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ISBN 0-315-54809-6

The Theology of the Martyrs:
A Study of the Martyrs Mirror as a Source
for Understanding Anabaptist Theology

by



Raymond Richard Friesen

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the
Department of Religion

Winnipeg, Manitoba

1988

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather

JOHN E. FRIESEN

who

lived the Anabaptist faith;

read the Martyrs Mirror;

inspired his children and grandchildren;

and gave expression to the Anabaptist understanding
of salvation and discipleship with the frequently asked
question:

"Woat'et noch mol aula tooreatje?!"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of a thesis is never the solitary task of one person nor the fruit of the efforts of only one individual. This is certainly true of this work. There are many people in my short history whose friendship, encouragement and academic dialogue contributed to what is now completed. These include the members of the Aberdeen Church, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, past and present, who endured my preaching, nurtured my thinking, and encouraged my studies.

I wish to acknowledge the helpful advice from the members of my thesis committee who found time in their busy schedules to read, advise, challenge and re-read this material. They were Dr. Larry W. Hurtado, Dr. John Badertscher, and Dr. E. E. (Al) Reimer (with whom I proudly share Kleine Gemeinde roots).

Thank-you to Dr. Egil Grislis who was a true adviser and friend during my studies. He knew when to be critical and to push me to work harder and when to give me the support and encouragement that I needed to keep going. Because of him I was able to believe in my own ability to complete an MA. I learned a great deal from him, not the least of which was the fact that a deep love for the church and a love for sound scholarship and academics are not mutually exclusive but are meant to be joined and to serve

each other.

Thank-you to my parents who first taught me the Christian faith and the Anabaptist distinctives within it; who shared my dream for an education; and who helped me financially so that the dream became a reality.

Thanks to Larissa and Rachelle who put up with Daddy's studying on Saturdays and his preoccupation with Martyrs Mirror when he should have been teaching someone to ride a two-wheeler and should have been reading "But No Elephants" with expression.

And most of all, a thank you to my wife, Sylvia, who shares my vision for the Church and for the need for education to serve it; who encouraged and supported me, yet made sure I did not forget that I had a family; who put up with little money and lots of debt; who was and is truly a help-mate without sacrificing her own individuality.

ABSTRACT

The Martyrs Mirror is a martyrology published in Holland in 1660, using materials that had been collected in various forms earlier. It covers the period from the time of Christ to the mid-seventeenth century. This thesis is a study of that section of the work that covers the years 1500 to 1600. The letters, stories and accounts of trials and executions are examined with the intent to establish the theology of the Anabaptist martyrs with regards to the Scriptures (chapters one and two), suffering (chapter three), salvation (chapter four) and eschatology (chapter five). The theology of the martyrs is compared with that of the two Dutch Anabaptist leaders, Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips. The correspondence between the theology of the leaders and that of the martyrs is very close and the study therefore concludes that Dutch Anabaptist theology was a lay theology, a theology held to and formulated by both leaders and the people in the churches. In the study of the theology it is also possible to draw certain conclusions about the relationships within the family, about the role of women in the Anabaptist movement, and about the Anabaptists' view of the state.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|---|
| CWMS | The Complete Writings of Menno Simons |
| IDB | The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible |
| ME | Mennonite Encyclopedia |
| MM | Martyrs Mirror |
| MQR | Mennonite Quarterly Review |

INTRODUCTION

Thieleman J. van Braght's The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660 has been a significant book in the forming of Mennonite faith and theology since its original publication in Holland. It travelled with the Dutch Mennonites from Holland to Prussia, then to Russia, and in the 1870's to Canada. Earlier it was brought to the United States by the first Mennonite settlers.¹ As the language of the people changed, the Martyrs Mirror, as it is commonly known, was translated so that it could be read by the common people in the congregations. The first German edition, an abbreviated version, was published in Pennsylvania in 1745.² A complete German version followed in 1748-49.³ The English version itself has gone through thirteen editions from 1837

¹ Gerald C. Studer, "A History of the Martyrs' Mirror," Mennonite Quarterly Review (hereafter MQR) 22 (1948):173.

² Ibid, 173.

³ Ibid, 174-175; and J. C. Wenger, "Publishers's Preface to Fifth English Edition, 1950," in Thieleman J. van Braght, The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660, (hereafter MM), trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 11th ed. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1982), 2.

to 1982. The first two were translations from the German, and the last eleven have been editions of the translation by Joseph F. Sohm.⁴ Within my own tradition, the Kleine Gemeinde, the Martyrs Mirror formed an important part of the libraries of the leaders in the churches as well as the lay people, libraries that usually consisted of the Bible, the writings of Menno Simons, the Martyrs Mirror, and a few small booklets.

Despite this kind of historical importance for the Mennonite church, the Martyrs Mirror has received little specific attention from scholars. No major work that I was able to locate has been published on it. The Mennonite Quarterly Review has published no more than half a dozen articles specifically on the Martyrs Mirror. The writings of Menno Simons have received significantly more attention and it is time that the Martyrs Mirror be studied with the same thoroughness that has been given to Menno. Such a study can add to our understanding of the sixteenth century Anabaptists in the Netherlands and their theology.

The intent of this thesis is to look at the Martyrs Mirror as a source for interpreting and understanding sixteenth century Anabaptist theology with specific reference to four main areas--Scripture, Suffering, Salvation, and Eschatology. Each one of the themes that has been chosen is significant in its own way and a study of

⁴ MM, p.2.

each will lead us to an understanding of the people represented in the Martyrs Mirror and of Dutch Anabaptism as a whole.

The Reformation itself was a turning to the Bible as the only authority in faith and religion, as opposed to a combination of church and Bible. The cry "sola Scriptura" had given life to the reforms of Martin Luther. In his historic declaration at the Diet of Worms he proclaimed:

Unless I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason, then I am a prisoner in conscience to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract. To go against the conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me. Amen.⁵

John Calvin, too, broke with the Roman Catholic position of the authority of tradition and Scripture. The importance he placed on Scripture is seen in the fact that he committed at least seven chapters in the Institutes of the Christian Religion to a discussion of Scripture.⁶ Consequently, it is important to determine what the Anabaptist martyrs said about Scripture and how they used the Bible in formulating their doctrines and beliefs. A reading of the stories and letters in the Martyrs Mirror confirms the necessity of such a study since it quickly becomes obvious that the martyrs used a large number of quotations from Scripture and references to Scripture both in writing to fellow church

⁵ Owen Chadwick. The Reformation (Markham: Penguin Books, 1972), p.56.

⁶ Chapters 6 to 10 of Book 1 and chapters 10 and 11 of Book 2.

members and in interacting with their enemies. In chapter one we will examine what they said about the Scriptures. In chapter two we will seek to determine the conceptual framework that guided their interpretation of the Scriptures.

The Martyrs Mirror is a book about torture and death, and so the theme of suffering is an important one to consider in examining the faith of these martyrs. It was inevitable that their understanding of the Bible and of life as a church and their outlining of their doctrines was influenced by their situation and experience of relentless suffering. There was nothing other than the Bible that had as profound an impact on their theology as did the persecution that they suffered. We will find that it played a significant role in how they read their Bibles, how they understood their salvation and how they understood history and the eschaton.

As we examine what the martyrs said about their sufferings we will find that Christ's own sufferings became an important part of their interpretation of their own sufferings. They identified very closely with him and saw their own experiences as a continuation of his sufferings at the hands of the Jews and the Romans. This will be examined in chapter three.

The salvation of man has been an important theme for centuries, being the core of the message of the New

Testament. Yet, the understanding of this salvation has varied greatly from century to century and from church group to church group. This was no less true during the Reformation. Luther felt that he had come to a glorious new insight when he understood the message of Romans and of the whole Bible to be "justification by faith alone." He was convinced that the Anabaptists were advocating a return to the works-righteousness of the Catholic church. Our study will find that the Anabaptists made repentance and obedience by the Christians a crucial part of salvation, but they did so without compromising on God's grace and the work of Christ on the cross. We will outline this understanding of salvation in chapter four.

The last chapter will deal with the Anabaptist martyrs' interpretation of "last things," their eschatology. They understood all of history to be a battle between the forces of evil and the forces of God. They were convinced that they were participating, by suffering, in the last stages of this battle. Christ's triumphant return was imminent. The judgement that was to be part of his return had already begun. The Christians were not to take up the sword to usher in this new kingdom, as the people at Münster had supposed, but were to wait patiently for their reward.

As we examine these four issues--Scripture, suffering, salvation, and eschatology-- we will also be able to draw some conclusions about the social relationships within the

Anabaptist group represented by the accounts in the Martyrs Mirror. We will find that marriage and the family unit were very important to the martyrs. We will notice that both men and women suffered for their faith; both men and women stayed true to their faith; and both men and women wrote letters, full of Scriptural references, and had their letters saved and published. It will also become clear that the Anabaptists were quite willing to break the laws of the day when those laws were seen to be contrary to the will of God as they found it expressed in their Bibles.

This study is limited by several factors that need mentioning.

1) No critical edition of the Martyrs Mirror exists and so we are left with a work in the form in which it was created under scholarship guidelines different from those of our day.⁷ Consequently errors do exist, "both in the names of martyrs and in the dates of their execution."⁸ An example of this kind of error is the date of execution of Hans van Overdam. Van Braght recorded it as 1550.⁹ A. L. E.

⁷ Harold S. Bender and N. van der Zijpp, "Martyrs' Mirror," Mennonite Encyclopedia 3:527; and H. Westra and N. van der Zijpp, "Braght, Tieleman Jansz van," Mennonite Encyclopedia 1:401.

⁸ Bender & van der Zijpp, p. 527.

⁹ MM, 486.

