the Articles, as originally drafted in German, have come down to us.¹ But, though McGlothlin was unaware of it when his book appeared in America, three sixteenth century printed copies had already come to light. The oldest bears the date 1533 and

¹The Bern text is given by Beatrice Jenny and closely compared with Zwingli's translation.

is now in the State Library in Berlin. The other two copies are undated. In each case the Confession is bound up with a letter from Michael Sattler, the Anabaptist leader, to the group of brethren at Horb, an account of Sattler's death, which occurred in May, 1527, and a statement on divorce. The printed German text of the Confession was reproduced by Walther Köhler in *Flugschriften aus den Ersten Jahren der Reformation*, Vol. II, Leipzig, 1908, and also by Heinrich Böhmer in *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges und der Wiedertäufer*, Bonn, 1910, a small book of documents for students in Lietzmann's well known series. Moreover, in addition to circulating in German and in Latin, the Confession was available in the sixteenth century in French and in Dutch. In 1544, Calvin published his *Briève Instruction pour Armer Tous Bons Fideles contres des Erreurs de la Secte Commune des Anabaptistes*. In it he quotes the *Schleitheim Articles* in a way that implies he had a printed French version in front of him. The full text of the Articles was also printed in Dutch as early as 1560. It circulated among the followers of Menno Simons, and was again printed in 1565.² It was difficult as well as dangerous for the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century to make use of the press. The discovery of these several printed forms of the Confession emphasises its importance and shows how widely it was known.

In 1936 a critical edition of Zwingli's *Elenchus* appeared in the *Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. XCIII. The introduction is by Walther Köhler; the notes are by Professor Fritz Blanke, of Zürich. The Schleitheim Articles have also been carefully studied by the Mennonite historians, John Horsch, Robert Friedmann and J. C. Wenger. An English translation of the Confession by Wenger appears in his *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1940 (2nd edition, 1947), and in his *Doctrines of the Mennonites*, Scottdale, 1950. Valuable articles on the Confession by Horsch and Friedmann are to be found in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vols. IV and XVI, while in Vol. XXV of the same periodical a Lutheran scholar, Gustav Bossert, Jr., has an important article on Michael Sattler. So much for the bibliographical material on which modern study has to be based.

The Schleitheim Confession was put together on February 6th, 1527, by a group of Anabaptists gathered at Schlatt, near Schaffhausen.³ After many months of controversy with Zwingli, the little group of radicals in Zürich, led by Conrad Grebel, had

² See Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XVI, 2 (April, 1942), pp. 83/4.

³ Attempts to identify the place with Schlatt in Thurgau or Schlatt in Baden are now discredited.

in January, 1525, reinstated believers' baptism as the basis of their church fellowship. The authorities at once proceeded against them and, though they secured considerable popular support in the valleys around Zürich, the leaders were soon either fugitives or in prison. Hübmaier had already left Waldshut and was making his way to Moravia. Grebel died during the summer of 1526, probably of the plague. His companions, Mantz and Blaurock, were captured in December of that year. Blaurock was driven from Zürich as a foreigner and made his way into the Tyrol. Mantz was drowned in the river Limmat in January, 1527. Others of the Zürich radicals, Wilhelm Reublin, Ludwig Hetzer and Michael Sattler among them, had escaped from the city some months before. There is trace of several of them, including Sattler, in Strassburg. The kind of discussions they had had with Zwingli were renewed with Capito and Bucer. The former was at first sympathetic, but could do little under the watchful eye of his companion. Neither on theological nor practical grounds were either the Reformers or the Catholics ready to give serious heed to what the Anabaptists were trying to say.

Sattler's name has been closely connected with the Schleithem Confession, at least since 1672, when J. H. Ottius published his *Annales Anabaptistici*. A letter to Menno Simons appears to carry the tradition back more than a hundred years to within thirty years of the Schleithem gathering.⁴ Beatrice Jenny, after re-examining all the evidence, does not think it can be proved that Sattler drafted the Confession, or even that he presided at Schleithem, but the probability is strong that he was one of the leading figures, and he was perhaps the author of the more personal paragraphs which precede and follow the seven articles themselves. These epistolary sections are not quoted by Zwingli; nor are they adequately reproduced or alluded to by McGlothlin.