Verheyden has it as 1551.¹⁰ Van Braght did make attempts to verify many accounts and includes excerpts from court records.¹¹ At other times he was stymied by records that had been destroyed when courthouses caught fire.¹²

Scholars in the past have suggested that van Braght's work was not to be trusted at all. However, since then they have come to agree that "van Braght's Martyrs' Mirror is a reliable, trustworthy book."¹³ I believe van Braght's credibility is also shown by the fact that his work includes few accounts that tell of strange supernatural events. There are some.¹⁴ In telling of the trial and execution of Michael Sattler such a story would have been available to van Braght, but he used one that tells only of the suffering and death and not of the hand that could not be burned, the spurting blood, the moon standing still, and bright letters in the sky.¹⁵ With some caution the Martyrs Mirror can

¹⁰ A. L. E. Verheyden, Anabaptism in Flanders, 1530-1650, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 9 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1961), p.43. Verheyden points to another error he sees in van Braght, in the account of Jooris Wippe, who is listed in MM as a burgomaster (p. 53, f.n. 65).

¹¹ MM, 536, 585, 845 & 1007.

¹² Ibid, 931 & 977. These two examples in all likelihood refer to the same fire.

¹³ van der Zijpp and Bender, 528.

¹⁴ See, for example, MM, 420-421.

¹⁵ For this latter account see John Howard Yoder, The Legacy of Michael Sattler, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 1 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 77-79.

therefore be used to study the history and theology of the sixteenth century Anabaptists.

The fact that no critical edition exists also means that we do not know how many of the Scripture references that appear in the text were put there by the martyrs and how many were added by later editors including van Braght. It is impossible to verify these and so we are left with what we have. Since, where his material can be corroborated, he proves himself to be trustworthy without deliberate falsifications, we can safely assume that the majority of letters and accounts were passed on to us without change and additions.¹⁶

It would be helpful to cross-reference the materials in the Martyrs Mirror with accounts in the Täuferakten. That has not been done for this study.

2) Van Braght compiled his work for a very specific reason and therefore materials were collected with a certain bias. His reasons for publishing the Martyrs Mirror are given by him in his own introductory material. He was concerned with what he perceived to be the absence of true discipleship in the church of his day, evidenced in the wealthy businesses and the luxurious houses owned by the

For van Braght's narrative see MM, 416-418.

¹⁶ Two examples of changes made by van Braght, acknowledged by him in footnotes, are found on pages 774-798 where he has omitted vulgar expressions in the text and on page 925 where the original reading seems to him to be too harsh.

Mennonites and in their practices of buying imported goods and giving huge and lavish feasts. It was his hope that the stories of the martyrs would encourage the people to turn back to true discipleship.¹⁷ The accounts and letters that he collected are, consequently, those of people who remained true to the faith and who expressed that faith in ways consistent with how he interpreted it. Van Braght believed that the true faith expressed itself in adult baptism, nonresistance, simple lifestyle and faithfulness under persecution. The massacred people of Münster do not make it into his "faith hall of fame,"¹⁸ nor did Gillis van Aachen, a church leader and evangelist, who recanted under torture.¹⁹ They were not true disciples within the limits of van Braght's strict criteria.

Again, this does not make van Braght's work invalid. He had a point to make and he made it forcefully with his great work. Polemics were a way of life in that age and usually the main reason for publishing. It does mean that we must exercise care in the conclusions that we draw from things that are not said in the work.

Van Braght depended for much of what he published on earlier martyr books. Where those would have had omissions

¹⁷ MM, 8-11.

¹⁸ A few Münsterites may be listed because van Braght was unaware of their real beliefs (van der Zijpp and Bender, 527).

¹⁹ Studer, 170; and Verheyden, 38.

or additions to portray a particular theological perspective, van Braght would have been limited by them.²⁰ A comparison of these various martyrologies would take us well beyond the scope of this thesis and would be hindered by limitations of language and availability of materials. However, such a study would be a helpful one.

3) My own research is limited by two factors. One is that I am working with the English translation and not the original Dutch. That does not take away from my overall conclusions but could affect a few individual specifics. Secondly, I chose to limit my research, because of my own interests and because of the need to be restrictive when dealing with a work of this size in a thesis, to the martyrs of the sixteenth century. By the year 1700 the persecution in Europe had largely ended. Martyrs from before 1600 were not part of the Reformation proper. This study is therefore deals with the majority of the Anabaptist martyrs.

4) I have not examined the roots of the faith of the Anabaptists in the thoughts and writings of their

²⁰ Archie Penner tells of a major controversy between two second generation Anabaptist/Mennonite leaders and their followers on this very question. Hans de Ries had published a martyrology that Pieter J. Twisck and his people argued had deliberate omissions relating to a particular view of the incarnation. They therefore published a new, "corrected" edition. De Reis insisted that the omissions were accidental. Hans Alenson argued the matter for him, and pointed out that the Twisck edition also had omissions ("Pieter Jansz. Twisck--Second Generation Anabaptist/Mennonite Churchman, Writer and Polemicist," [Ph.D dissertation, University of Iowa, 1971], 241-251).

predecessors. In particular, it would be interesting to study the relationships between Thomas à Kempis and the Brethren of the Common Life on the one hand and the Anabaptists on the other.²¹

5) I have limited myself to four main subject areas in order to keep this thesis manageable and, at the same time, to do a thorough study. Other themes could have been traced and will hopefully be undertaken in subsequent studies. Among them are the christology of the martyrs, their understanding of the Holy Spirit, their view of discipleship, and their relationship to the world and culture around them.

The documents in the Martyrs Mirror are not carefully developed theological treatises nor confessions of faith formulated after careful deliberations. Instead we have collections of stories and letters that were composed under the pressure of separation from family, the threat of death, and the excruciating pain of torture. They are statements of faith formulated within the crucible of life and so have that "liveliness" about them that is absent in carefully written confessions. However, they lack tidy systems and outlines of carefully developed confessions. Our study must therefore be in the form of gleanings here and there that

²¹ Egil Grisliis argues for a connection between the ideas of Menno Simons and those of John Ruusbroec, a Dutch mystic ("'Good Works' According to Menno Simons," Journal of Mennonite Studies 5 [1987]:128).

can be joined to form a more complete picture, but always with the realization that they come from varying sources. The one confession of faith that van Braght includes in his introductory section on baptism in the sixteenth century is dated by him around 1600 and so comes at the very end of the period that concerns us.²² As such it will be a helpful supplement to the study but will have to be examined in the context of other documents in the Martyrs Mirror. We still need to draw our conclusions from what the martyrs said to their adversaries as they sought to defend the faith; what they wrote to their Christian brothers and sisters and their families as they reported to them what was happening; and

²² MM, 373-410. Van Braght describes the confession as ". . . a certain Confession of Faith, which very probably, was once contained in the History of the pious Anabaptist Martyrs, and is declared to have been the summary of their faith; . . ." He suggests that it may not agree in precise detail with what each of the martyrs believed, but that on basics it would be the same, and that certainly no martyr was opposed to the contents of the confession.

Ira D. Landis attributes the confession to Peter J. Twisck, a second generation leader in the Netherlands (The Faith of Our Fathers on Eschatology [Lititz, PA: by the author, 1946]), 6.

Archie Penner, in his major study of Twisck, indicates that Twisck himself denied that he had written the confession. Penner concludes that technically Twisck was truthful in his denial. Penner argues that it was written by Syvaert Pieters, a colleague of Twisck's. Penner further argues that the ideas were those of Twisck and that the confession can be used to outline his theology ("Twisck," 251-261, 393).

The confession itself consists of thirty-three articles, covering topics such as God, Christ (4 articles), Holy Spirit, the Trinity, creation, the Fall, Scripture, salvation (5 articles), the church and church practices (8 articles), marriage, the oath, and eschatology including death, resurrection, judgement, and the soul's eternal destiny.

what they wrote in letters of encouragement.

The two most influential leaders of the early Dutch Anabaptists were Menno Simons and Dirk Philips. Since, in the words of Poetcker, their "biblical approach may will be taken as normative for early Dutch Anabaptism,"²³ this study will consider their writings along with those in the Martyrs Mirror. This will help us both in interpreting the ideas of the martyrs and in seeing the Martyrs Mirror as an important work for understanding Menno and Dirk.

As indicated earlier, the Martyrs' Mirror has been an important part of Mennonite libraries since it was first issued in 1660. An interesting and important study that will hopefully be done by someone in the future is to see how subsequent Mennonite thinking was influenced by van Braght's work. There would be times when it would be difficult to distinguish that influence from the influences of Menno's writings and Dirk's Enchiridion. However, it would still be a worthwhile and helpful endeavour.

²³ Henry Poetcker, "The Anabaptist View of the Scriptures," Mennonite Life 19 (1964):110.

CHAPTER I

"PROVE TO ME BY THE SCRIPTURES":

THE MARTYRS' VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

The Anabaptist martyrs whose stories and letters appear in the Martyrs Mirror used a prodigious number of Scripture references in their letters from prison and in their discussions with their opponents. This in itself is evidence that the Scriptures were crucial to the Anabaptist martyrs as they sought to delineate their faith, defended it in conversations with their enemies, and attempted to make sense out of what they were experiencing. However, their use of these Scriptures and what they said about them require further investigations to substantiate the claim that the martyrs were first of all a people of the Bible.

In placing a heavy emphasis on the Bible, the Anabaptists were not unique in the sixteenth century reformation. They were one with the Protestant reformers in their insistence on Scripture as the only authority.¹ At the same time, as C. J. Dyck argues, "there was actually considerable difference in what these two traditions

¹ Henry Poetcker, "Biblical Controversy on Several Fronts," Mennonite Quarterly Review 40 (1966):128. He writes: "[The Reformers] as well as Menno now began with the Scriptures--this source now took precedence over all else. The Catholics, however, would not accept this." See also Harold S. Bender, "Bible," Mennonite Encyclopedia 1:323.

understood the term to mean in practice."² In particular we will notice that in the theological assumptions that guided their interpretation of Scripture the Anabaptists differed from Luther and Calvin.