Sattler was born in the closing years of the fifteenth century at Staufen, not far from Freiburg. He is described as a well-educated young man, versed in several languages. Though not on the matriculation roll, he may have attended classes at Freiburg University. He entered St. Peter's Monastery in the neighbourhood and rose to the position of prior. Disgust at the worldliness of the clergy and monks, combined with study of the New Testament, and particularly the Pauline Epistles, led Sattler to join the forces of the Reformation. He left the monastery and married. By March, 1525, "Brother Michael" was in Zürich and a member of Grebel's party.⁵ Banished by the Edict of November 18th,⁶

⁴ See F. Blanke, *Zwingli's Elenchus*, 1936, p. 104; B. Jenny, *op. cit.* p. 26.

⁵ See L. Von Muralt and W. Schmid, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, Vol. I, Zurich, 1952, No. 64, p. 73.

⁶ See Muralt and Schmid, *op. cit.* No. 133, p. 136.

Sattler made his way to Strassburg. Both Capito and Bucer were deeply impressed by his integrity and zeal and were ready later to speak well of him. It is likely that Sattler and Hans Denck met at this time. The former stood for the biblical piety and churchmanship of the Swiss Brethren; the latter represented the more spiritualistic wing of the Anabaptist movement.

On leaving Strassburg, probably in the first weeks of 1527, Sattler began to work as an Anabaptist evangelist and leader in the Neckar valley, with the little town of Horb as his centre. Soon after the Schleithem gathering, he was arrested with some of his followers. For eleven weeks they were imprisoned in the tower at Binsdorf. A letter written by Sattler to the Horb congregation found its way into print as early as 1533, as has already been noted, and passed in time into *The Martyrs' Mirror*, the famous Dutch collection of Anabaptist records which came gradually into existence from 1562 onwards. In May, 1527, the prisoners were transferred to Rothenburg and were there tried. In spite of a courageous defence, young Sattler was sentenced as a heretic to have his tongue cut out, his body lacerated with red-hot irons and, finally, to be burned. This savage sentence was carried out on May 21st, 1527. Sattler's wife, who shared his faith and constancy, was afterwards drowned with other women in the Neckar. Certain of the other men were executed.

Apart from the letter written to the Horb congregation, we possess for certain none of Sattler's writings, though T. J. van Braght, who compiled *The Martyrs' Mirror* in the seventeenth century, believed that he was the author of a number of Anabaptist tracts, including one on *The Hearing of False Prophets or Antichrists*.⁷ The Anabaptist hymnbook, *Ausbund*, the first edition of which appeared in 1564 and which is still in use among the Old Amish Mennonites of the United States, contains a hymn ascribed to Sattler. It consists of thirteen verses of four lines each. The following is a version of my own of three of the verses, which tries to reproduce not only the metre and rhyme scheme of the original, but also something of its simplicity:—

When Christ by teaching through the land
Had called to Him a tiny band,
"Patience, My friends," they heard Him say,
"Take up and bear your cross each day.

"He who would My disciple be,
With courage and with constancy,
Must on this earth love more than all
The words that from My lips do fall . . .

⁷ The text is given by J. C. Wenger in *M.Q.R.*, Vol. XXI. No. 4 (October, 1947).

"When for My sake you are accused,
When persecuted and abused,
Be of good cheer; at Heaven's throne
There waits a recompense all your own."⁸

One of the accounts of Sattler's trial and death is thought to have come from the pen of Wilhelm Reublin, who was active in the country to the south of Rothenburg.⁹ There are other contemporary accounts, one of which was included in *The Martyrs' Mirror*. The nine charges made against Sattler were as follows¹⁰ :—

1. that he and his adherents had acted contrary to the mandates of the Emperor. (The decrees of the Diet of Worms, 1521, were probably in mind.)
2. that he denied the doctrine of transubstantiation.
3. that he taught that infant baptism is of no avail for salvation.
4. that he rejected the sacrament of supreme unction.
5. that he despised and condemned the Mother of God and the saints.
6. that he condemned the taking of oaths before magistrates.
7. that "he has commenced a new and unheard of custom in regard to the Lord's Supper, placing the bread and wine on a plate, and eating and drinking the same."
8. that he had left his Order and taken a wife.
9. that "he has said that if the Turks should invade the country, no resistance ought to be offered them; and if it were right to wage war, he would rather take the field against the Christians than against the Turks."