In this chapter our focus will be on what the martyrs said about the Scriptures. In the following chapter we will examine how they used these Scriptures and determine what central principle guided their interpretation of the Scriptures.

1. Scriptures as sole authority.

Jacques d'Auchy, a Frenchman, was imprisoned and later executed in Friesland in 1559. While in prison he wrote a short confession of faith and a lengthy account of his interrogations. The account of the interrogations is written as a verbatim report of the sessions. It is in this account that we find d'Auchy saying many of the things that the martyrs said about Scripture in their encounters with their enemies.

When the commissary who questioned him confronted him

² C. J. Dyck, "Hermeneutics and Discipleship," in Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives, ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 30. Dyck compares only the Lutheran and the Anabaptist positions. What he says would, however, also be true of the Anabaptists and Calvin.

Ben C. Ollenburger lists six points of agreement and four points of disagreement between the Anabaptists and their contemporaries ("The Hermeneutics of Obedience," in Essays on Biblical Interpretation, 47-50).

with the accusation that he had left the true teachings of Jesus for the teachings of various Anabaptist leaders, Jacques's response was: "I have not forsaken the Word of God; for my faith is founded upon the Word of God, and not upon men, nor upon the doctrines of men, . . ." ³ When told to accept the practices that the "fathers and holy doctors" had ordained, Jacques's reply was: "Did those teachers institute this ordinance with a good intention; or did they institute it because it was an ordinance of God, contained in Scriptures?" ⁴ This is not unlike Menno Simons' reply to a similar question. ⁵ In later interactions d'Auchy said: "I think more of Paul singly, than of all the other teachers, and I hold only to Paul's exposition." ⁶ And again, when told that he was rejecting the word of "the holy teachers of the church," he answered:

I do not reject them, but I leave them undisturbed; for I find material enough in the Word of God to lay a good foundation, and water of

³ MM, 592.

⁴ Ibid., 596.

⁵ "To this we answer asking, Have Origen and Augustine proved this from the Scriptures? If they have, we would like to hear it, and if not, then we must hear and believe Christ and His apostles, and not Augustine and Origen. . . . Put your trust in Christ alone and in His Word, and in the sure instruction of His holy apostles" (Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. J. C. Wenger, trans. Leonard Verduin, with a biography by Harold S. Bender [Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1974], p.137). (In subsequent references Menno Simons' writings will be referred to as CWMS.)

⁶ MM, 598.

life enough to drink in the pure fountain, without running to the brooks or pools, which are mostly filthy and turpid.⁷

Yet, when it suited his argument, d'Auchy did not hesitate to refer to Eusebius, Cyprian, and Tertullian.⁸ He had obviously not "left them undisturbed" but was conversant in their writings. However, we must be quick to add that they were not drawn upon as authorities but as writers that would be recognized by the commissary.

Jacques d'Auchy made numerous other statements in the course of his discussions with his foe that show him to claim the Scriptures as the only authority for his faith and doctrines. He refused to expand on Paul's writing on the breaking of the bread, saying: "I do not want to comment on the Word of God."⁹ He insisted that matters be proved to him by Scripture,¹⁰ and "exclusively by Scripture."¹¹ His faith and doctrine were not based on men but "upon the Word of God."¹² When asked by the inquisitor: "But who is it that instructs you here upon earth, who is your teacher?" he replied: "The Word of God."¹³ Earlier he admitted to

⁷ Ibid., 600.

⁸ Ibid., 602.

⁹ Ibid., 594.

¹⁰ Ibid., 595, 596, 597, 601, 603, & 604.

¹¹ Ibid., 595.

¹² Ibid., 603.

¹³ Ibid., 603.

having various conversations about Scripture with people, but insisted that "my principal instruction and foundations I derived from reading the holy Word of the Lord."¹⁴ On the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, he maintained that he believed "nothing further concerning it than what the Scriptures testify."¹⁵ For d'Auchy the Scriptures were the only authority necessary. They did not need to be supplemented with any other literature. All that mattered was that the Scriptures be read and that their message be lived out by the believers.

D'Auchy was not unique in his insistence on being shown the error of his ways by Scripture and in refusing to accept the church fathers as authoritative. Maria van Beckum and her sister-in-law, Ursula, martyred in 1544, answered those who tried to change their beliefs: "We hold to the Word of God, and do not regard the dictates of the pope, nor the errors of the whole world."¹⁶ Hans Vermeersch was asked if he would not believe Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and Bernard. He replied: "I believe only the Word of God." When asked to speculate on Christ receiving flesh from Mary, he, like Jacques d'Auchy, answered: "I must not speak of

¹⁴ Ibid., 594. Conrad Koch, in 1565, described his own encounter with the authorities. When they wished to send a preacher to him, he replied: "I do not want him; the Word of the Lord has taught me. Did I not tell you, that I want no preacher?" (Ibid., 688).

¹⁵ Ibid., 597.

¹⁶ Ibid., 467. See also Ibid., 612 & 778.

that concerning which the Scriptures give me no information; suppositions are of no value."¹⁷

Menno Simons expressed a similar aversion to speculation on what Scripture meant.¹⁸ In the "Foundation of Christian Doctrine" he writes: "We dare not build upon uncertain conjecture but upon the Word which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path."¹⁹ He kept on insisting that what his opponents were saying "the Scriptures do not teach" and that "they have not Scriptural authority for [their] doctrine."²⁰ At the same time, as Poetcker has pointed out,²¹ in his writings on the incarnation Menno did theologize and speculate, as did the Anabaptist martyrs of

¹⁷ Ibid., 632. On using the church fathers, Christian Langedul also comments in a letter written in 1567. He writes: "It seems strange to me that the lords are not ashamed to come with such men, who will by no means defend themselves with the Holy Scriptures, but with the teachers of the Roman church, with Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, whom (they say) we are to believe. I then confessed that it could not be proved with the apostolical writings that the apostles baptized infants; . . . But he constantly asserted that the ancient teachers had written it, and that the holy Roman church so observed it, hence also we had to observe it. A poor argument" (Ibid., 708). See also Ibid., 541-542, 558 and 780.

¹⁸ Franklin H. Littell, A Tribute to Menno Simons (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1961), 11.

¹⁹ CWMS, 136.

²⁰ Ibid., 136.

²¹ Henry Poetcker, "The Hermeneutics of Menno Simons," (Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, 1961), 344.

his day.²² In both cases this happened when they were pushed by their enemies and had to defend a position on which the Scriptures say very little. As well, their understanding of the biological conception and birth of children was such that they thought women did not contribute to the child in any way other than by providing a place in her body for it to grow.²³ This breakdown in their insistence on "Scripture only" need not be seen as negating their stance, but as an indication that any position that is strongly held by a group of people in all likelihood has its weaknesses and places where it breaks down, particularly under pressure.

Both Menno Simons and Dirk Philips²⁴ held firmly to the belief that the Scriptures were to be the only authority for

²² They insisted that Jesus had not received flesh and blood from Mary. See MM, 558, 632, 636, 654, & 660.

²³ Jelis Strings said to his interrogator: "Say it as it ought to be: born; for a woman can certainly not make a child" (MM, 660). Menno held to a similar position (CWMS, 767-768; and M. Lucille Marr, "Anabaptist Women of the North: Peers in the Faith, Subordinates in Marriage," MQR 61 [1987]:360).

²⁴ Dirk Philips encourages his readers to "shun all strange doctrine that is contrary to the gospel, no matter how plausible it may appear to be" (Enchiridion or Handbook of the Christian Doctrine and Religion, compiled (by the grace of God) from the Holy Scriptures for the benefit of all lovers of the Truth, trans. A. B. Kolb [Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway Publishing Co., 1978], p.258). His own writings are to be evaluated "by the plummet of the divine word" (Ibid.). His hope is that he will have written only that which can "be proved by the evangelical and apostolic scripture" (Ibid., 290). Throughout his writings he refers to "the scripture" again and again as the source for what he is saying. See Ibid., 280-282, for example.

believers in matters of faith and ethics. For Menno this grew out of his own experience of conversion.²⁵ He had come to the faith after searching the Scriptures to find answers for the questions that developed in his mind with regards to infant baptism and the mass.²⁶ When what he found in the Scriptures was different from what the Church was teaching, he had to make a decision on which of those two was really God's Word. Christoph Bornhäuser writes: "Einmal musste er nun viel intensiver zu erfragen versuchen, was denn eigentlich Gottes Gebot sei im Unterschied zu allerlei kirchlich sanktioniertem Menschengebot."²⁷ It became for Menno, as Bornhäuser notes, a decision whether he would follow God's Word or cast it aside.²⁸ He chose with Scripture and it became his authority for the rest of his life. This authority was such that he not only felt bound by its prohibitions and admonitions, but he was convinced that the Christian was to do only that which the Word specifically commanded. He wrote:

²⁵ For Menno's own account of his conversion see his "Reply to Gellius Faber," CWMS, 668-674.

²⁶ William Keeney also notes the importance of the Bible in Menno's conversion and break with the church. See his, The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice 1539-1564 (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1968), 32 & 43.

²⁷ Christoph Bornhäuser, Leben und Lehre Menno Simons (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukircher Verlag, 1973), 54.

²⁸ "Jetzt aber erkannte er, das es letztlich nur auf ein einziges ankam: ob er dem Wort Gottes folgte oder ob er es verwarf" (Ibid., 54).

If it is not commanded of God, then it is not His ordinance, and therefore it has no promise. To repeat, if it is not commanded of God, then it is not His ordinance; and if it is not His ordinance, then it has no promise; and if it has no promise, than it is doubtlessly useless and vain.²⁹

Numerous other examples of martyrs who argued for Scripture as the sole authority could be given.³⁰ All point to the fact that the Anabaptist martyrs, like their leaders, held to the Scriptures as their guide for faith and refused to be persuaded by arguments from other sources. They welcomed and encouraged their enemies to prove them wrong with the use of the Scriptures.³¹ Until they were proven

²⁹ CWMS, 263. Henry Poetcker writes: "The rule for Menno (as for some other Anabaptists, including Grebel) became: what is not specifically commanded in the Scriptures is thereby forbidden!" (Henry Poetcker, "Menno Simons' Encounter with the Bible," MQR 40 (1966):125). Conrad Grebel's position on the same issue can be found in "Letters to Thomas Müntzer By Conrad Grebel and Friends," in Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, The Library of Christian Classics: Ichtus Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 75. Here Conrad and his friends wrote: "Whatever we are not taught by clear passages or examples must be regarded as forbidden, just as if it were written: 'This do not; sing not.'"

³⁰ MM, 793, 855, 940, 998, 1001, 1023, 1028, 1046, & 1079. The last reference is to a letter by Joost de Tollenaer to his daughter in which he agrees that the results of following the teachings of Scripture may not be pleasant, but the task of the Christian is to follow what the Scriptures teach.

³¹ Michael Sattler challenged the judges, saying: "Therefore, ye ministers of God, if ye have not heard or read the Word of God, send for the most learned, and for the sacred books of the Bible, of whatsoever language they may be, and let them confer with us in the Word of God; and if they prove to us with the Holy Scriptures, that we err and are in the wrong, we will gladly desist and recant and also willingly suffer the sentence and punishment for that of which we have been accused, but if no error is proven to us,

wrong solely on the basis of Scripture, they insisted on holding to their beliefs. They were confident enough in their position and their arguments from the Scriptures that they were willing and eager to defend themselves in public so that others, hearing their convincing arguments, would come to the Anabaptist faith.³²

2. The Scriptures as living authority.

This Word of God was for them not just a dead letter, a literal collection of instructions that must be learned as one might learn any set of instructions. It was alive and effective in its work.³³ Reading it brought changes to

I hope to God, that you will be converted, and receive instruction" (Ibid., 417).

Francis of Bosweert, almost taunting the council, invited them: "My lords, be not angry; but you high priests, show me the false doctrine which I hold, and this from the Bible, for I have brought one with me; come and instruct me from it" (Ibid., 472).

Hans van Overdam challenged his adversaries to a public debate beside a fire. He reports: "In the letter I wrote, that I desired and requested liberty publicly to dispute with all their learned men, in the presence of a great fire, into which the defeated party should be cast; . . ." The challenge was not accepted (Ibid., 487).

³² Hans de Vette, in 1559, said to the Dean of Ronse: "If you want to dispute with us in the market or any other public place, we are ready, in hopes that some of the ignorant might be drawn thereby" (Ibid., 622). See also Ibid., 488, 544, 637, 652, & 659.

³³ "Afterwards the Lord so ordered it that His Word did effectually work in some, so that, in the language of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 55:11), it accomplished that whereunto God sent it, and did not return unto Him void, but guided many into the right way" (Ibid., 433).

people's lives.³⁴ It was the royal, incorruptible seed by which people were regenerated and brought to new life.³⁵ By it people became a people of hope.³⁶ In writing to a Lutheran preacher, Jan Gerrits insisted that it was by the preaching of this Word that the church came into being. He wrote:

. . . for if we were brethren according to the spirit, and according to the doctrine of Christ and the apostles, we must be in one faith and practice, and be led by one spirit, which however, is far from being the case; for the brotherhood must spring out of the heavenly regeneration, through the hearing of the divine Word, from the earthly into the heavenly. . . . God would dwell above all, and in us all, through His Word.³⁷

Joost Verkindert wrote that "without Christ and without His Word there is no salvation."³⁸ This living Word was the Word that they relied on, the Word that they studied and the

³⁴ Ibid., 546, 565 & 737.

³⁵ ". . . to the salvation of all those that are born again with Him, through His imperishable Word or Gospel, and do His will; . . . obedient children of God, who have amended their life, and thus have risen with Christ, through His Gospel, into newness of life" (Ibid., 507). See also 509 & 879.

William Keeney writes: "It was the Word of God which could enter man from the outside as a spiritual entity and not as a physical act, and produce such a change" (Thought and Practice, 43). See also Littell, 19.

³⁶ "Blessed be the God of mercies, who has with His divine Word begotten us again unto a lively hope, reserved in heaven for us, . . ." (MM, 523).

³⁷ Ibid., 682. Emphasis mine. Littell, argues that for Menno Simons "it was the living Word, planted in the midst of the faithful, which created the church" (p. 15).

³⁸ MM, 861.

Word that they used to defend themselves.

The martyrs insisted that the Scriptures were to be the Christian's only weapon of defense. They felt that their adversaries were wrong in trying to use sword, torture, prison, and death to convert them. Hans van Overdam wrote to the authorities, requesting that "they should leave the sword to the secular power, and contend with the Word of God."³⁹ He bemoaned the fact that the Roman church would use the emperor's sword to kill those "who will not defend themselves with temporal or carnal weapons, but only with the Word of God, which is our sword, and which is sharp and two-edged."⁴⁰ Had the religious leaders of their day been willing to meet them on equal grounds, the Scriptures, the martyrs felt that their defense would have stopped their adversaries. This was admitted by one of the margraves who "declared that he had never heard so clear an exposition of the Scriptures, and that if he were with them only two weeks they should persuade him."⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 487.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 492.

⁴¹ Ibid., 497. In another situation, the martyr seems to have won the argument. "Two priests and a doctor in the Scriptures then came to them, and vehemently argued with them about infant baptism; but Nicholas vigorously withstood them with the Scriptures, and drove them from him" (Ibid., 644). Of Claudine le Vetre, the chronicler reports that she was able to refute, "from the word of God, all that the priests and monks were able to bring forward, against her, . . ." (Ibid., 737). Joos Verkindert reported that, in arguments with the bishop's commissary, he "contradicted him with divers Scriptures." (Ibid., 858).

For the Anabaptist martyrs the Scriptures were a source of comfort in their troubled times and in their painful experiences. Jerome Segers, in writing to his wife, said: "Herewith I will commend you to the Lord, and to the Word of his grace, . . ."42 There is a sense here of being placed within the care of the Word, of the Word being alive and able to care for the people. This was so because of the promises that it contained. Hendrick Alewijns wrote that he was in good spirits because he had "the rich promises of God to succor us in this present time, who also assures us of eternal life hereafter, of which so abundantly mention is made in the Scriptures."43 The Scriptures promised that God would care for his own and therefore, "according to the Scriptures, no one is ever confounded, who fears God from the heart."44 People could rejoice together in the Word of God.45 Joriaen Simons and his fellow prisoners wrote to other believers, encouraging them, while experiencing the burning sun of suffering, to "sit under the shadow of the Scriptures, and they will be a glorious protection unto you."46 People gathered together "in order to be refreshed,

42 Ibid., 521. See also Ibid., 586, 624, 630, 650, & 652.

43 Ibid., 743.

44 Ibid., 525.

45 Ibid., 539 & 759.

46 Ibid., 567.

edified and bettered by the preaching of the Word of God."⁴⁷ Christian Langedul encouraged his wife to "comfort [her]self with the Word of the Lord."⁴⁸ For the martyrs the Scriptures were the source of comfort in a time of need. There they found God's promises as well as numerous examples of how God had provided for, protected, comforted and been present with his people in the past. It gave them the assurance that he was with them now.

3. The Scriptures and Education

Because the Scriptures were so important to the Anabaptists in formulating beliefs, in encouraging each other and in defending themselves in sessions with the inquisitors, those who were in prison wished for copies of the Scriptures to be brought to them⁴⁹ and encouraged their families and fellow believers to diligently study the Bible. Jerome Segers encouraged his wife "constantly to have the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 584.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 705. See also Ibid., 770 & 1031. Dirk Philips writes: "Therefore the holy scripture comforts all the godly who suffer persecution here . . ." (Enchiridion, 459).

⁴⁹ John Bair, imprisoned in Franconia for twenty-three years, wrote to the elders of the church, saying that he had received various things from them, "but most important, the Bible, I did not receive, as is written in the forepart of the tablets; but it is my request, that you will send it to me, if it can still be found; for I would like to have it above all things; if it can be according to the will of God; for I am sadly in want of it, and suffer great hunger and thirst for the Word of the Lord these many long years" (MM, 503-504). See also Ibid., 707.

Word of the Lord before [her] eyes."⁵⁰ Peter Witses wrote: "Let us arm ourselves with the Word of God; for the Word of God is the true door."⁵¹

Those who did not have Bibles, were encouraged to buy them. Christoffel Fierens, in 1572, just before his execution, called to the people: "Sell your clothes, and buy Testaments; attend therein to the words of God: for therein you will find life; . . ."⁵² It was through the Scriptures that God's will could be known and that Christ could become real to the believer. Therefore no effort was to be spared in pursuing the study of the Scriptures.

This effort included the learning to read and write.⁵³ Upon his imprisonment in 1557, Joriaen Simons left a testament for his son, Simon. In it he advised the boy "to learn to read and write, that you may learn and know the better, what the Lord requires of you."⁵⁴ Their quickness in learning to read and write amazed their enemies. Friar

⁵⁰ Ibid., 512.

⁵¹ Ibid., 549. See also Ibid., 614, 668, 822, 915, 947, 949, & 1074.

⁵² Ibid., 961. See also Ibid., 653.

⁵³ C. J. Dyck concludes that "the Anabaptists made every effort to teach their converts to read in order to study the Scriptures" ("The Suffering Church in Anabaptism," MQR 59 [1985]:12).

⁵⁴ MM, 565. In 1560, Lenaert Plovier wrote to his children, saying: "And when you have come to years of understanding, take a Testament, and see what Christ has left and commanded us there; for all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, . . ." (Ibid., 642).