Sattler denied the first charge. He and his friends had not adopted Lutheran teaching, he said. They were only being loyal

⁸ A. J. F. Zieglschmid, *Der Alteste Chronik Der Hutterischen Brüder* New York, 1943, pp. 55n., questions the ascription of this hymn to Sattler. R. Friedmann, *M.Q.R.* XVI, 2 (April, 1942), p. 87, says that a 17th century book in the Goshen College Library ascribes the *Ausbund* farewell hymn, No. 136, to Sattler.

⁹ See Muralt and Schmid, *op. cit.*, No. 224, pp. 250f.

¹⁰ For the full document from *The Martyrs' Mirror* see E. B. Underhill, *A Martyrology*, Hanserd Knollys Society, 1850, pp. 21f. Cf. Gustav Bossert, Jr., "Michael Sattler's Trial and Martyrdom" *M.Q.R.* XXV, 3 (July, 1951). *Die Alteste Chronik* u.s.w. which was begun in the second half of the 6th century in Moravia, contains a summary of Sattler's trial and martyrdom. Charges 1 to 6 above are recorded; then follows 9, and finally 8. Charge 7 is not given. It is stated that a full account is in the possession of the brethren. See Zieglschmid's edition, pp. 55-56. G. Bossert, Jr., *op. cit.* pp. 209-210, thinks that charge 7 should really be added to charge 2, but was the result of baseless rumours. Lydia Müller, *Glaubenszeugnisse Oberdeutscher Taufgesinnter*, Leipzig, 1938, pp. 376, gives an account of Sattler's death from a MS. in the Library of the Evangelical Church in Pressburg.

to the Gospel and the word of God. He admitted the second, third and fourth charges. In the case of the fifth, he denied the charge in the form in which it was presented, but stated clearly that Scripture knows nothing of Mary as a mediatrix. The duty of non-swearing, Sattler based on *Matt.* v. 34 and *James* v. 12. There is no indication of his reply to the seventh charge. In regard to the eighth, he replied that "the pomp, pride, usury and great whoredom of the monks and priests" had led him to break with them and that the New Testament enjoined marriage. He boldly defended the principles of non-resistance and also his remark about the Turks; they knew nothing of the Christian faith, whereas Christians who persecute others are "Turks after the spirit."

It is to be noted that several of the charges against Sattler were of the kind that could have been levelled against any adherent of the Reformed teaching. In Rothenburg. Sattler was in the hands of authorities loyal to the Pope as well as the Emperor. The charges in regard to infant baptism, the taking of oaths, and pacifism, as well as the somewhat ambiguous reference to the Lord's Supper, marked him out as one of the radicals. All these points occur in the Schleithem Confession.

This cannot be reproduced here in full. The introductory epistle suggests that the Confession was intended for dissentient Anabaptists or perhaps for former associates in Zürich, rather than for the outside world. It appears to hint at antinomian tendencies in certain quarters and appeals for strict separation from the world and from false brethren. The seven matters which are said to have been discussed at Schlatt and on which unanimity had been reached, are:—

1. Baptism, which is to be given only to "those who have learned repentance and amendment of life . . . and who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ."
2. Excommunication from the Church (i.e. the Ban), which is to be employed against those who "slip sometimes and fall into error and sin," but only after two private admonitions. It should take place prior to the breaking of bread, so that a pure and united Church may sit down together.
3. The Lord's Supper, which is to be partaken of only by those who have been baptised.
4. Separation from the World, by which is meant "all popish and antipopish works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the commitments made in unbelief and other things of that kind." "Therefore there will also unquestionably