Cornelis, in commenting on this, said:

You Anabaptists are certainly fine fellows to understand the holy Scriptures; for before you are rebaptized, you can't tell A from B, but as soon as you are baptized, you can read and write. If the devil and his mother have not a hand in this, I do not understand any thing about you people.⁵⁵

It was not the devil and his mother but the commitment to the Word of God and to keeping that Word that compelled the Anabaptists to study the Scriptures till they were conversant in them.⁵⁶

Because their opponents were often people with an education,⁵⁷ and because it was the Spirit in the heart of the believer that was important in understanding the Scriptures,⁵⁸ the only education that was needed to understand the Scriptures, according to the Anabaptists, was the ability to read and write. Some did have a higher education⁵⁹ but others in all likelihood did not.⁶⁰ With

⁵⁵ Ibid., 775. A Bavarian official expressed similar, though less derogatory amazement at "how quickly these uneducated craftsmen and day laborers, pure idiots as he called them, quoted scriptural passages and defended their doctrines" (Claus-Peter Clasen, Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618 [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972], 397).

⁵⁶ Cornelius Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life, and Thought (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), 206.

⁵⁷ Poetcker, "Encounter," 115, agrees with this.

Menno repeatedly refers to his opponents as "the learned ones." See CWMS, 128 & 207, for example.

⁵⁸ See pp. 32-36 below.

⁵⁹ Sattler was willing to work out of a Bible of any language which the judges might choose (MM, 417). In 1549, Elizabeth, a nun, was converted after reading the Latin

their hesitation to comment on a text beyond quoting the text itself in response to a question or issue, education would not have been needed since anyone could memorize Scripture.⁶¹ The Anabaptist's interest in simple interpretation rather than more educated and involved interpretation is expressed by a group that fled from Flanders to London who, after having been arrested and imprisoned in the English city, wrote:

Hence we willingly accept whatever the holy Scriptures declare to us, and wish that we would be left to adhere to the simplicity of the Word of God, and not with subtle questions to be driven further, than we with our feeble understanding can comprehend or answer with the Scriptures.⁶²

Their antipathy towards the teachings of the Church Fathers also indicates that education would have been seen at the very least as unnecessary for the proper interpretation of Scripture. Claesken, a woman who was arrested and executed in 1559, responded to the inquisitor's

Bible (Ibid., 546). Jacques d'Auchy was familiar with the writings of some of the Church Fathers (Ibid., 602). Menno Simons had trained for the Catholic priesthood. Harold Bender says that Menno learned to read Latin and Greek "and became well acquainted with many ancient writings in Latin, particularly the writings of the church fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Eusebius" ("A Brief Biography of Menno Simons," CWMS, 4).

⁶⁰ See Friar Cornelis' comments on p. 29 above.

⁶¹ That they did memorize seems obvious from examples like that of Valerius Schoolmaster who included numerous references to Scripture in the text of a booklet, despite the fact that he had not seen a Bible for fourteen weeks (MM, 726-728).

⁶² Ibid., 1023.

insistence that she needed to look at writings other than Scripture by saying:

We need no other writings than the holy Gospel, which Christ Himself, with His blessed mouth, has spoken to us, and sealed with His blood; if we can observe that, we shall be saved. . . . Though I am simple before men, I am not simple in the knowledge of the Lord. Do you not know that the Lord thanked His Father, that He had hid these things from the wise and prudent, and had revealed them to the simple and unto babes?⁶³

What was required was an openness to the Spirit and a willingness to obey what was written. This view agrees with that espoused by Menno Simons. He wrote:

For the wisdom of God which we teach is a wisdom which none may understand except those who are desirous of living and walking according to the will of God. It is that wisdom which is not to be brought from afar nor taught in colleges. It must be given from above and be learned through the Holy Ghost.⁶⁴

At the same time that he disparaged education, Menno also saw benefit in some of it, particularly, the knowledge

⁶³ Ibid., 612. In the Confession of 1600 the churches are told that in calling ministers they "should not turn to such as have been educated in universities, according to the wisdom of man, that they may talk and dispute, and seek to sell their purchased gift for temporal gain; and who according to the custom of the world do not truly follow Christ in the humility of regeneration." What is important, according to the confession, is fasting and prayer and inspiration by the Spirit (Ibid., 395).

⁶⁴ CWMS, 106-107. In one tract Menno refers to the Anabaptists' opponents as those who "have deceitfully mingled the precious fine gold of the divine Word with the dross of human doctrine, and the pure wine with the polluted water of their foolish wisdom" (Ibid., 159).

Dyck, 35; Keeney, Thought and Practice, 32 & 41; and Poetcker, "Hermeneutics," 174, all agree that Menno was skeptical of education.

of the languages of the Biblical texts. He wrote: "Learnedness and proficiency in languages I have never disdained, but have honored and coveted them from my youth; although I have, alas, never attained to them."⁶⁵ These languages would have helped Menno to understand the text itself and so a knowledge of them was desirable. Any education beyond that which assisted in reading the Scriptures, either in Dutch or in the original languages, was seen as unnecessary and a threat to pure understanding and willing obedience.

4. Word and Spirit.

The Anabaptists were accused by some of being dead literalists and by others of being visionary spiritualists. Although their strict obedience to the Word and their constant insistence on being proven wrong by the Word might look like literalism, and the excesses of Münster gave grounds to the accusations of spiritualism, by and large they were guilty of neither. They depended on and argued for a combination of Spirit and letter in determining God's will and ordering their lives.

⁶⁵ CWMS, 790. William Keeney, "Menno Simons on Faith and Reason," in No Other Foundation: Commemorative Essays on Menno Simons (N. Newton: Bethel College, 1962), 27 & 31; and Cornelius Krahn, Menno Simons 1496-1561: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theologie der Taufgesinnten (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schreider, 1936: reprint ed., Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 109, both mention this two-sided response to education on the part of Menno Simons.

John Claess in writing to his wife and children said:

. . . if we ask Him for the Holy Spirit, the same will teach us in all things, and comfort and strengthen us through His grace, . . . the Holy Spirit will teach you all that you ought to believe. Believe not what men say, but obey the commands of the New Testament, and ask God to teach you His will. Trust not to your understanding, but trust in the Lord, and let all your counsel be in Him, and ask Him to direct your paths. . . . May God the Father, through His beloved Son Jesus Christ, give you His Holy Spirit, that He may guide you into all truth. Amen. John 16:13.⁶⁶

At the same time that Claess stressed the importance of the Spirit, he used numerous references to refer to the writings of Scripture. Maritgen Jans referred to the Word of God as the sword of the Spirit.⁶⁷ Lauwerens van der Leyen wrote:

. . . the holy Scriptures were given through the Holy Ghost, and not without Him, . . . Thus, the Holy Ghost bears testimony, that the Gospel which we have, is the word of the living God, which He has given us, that we should live according to it, and thus be saved at the last day; . . .⁶⁸

In a letter that she left for her children, Soetgen van den Houte indicated that she thought that both the Holy Spirit's teachings as well as her instructions from the Bible were important for her children.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ MM, 469.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 495.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 637. See also Ibid., 923.

⁶⁹ She writes: "May the wisdom of the Holy Ghost instruct and strengthen you therein, that you may be brought up in the ways of the Lord." In the next paragraph she says: ". . . but I should like to write a jewel into your heart, if it were possible, which is the word of truth, in which I want to instruct you a little for the best with the

We can conclude from these examples that for the Anabaptists letter and spirit were both important. The Scriptures had come by the action of God through his Spirit. They were the message of Christ and the apostles generated by the Spirit. As such they were God's voice⁷⁰ speaking to them and therefore were meant to be taken literally. At the same time, true understanding of that which was written could come about only by the power of the Spirit within the person.⁷¹ The Spirit and the Word had to work together, both in teaching God's truths and in bringing about regeneration within the person.⁷²

Poetcker argues that for Menno the work of the written Word and of the Holy Spirit were very close. He writes:

Word of the Lord, according to the little gift I have received from Him and according to my simplicity" (Ibid., 646).

⁷⁰ The martyrs refer to the Scriptures variously as that which the Spirit declared (Ibid., 515), the voice of Christ (Ibid., 441-442), and the voice of God (Ibid., 527). Dirk Philips referred to all three, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, as being operative in the coming of the Word of God. He wrote: ". . . the true ordinances of God, as those that have come down from heaven, given by God the Father, taught and commanded by Jesus Christ, testified to and confirmed by the Holy Ghost (Matt. 3:17), and practiced and declared by the apostles" (Enchiridion, 437-438).

⁷¹ Myron S. Augsburger, Principles of Biblical Interpretation in Mennonite Theology (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), 26; Dyck, p.37; Ben C. Ollenburger, 51; Wilhelm Wiswedel, "The Inner and the Outer Word: A Study in the Anabaptist Doctrine of Scripture," MQR 26 (1952):171-191.

⁷² ". . . for Christ gives and sends the Holy Spirit from above down upon everyone whom He sees prepared; and His Word He also brought from above, and hence this regeneration is effected from above. John 15:26; 8:26; 3:3, 7" (MM, 866).

"Menno never ceased insisting that the two, Scripture and Spirit, must be held together."⁷³ Without the Spirit the Scriptures remained a closed book. With the Spirit, they became alive. In discussing a quotation from Menno, Poetcker says:

In effect this speaks of the crucial role of the Spirit of God in aiding men to understand. The Holy Ghost illumined Menno so that he could understand. And Menno went on to point out that the Spirit continues his word, for he teaches the gospel truths to his children, and "writes them upon the tablets of our hearts with the gracious finger of his heavenly flame."⁷⁴

This did not mean that the Spirit went beyond the words of the Scriptures, but rather that the Spirit gave meaning and life to those words. Together they created a new people out

⁷³ Poetcker, "Hermeneutics," 162; and Henry Poetcker, "Menno Simons' View of the Bible as Authority," in A Legacy of Faith: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Cornelius Krahn, ed. C. J. Dyck (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1962), 54.

William Keeney writes, in discussing Menno's view: "God works through means in order that the true being may be revealed to man and the Holy Spirit must be the agency to bring the words and reality together in the experience of the believer" (Thought and Practice, 34).