- fall from us the unchristian, devilish weapons of force—such as sword, armour and the like and all their use.”
5. Pastors in the Church of God, who must be men recognised for their integrity by those “outside the faith”; whose office is “to read (i.e. the Scriptures), to admonish and teach, to warn, to discipline, to ban in the church, to lead out in prayer . . . to lift up the bread when it is to be broken, and in all things to see to the care of the body of Christ; and who are to be supported by the church.” If a pastor suffers banishment or martyrdom, “another shall be ordained in his place in the same hour so that God’s little flock and people may not be destroyed.”
 6. The Sword, which is ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates for the punishment of the wicked, but must not be used by Christians even in self-defence. Neither should Christians go to law, or undertake magisterial duties.¹¹
 7. Oaths, which are forbidden in accordance with *Matt.* v. 34, and *James* v. 12.

The concluding epistle states that “these are the articles of certain brethren who had heretofore been in error.” It seems clear that they were agreed upon only after discussion and that they were sent out for the guidance of the Anabaptist groups represented at Schleithem and quickly secured a wider acceptance and authority. It is to be noted that the first three Articles and the fifth—that is, those on baptism, excommunication, the Lord’s Supper and the ministry—are much more summarily treated than are those on separation, the sword and oaths. Beatrice Jenny is less sure than Professor Blanke that it was intended to enforce with the ban acceptance of the decisions of the Schleithem gathering. Copies of the Confession soon reached Bern, for on April 25, 1527, Berchtold Haller was able to send one to Zwingli, whose mind began at once to work on a reply. If Professor Blanke is right, when Zwingli wrote out the *Elenchus* in the closing days of July, he had more than one copy of the Confession in front of him.¹²

What are set forth in the Confession are the points on which the Anabaptists differed sharply from the State churches. Its distinctive emphasis is on believers’ baptism as the basis of a gathered church of confessed believers, a church intent on keeping itself free from “spot or wrinkle” and, therefore, ready to make

¹¹ It should be noted that the State is regarded as part of the divine order, but the authority of the magistrate applies only to those outside the Church.

¹² See *Elenchus*, pp. 107, 122, for a possible explanation of some confusion in Zwingli’s division of points (4) and (5).

use of excommunication, a church deliberately separating itself from the State and the authority of the sword. This main emphasis was common to almost all the varied groups which appeared on the left wing of the Reformation and to whom the name Anabaptist is applied. The same general emphasis is to be found among their successors in England and America in the seventeenth century. But on the practical consequences of separation difference of opinion and practice was to be found both in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. In Moravia, Balthasar Hübmaier stood for a more positive attitude towards the magistracy and accepted the necessity of Christians, resisting the onrush of the Turks. The first English Baptists were ready to take an oath of loyalty to the English sovereign, in spite of the criticisms of their Mennonite friends. As Robert Barclay rightly emphasised in *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, it was the Quakers who, in respect of the sword and of oaths became, in company with the Mennonites, the residual legatees of the Swiss Brethren and those Anabaptists who thought with them.

The Schleithem Confession remains, however, one of the basic documents for an understanding of the history and tradition of Baptists. It is to be hoped that one day we may have a revised and enlarged edition of McGlothlin with the pages devoted to the Confession increased in number, and these and other issues more fully discussed. Meanwhile, Michael Sattler is a pioneer and martyr whose name deserves to be better known among us than it is.

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Things Touching the King, by G. W. Emery and M. W. Anderson. (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 8s. 6d.)

This is a fascinating story of the medical work of the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission in Patna, centred in the Duchess of Teck Hospital founded in 1895. It is packed with incident and human interest and tells us just what we want to learn from such a book. It describes the patients, the appalling physical and moral conditions from which most of them come, the day to day routine of the hospital, and the results in healed bodies and converted lives. The far-reaching effects of such a hospital are partly revealed in the training of nurses and dispensers. The failures are there as well as the successes, and it is an informing and inspiring book. Between the lines one can read the faith, courage and sacrifice of the staff.

F. BUFFARD.