On the importance of the role of the Spirit for Menno in interpreting the Bible see also Richard B. Gardner, "Menno Simons: A Study in Anabaptist Theological Self-Understanding and Methodology," MQR 39 (1965):108.

A. Orley Swartzentruber comes to a similar conclusion about Michael Sattler after studying one of the martyr's letters. Swartzentruber says: "In Sattler's mind there is no conflict between living in the light of the Spirit and living by the word of the Scriptures" ("The Piety and Theology of the Anabaptist Martyrs in van Braght's Martyrs' Mirror, I," MQR 28 [1954]:22).

⁷⁴ Poetcker, "Encounter," 117. See also Bornhäuser, 60-63.

of those who heard and read the Word.⁷⁵

This conclusion would suggest that Renze O. De Groot was wrong in his assessment when he argued that Menno and Dirk did not see a "real connection" between the Spirit and the Word.⁷⁶ He went on to add that Menno "gives one the impression that he expected the natural man to heed spiritual truths without the Spirit's illumination."⁷⁷ In light of the evidence from both the writings of Menno and from the Martyrs Mirror, this position is not tenable. The Anabaptists gave to the Spirit a very significant role in the interpretation of Scripture. They did so without relinquishing their stand on the authority of the letter, a letter given, and in each reading coming to life by the power of the Spirit.

⁷⁵ Poetcker, "Hermeneutics," 211-216.

Bruno Penner, in his study of the sixteenth century Anabaptists, divided them into three categories, 1) the mystical, 2) the concrete Biblical spiritualists and 3) the literalists. He places Menno within the third group, although he recognizes a kinship with the second group, a group that stressed the importance of both the literal Word and the Spirit ("The Anabaptist View of Scripture," [M.Th. thesis, Bethany Biblical Seminary and Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1955], 49 & 60-61). Later he argues that for Menno's interpretation of Scripture, the Spirit was very important (Ibid., 96-97). In light of our current study, it is certainly unfair to label Menno and the Dutch Anabaptists as "literalists" if that means a reliance on Scripture without the help of the Spirit.

⁷⁶ Renze Otto De Groot, "The Faith of the Dutch Anabaptists," (Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Oak Brook, Illinois, 1947), 37.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 38.

5. The Old Testament and The New Testament.

Another important issue to consider in the martyrs' view of the Scriptures is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In citing references they used the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Apocrypha⁷⁸ extensively, with an obvious preference for the New Testament.⁷⁹ That preference is explained in the points of view that the martyrs expressed. Jelis Bernaerts saw the Old Testament as having been fulfilled by Christ and the New Testament "confirmed by His blood." He encouraged his wife to show that she was "a child of the New Testament, that the law of the Lord is written in your heart, and is thus read."⁸⁰ It was the New Testament that was now to be followed and was to be descriptive of the Christian. In using the example of Pharaoh and the Israelites, Bernaerts showed that the Old Testament stories could be used as types of what the New Testament taught.⁸¹ It was, however, the New Testament that was to be determinate for the saints.⁸²

⁷⁸ On their view of the Apocrypha see #6, pp. 41-44 below.

⁷⁹ In my own research I found that in one section of 247 pages in the MM, (413-659), there were 109 specific references to the Old Testament, 28 to the Apocrypha, and 717 to the New Testament.

⁸⁰ MM, 625-626. Matthias Servaes, in his arguments with the authorities, used only the New Testament to refute them (Ibid., 690-691).

⁸¹ Ibid., 625.

⁸² Augsburgur, 24; and Ollenburger, 59.

In discussing the relationship between the two testaments in a confession of faith that he left for his children, Hendrick Alewijns declared that the difference had to be understood

with a due distinction of times and laws, as regards the ancient warfares of Israel, the taking of revenge on enemies, fighting and killing in the time of the law, and previous to it, which then was done by the will, command, permission, and also, help, of God, under the Old Testament, it must not be so, and is now plainly prohibited, by the Word and example of Christ, Himself God and the Son of God, whose word must be heard."⁸³

The crucial difference in the times was Christ and His teaching. Where the teachings of Christ were different from those of the Old Testament, the new teachings were to be taken as authoritative, for Christ, as God, spoke with the authority of God.

Tijs Jeuriaenss wrote, in 1569:

This holy, unsearchable and only wise God wrought all things according to His wisdom, purpose, and predetermined counsel, first in figures, promises, types and shadows, unto the bringing in of a better hope, by the which we draw nigh unto God. Heb. 7:19. For the figures, shadows and heavenly types point us to the true substance and perfect truth itself in Christ Jesus, which especially the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, . . .⁸⁴

The Old Testament pointed to the New Testament and in that it was the Word of God and fulfilling the intent of God. It

⁸³ MM, 754. Dirk Philips also mentions two dispensations (Enchiridion, 267). Poetcker understands the same kind of distinction between dispensations to be present in Menno ("Hermeneutics," 197 & 230).

⁸⁴ MM, 828. Emphasis mine.

was not to be seen as equal with the New Testament, however, for Christ had fulfilled the promises and was now the clear picture of God's message and the will of God. His commands were to be the guide for the Christian.

This agrees with the views expressed in the confession of faith of 1600. This confession stated that the Old Testament was also written by the Spirit of God. By its "figures and shadows" it "pointed and led to Christ Jesus, . . . But Christ Jesus came who is the end and fulfilling of the old law, and the beginner and author of the new law."⁸⁵

It continued:

And it is so much worthier, and better established than the Old Testament, as it was given through a higher and worthier ambassador, and was sealed with a more precious blood; and it shall not cease, but continue till the end of the world.⁸⁶

Christians were to submit themselves wholeheartedly in obedience to this new message.

The Old Testament was still important and "must be distinctively taught among the people of God."⁸⁷ When one martyr, identified as Trijntgen, refused to listen to the teachings of the Old Testament, insisting that she wanted to "adhere to the New Testament," she was chided by a fellow Anabaptist.⁸⁸ The Old Testament was not to be disregarded.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 382.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 889.

However, it was "to be expounded by and reconciled with the New Testament."⁸⁹ In that way its true meaning would become clear.

Menno Simons and Dirk Philips also saw the Old Testament as being a preparation for the New Testament and believed that the difference between the two was Christ. Menno spoke of "Christ Jesus alone in whom all the figurative signs take an end."⁹⁰ Dirk argued that "the letter of the law of Moses had to make way for, and [was] culminated in Christ Jesus."⁹¹ He wrote that "the Mosaic law of figures and shadows had its end in Christ Jesus."⁹² The importance of the Old Testament was therefore, in anticipating the New. In it could be seen the evidence of God's preparation for the coming of the time of Christ and the age of the church. The Old Testament was also important as the story of God's dealings with his people and consequently as a source for devotional materials, for promises of God, and for both positive and negative examples.⁹³ The Old Testament was important. Less anyone think otherwise, Menno wrote:

⁸⁹ Ibid., 382

⁹⁰ CWMS, 125.

⁹¹ Enchiridion, 262.

⁹² Ibid., 272.

⁹³ Bornhäuser, 49; Poetcker, "Hermeneutics," 202; and William Klassen, "Old Testament," Mennonite Encyclopedia 4:51.

We certainly hope no one of a rational mind will be so foolish a man as to deny that the whole Scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction, and that they are the true scepter and rule by which the Lord's kingdom, church, and congregation must be ruled and governed.⁹⁴

It was, however, important only in relation to the intention of Christ and the message of the New Testament.⁹⁵

6. The Apocrypha.

The Apocrypha was also used by the martyrs, though not with the same frequency as the canonical books. Was it seen as equally authoritative? In the Martyrs Mirror we have only one discussion that comments on this issue. In his arguments with the inquisitor Jacques d'Auchy refused to accept the Apocrypha as authoritative. He said:

The ancients used this name, [apocryphal], to indicate that they are not authentic books, from which rules or ordinances may be taken. . . . the reason why I will not receive them, is not only this, that I will not trust in what men have said, but also because I do not find that Christ or His apostles received them, or quoted any testimony

⁹⁴ CWMS, 160.

⁹⁵ Of all the Anabaptist leaders in sixteenth century Europe, Pilgram Marpeck gave the most comprehensive description of his understanding of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament, speaking of them as old and new covenant, promise and fulfillment, law and gospel and so on. For a discussion of Marpeck's views see William Klassen, "The Relation of the Old and New Covenants in Pilgram Marpeck's Theology," MQR 40 (1966):97-111, and the lengthier discussion in his Covenant and Community: The Life, Writings and Hermeneutics of Pilgram Marpeck (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), pp.101-147.

from them.⁹⁶

Harold Bender and N. van der Zijpp see this as conclusive proof that the Apocrypha did not have the same authority for the Anabaptists as did the other books of the Bible.⁹⁷ One such example is hardly clear evidence. D'Auchy himself did not hesitate to refer to the book of Judith.⁹⁸ The other martyrs made liberal use of the Apocrypha. Jacob D. Goering concludes that Menno Simons took the Apocrypha seriously and made references to it "without any qualification which would tend to differentiate or set them apart from the references to the Scriptures proper."⁹⁹ Poetcker argues that the Apocrypha was part of

⁹⁶ MM, 603. C. T. Fritsch would agree with d'Auchy that there are no direct quotations from the Apocrypha in the New Testament. However, he adds: ". . . the influence of these books is felt in every part of the Christian scriptures." Fritsch gives several examples of the influence of the Apocrypha on the New Testament writings, and then concludes: "These allusions, and many others not mentioned here, are convincing proof that the NT writers were well acquainted with the Apoc.[sic] and used them for religious instruction and example" ("Apocrypha," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 1:161-166).

Had d'Auchy been presented with this evidence, considering his high regard for the New Testament, and his own inclination to refer to Apocryphal books, he might well have been less adamant about the Apocrypha not being authoritative.

⁹⁷ Harold S. Bender and N. van der Zijpp, "Apocrypha," Mennonite Encyclopedia 1:136.

⁹⁸ MM, 605-606.

⁹⁹ Jacob D. Goering, "Menno Simons' Use of Scripture with Special Reference to the Apocrypha," (Unpublished paper written at Bethany and Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Chicago, 1947).

Menno's canon and that he quoted from it freely.¹⁰⁰ In one selection of five of Menno's books, Poetcker found 100 references to at least eight Apocryphal writings and no comments that Menno considered "them less canonical than the other books."¹⁰¹ Bender's and van der Zijpp's unequivocal "This is not correct," given in response to the statement that Menno ascribed the same authority to the Apocrypha as to the canonical Scriptures, without any supporting evidence, seems, therefore, to be unfounded.

This same use of the Apocrypha on equal status with the other books of the Bible is clearly evident in the writings of Dirk Philips¹⁰² and in the Martyrs Mirror. In the Martyrs Mirror the Apocrypha is used to buttress arguments against business,¹⁰³ to give advice on child-rearing,¹⁰⁴ to

¹⁰⁰ Poetcker, "Hermeneutics," 151. See also his "Menno Simons' View," 48. Krahn writes: "In seiner Verwertung der Bibel in seinen Schriften macht er zwischen den kanonischen Schriften und den Apokryphen keinen Unterschied" (Menno Simons, 109).

¹⁰¹ "Hermeneutics," 153. Goering also did a count of the references made in Menno's writing (9). Yoder and Hochstetler do not provide a count but list all the instances that they found of references to the Apocryphas in Menno's writings (90-105). Their findings would support the conclusions of Goering and Poetcker.

¹⁰² For example, see Enchiridion, 282, 284 & 418. On 158-160 Dirk gives several examples of people who faithfully separated themselves from the evil practices of the world. Two of the examples are from the Old Testament and four are from the Apocrypha.

¹⁰³ MM, 696.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 581.

discuss eschatology,¹⁰⁵ and to give comfort.¹⁰⁶ The martyrs referred to Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Jesus Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, I, II, & III Maccabees, Esther, Susanna & Daniel, Bel and the Dragon, and II & IV Esdras.¹⁰⁷ We must conclude from this that the Apocrypha was important to the Anabaptist martyrs and that they thought of the Apocryphal books as having authority.

If the Anabaptists had not thought of the Apocrypha as authoritative and inspired they would not have made such liberal use of it. We notice in their attitudes to the writings of the Church Fathers that they were not about to use materials of doubtful authority. Since they rejected the Church Fathers so forcefully yet accepted the Apocrypha so willingly, they must have seen it as one with their Scriptures that they had received from God.

7. Summary.

In writing to their families and fellow Christians and in their discussions with their interrogators the Anabaptist martyrs showed themselves to be a people committed to the Scriptures. They accepted no other authority in doctrine and in lifestyle. Some of the Anabaptists might have read

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 579.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 569.

¹⁰⁷ Eldon T. Yoder and Monroe D. Hochstetler, Biblical References in Anabaptist Writings (Aylmer, Ont.: Pathway Publishers, 1969), 90-105.

the Church Fathers in the past. They were, however, hesitant to refer to them. And since many had not read them, and would not be able to read them, they insisted that all that was needed to understand the Scriptures was the ability to read and the willingness to obey.

The Scriptures were read and re-read by the Anabaptists. As they were studied under the guidance of the Holy Spirit their message became clear and could be understood by anyone. As the Holy spirit brought life to the letter of the texts, the Word brought about regeneration within the hearts of the people, initiated changes in their lives, and gave birth to the church, the fellowship of believers.

In the Anabaptists' study of the Word, the outlining of their theology and the delineating of their ethics the New Testament was primary. It served as the door into the Old Testament. It could be supplemented by the Old Testament and by the Apocrypha but it could never be superseded by them. The message of Christ and His apostles was the final revelation of God and was the martyrs final proof and authority.

In their views of Scripture, the Anabaptist martyrs shared those of their leaders, Menno Simons and Dirk Philips. They agreed that the Scriptures should be the only authority to the exclusion of the Church Fathers, and that within Scripture the New Testament was primary.

The question that still remains to be answered is how did the Anabaptists interpret this Bible to which they gave all authority. For that authority to express itself the message of the Scriptures had to be interpreted by them and applied to their lives. At times it seemed that they thought that no interpretation was needed, when, for example, they quoted at length from various scriptural passages without comment. Yet the passages they chose, and the fact that they quoted without comment indicated a way of interpreting, a kind of hermeneutics. At other times, they did give interpretations and assembled ideas from various parts of the Scriptures, making it quite clear that they were interpreting the texts and following a certain method. What that was will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

"THE WAY OF THE PROPHETS, APOSTLES AND MARTYRS":

THE MARTYRS' INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

The Anabaptist martyrs not only insisted continually on the importance of using the Scriptures as the sole authority, but, in their letters and in their interactions with others, made frequent and regular use of Scripture passages. In doing so they simply referred to Scripture references, they used partial verses, and they quoted lengthy passages, sometimes with very little comment on the passages quoted.¹ To them the connection between the quotation that they were using and the issue that they were addressing was obvious.

In studying the Anabaptist interpretation of Scriptures it is important to note their rejection to a large degree of the allegorical method that had been common in the Middle Ages, and an acceptance of a more literal approach. That literal interpretation was guided by the idea of the church, their experience of suffering, and by the Anabaptists' understanding of the importance of discipleship. As we use these three categories to examine the Anabaptist interpretation of Scripture within the writings collected in the Martyrs Mirror, we will come to

¹ For an example of this see Dirk Pieters Smuel's testament and letter from prison written in 1546 (MM, 478-481).

the conclusion that the Anabaptist hermeneutics centred on the church of suffering disciples.

1. The Hermeneutical Method.

During the Middle Ages students of the Bible looked for four meanings within each text--the historical, the allegorical, the ethical, and the anagogic.² To a large extent the Anabaptists rejected the use of the allegorical³ and the anagogic. The ethical meaning of the text was of crucial importance to them,⁴ but was not imposed on the text apart from the text's historical setting. At the same time it did lead to a certain ahistorical approach in the sense that the ethical commands of the New Testament were meant for all times and were not restricted to one brief historical period. The commands of the Old Testament, on the other hand, were bound by their history.⁵

Dirk Philips and Menno Simons were not agreed on the use of the allegorical.⁶ Menno, in his practice and

² Robert M. Grant, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 119.

³ C. J. Dyck, "The Christology of Dirk Philips," MQR 31 (1957):152.

⁴ See Keeney, Thought and Practices, 32-35, and the discussion below, pp. 61-65.

⁵ See pp. 37-41 above.

⁶ Alvin Beachy, "The Bible and the Reformation," Mennonite Life 19 (1964):87-89; Krahn, Menno Simons, 105-107; and Poetcker, "Anabaptist View," 111.

conviction, insisted on staying very close to the letter of the text and restricted himself to the text's simplest meaning.⁷ As a result, he used the Old Testament stories as examples of God's dealings with man, the need for obedience and the dire consequences of disobedience. The text had its original, historical fulfillment and a meaning it received in that fulfillment. The meaning could be transferred to the present and applied to current persons and situations.⁸ The new application could be more spiritualized with the original serving as a "type" of the new, as in Aaron being a type of Christ.⁹ That did not, however, detract from its original meaning and application. The one exception seems to be in the interpretation of the Song of Solomon which became a hymn describing the relationship between Christ and His church.

Dirk, as can be seen from at least two of his writings, "The Tabernacle of Moses"¹⁰ and "Of Spiritual

⁷ Poetcker, "Biblical Controversy," 136. Bornhäuser writes: "Dem 'glozeren' . . . hält Menno immer wieder den Buchstaben des ausdrücklich dastehenden Wortes entgegen" (p. 58). See also Krahn, 107.

⁸ In using Jeremiah's prophesy that Babylon would be punished Menno wrote: "I am aware that this was fulfilled against Babylon, in the country of the Chaldees, although the Roman Babylon shall not escape the same visitation; . . ." (CWMS, 47).

⁹ CWMS, 184.

¹⁰ Enchiridion, 255-291.

Restitution,"¹¹ was quite prepared to use allegory and spiritual interpretation in his study of the Scriptures,¹² claiming that he was only following the examples of the apostles, particularly as seen in the book of Hebrews.¹³

This same difference of opinion is evident in the Martyrs Mirror. By and large the stories of the Old Testament were used as examples to make a point and to encourage the believers, leaving the historical meaning and setting intact. Thus, when Walter of Stoelwijk referred to a series of Old Testament stories, he did so without discarding their historical meaning. The individuals in those accounts served for him as examples of faith and steadfastness that could encourage the believers of his day.¹⁴ At the same time there were others who were inclined to a more spiritual, allegorical interpretation.¹⁵

Most of the martyrs showed in their use of the

¹¹ Ibid., 321-363.

¹² Douglas H. Shantz argues that Dirk saw two meanings in the Biblical texts--the literal and the allegorical ("The Ecclesiological focus of Dirk Philips' Hermeneutical Thought in 1559: A Contextual Study," MQR 60 [1986]:126).

¹³ Enchiridion, 258-260. Dirk says specifically: "Therefore we have no thought of writing anything strange or new on the tabernacle of Moses, but the apostolic interpretation is the foundation upon which we build, and if we explain some things a little further than the apostles did, there is reason for doing so" (Ibid., 259).

¹⁴ MM, 457.

¹⁵ Ibid., 681-686 & 824-831.

Scriptures that they saw the Bible as a record of God's dealings with his people and a Word from God on how His people were to live. This did not have to be embellished with fanciful allegorical interpretations. It was best read as it was written.

2. The Conceptual Centre.

In interpreting Scriptures people are always guided by concepts and ideas that they bring with them to the reading of the Bible. Usually, in studying a persons interpretations, it is possible to determine what the central idea is that serves as this guide. For the Anabaptist martyrs it was related to their view of the church, their experience of suffering and their understanding of discipleship.

i) The Idea of the Church

In 1539 Anna of Rotterdam wrote a testament for her son and sealed that testament with her own death at the hands of the authorities.¹⁶ In that fairly brief writing¹⁷ she made

¹⁶ Ibid., 453-454. In using Anna's testament as an example I am not suggesting that her hermeneutics were followed by others. I am suggesting that the hermeneutics we see operative in this piece of writing is like that used by most of the other Anabaptists. Swartzentruber, in his examination of her testament, says: "It would be difficult to imagine a more representative statement: if we may postulate 'wings' in the movement, Anneken represents the 'center.'" Cornelius Krahn considered her testament important enough to include sections of it in his major study of Dutch Anabaptism (Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 200-

forty-three references to Scripture passages where the chapter and verse reference is given. There are several other allusions to specific verses. Of the forty-three, eleven are to the Old Testament, one is to the Apocrypha, and thirty-one are to the New Testament. They include references to the Pentateuch, Proverbs, Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Pauline letters, the General Epistles, and the Revelation of John. We will find, therefore, that her letter is helpful in understanding how the Anabaptists used these Scriptures.

In her use of the Scriptures Anna saw herself, her son, and their fellow-Christians as being in the company of all the people of God referred to in the Bible. In her testament she used verses scattered throughout Scripture, as

201). Fr. Nippold refers to it as "one of the most worthy witnesses of the self-denying, sacrificing, steadfast piety of the Anabaptists" (Fr. Nippold, "David Joris von Delft," in Zeitschrift für die hist. Theol., 1863, as quoted in C. Neff and N. van der Zijpp, "Anneken Jans," Mennonite Encyclopedia 1:127).

Others may have used Anna's testament to model their own. Maeyken van Deventer, also of Rotterdam, wrote a testament to her children in 1573, just before her death (MM, 977-979). After her own introduction, she follows Anna's testament very closely, in Scriptures used, in ideas put forward, and in style. She is the only other martyr, according to Yoder and Hochstetler, 394, who refers to the kings in Rev. 16:12. Her interpretation is identical to Anna's. Of the three references to II Esdras 7:6-9 in the Martyrs Mirror, Anna's and Maeyken's testaments have two. It seems that she wrote her own introduction and ending but then recopied Anna's testament with only minor changes in detail.

¹⁷ About 1 1/2 pages in the Mirror, as compared to letters that cover several pages.

noted above, and applied them directly to herself and her son and their situation. She wrote:

Behold I go today the way of the prophets, apostles and martyrs, and drink of the cup of which they all have drank. Matt. 20:23. I go, I say, the way which Christ Jesus, . . . Himself went, and who went this way, and not another, and who had to drink of this cup, even as He said: . . .
18

This is followed immediately with a paraphrase of what the writer of the Gospel of Luke attributes to Jesus in Luke 12:50.¹⁹ She saw herself as one with all saints who had gone before and one with Jesus in her situation of suffering, and therefore what the Scriptures said of them also applied to her. She saw herself in company with the martyrs under the altar in Rev. 6 and the twenty-four elders in Rev. 4. What was said of people in Ezek. 9, Zech. 14, Rev. 14 and Rev. 21 applied to her. The same was true of Deuteronomy, Ephesians, Luke, John, Romans and Hebrews. For Anna the Biblical writers were describing her and her situation and that idea guided her interpretation and use of the Scriptures.

Other martyrs expressed a similar solidarity with the people of the Bible, applying its texts to themselves. Hendrick Alewijns in a letter from prison written to the

18 MM, 453.

19 Anna's praphrase reads: "I have a cup to drink of, and a baptism to be bapitized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Ibid., 453). The original in the New American Standard Bible reads: "But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!".

church in 1569, expressed the confidence that God would keep His promises to His people.²⁰ Then Hendrick listed references from Deuteronomy, Numbers, I Corinthians, I Thessalonians and II Timothy in support of the argument. This is followed, in the letter, by several quotations from New Testament books to give the same message. In discussing the suffering that they were enduring, Hendrick quoted from II Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, I Peter, Hebrews, John and Romans. In his letter he also referred to Luke, Jeremiah, Sirach, II Chronicles, Psalms and II Samuel.²¹

Towards the end of the letter, Hendricks traces the history of God's people as a history of suffering at the hands of the wicked ones. He begins with Abel's death at the hands of Cain, and continues on through Lot, David, Elijah, Micaiah, Urijah, Jeremiah, Daniel's friends in the furnace, the righteous who died at the hands of Antiochus, John the Baptist, Jesus, Stephen, and others. He understood himself and his brothers and sisters in the faith to be part of this ongoing experience of the righteous within the world. Walter of Stoelwijk outlined a similar history, starting with Joseph, and including Tobit and Eleazar from

²⁰ Ibid., pp.742-749.

²¹ Others, whose writings appear in the Martyrs Mirror, wrote their letters in a similar way. See, for example, the letters of Walter of Stoelwijk, 455-464; of John Claess, 468-471; of Jerome Segers, 504-521; of Adrian Corneliss, 527-535; of Thomas van Imbroeck, 578-582; of Joris Wippe, 585-588; and of Jelis Bernaerts, 624-630.

the Apocryphal books.²² What the Bible said of their predecessors in the faith, it now said of them.²³

Another example of this perceived solidarity with the people whose stories are told in the Scriptures can be found in the account of the death of John George, who was drowned in Italy. Taking what the writer of Hebrews said about Moses in Hebrews 11:24 & 26, the chronicler now applied to George.²⁴ All of Scripture described the experiences of

²² Ibid., 457. Govert, of Lier, in Brabant, said of his persecution: "This has been witnessed from the time of righteous Abel, that the righteous have suffered reproach; hence be not astonished" (Ibid., 494). Jerome Segers, in a letter from prison in 1551, compared their lot with that of the Israelites leaving Egypt (Ibid., 504). See also Ibid., 527 & 565.

²³ For comparison see Enchiridion, 158-161 & 457. Frits Kuiper writes: "The Anabaptists considered themselves as fellow-creatures of the disciples of Jesus at the time of his life on earth and they considered themselves similar to the prophets of Israel. As to 'the book' which Ezekiel and John of Patmos had to eat (Ezek. 3:1-3; Rev. 10:9-10), they too swallowed it!" ("The Pre-eminence of the Bible in Mennonite History," MQR 41 [1967]:225).

Ethelbert Stauffer concludes: "The true church of God has been a suffering church (Martyrergemeinde) at all times; this is the basic conception of the Anabaptist theology of history" (p. 187). He continues: "The people of God, suffering ever since the first attack of the Serpent from the hatred of the 'world', are in truth the people of Christ. Abel is the first advance in the direction of Christ, and all suffering of the martyrs since is in fact the 'Cross of Christ' itself" (pp. 189-190). See also Alan F. Kreider, "'The Servant is not Greater than his Master': The Anabaptists and the Suffering Church," MQR 58 (1984):20.

According to van Braght "the whole volume of holy Scriptures seems to be nothing else than a book of martyrs" (MM, 12).

²⁴ "Through faith he forsook and abandoned all nobility of this world, choosing rather to suffer reproach with the people of God, than to enjoy temporal honor and distinction among his own people; and esteeming reproach for

God's people and could be used by current members of the church, the present expression of God's people on the earth, to make sense of their situation, to encourage and admonish each other, and to define their theology.

The importance of the church in Anna's hermeneutics is also seen in the way she connected ideas from different Scripture passages. Without hesitation she combined ideas from various parts of Scripture that, to our eye, do not have an obvious connection. What connected them for her was the fact that she saw them as references to the believers, God's people, the church. An example of this is her use of Rev. 16:12 and I Peter 2:9. The kings of Rev. 16:12 who gather at Armageddon and the "royal priests" of I Peter 2 are, for Anna, one and the same. This connection is made despite the fact that within the context of Revelation, the kings are the ones who are defeated in the great eschatological battle.²⁵ She made similar connections

the name of Christ great riches, far above the treasures of Egypt or the nobility of this world; for he had respect to the future, and the eternal reward, which will be great in heaven, and will not be withheld from him as a witness, follower and valiant soldier of Christ. Heb. 11:24, 26" (Ibid., 703).

Jan van Hasebroeck, using this same method, took the words of Psalm 42:1 and applied them to his longing for his wife. He wrote: ". . . for, as a hart panteth after the water brooks, so did my heart long to see your face again" (Ibid., 770).

²⁵ She may understand the battle and defeat and their flesh being eaten by birds as the Christians' experience of suffering that will ultimately lead to salvation and eternal life. The eschatological battle, then, is the current battle between the Anabaptists and their opponents, waged on

between Ezek. 9:6 and Rev. 14:4, Rev.21:2 and Zech. 14:16, and Deut. 6:6-8 and Ps. 92:13. The ideas within a pair may be different but what brought them together for her was their reference to God's people and therefore to her, her son, and her brothers and sisters within the Anabaptist movement. The church was seen in all of Scripture. This view of the church is summarized well by van Braght himself in the introductory materials in the Martyrs Mirror when he says:

The divine and heavenly church, which is the separated holy flock and people of God, originated upon earth at the beginning of the world; has existed through all the ages up to the present time; and will continue to the end of the world.²⁶

ii) The Experience of Suffering

Anna of Rotterdam was also guided, in her interpretation of Scripture, by her own situation of suffering and martyrdom.²⁷ Suffering was understood as the lot of all of God's people. Therefore, although Rev. 4 makes no reference to the twenty-four elders as having suffered, Anna, in her testament, said that the way of suffering "is the way in which walked the twenty-four

the one side with the sword of the Spirit and with suffering and death, and on the other side with swords of steel, prisons, edicts and fire. We will return to this in chapters 3 and 5.

²⁶ MM, 21. See also Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 193.

²⁷ Swartzentruber refers to Anna's theology as a "martyr theology" (pp. 130 & 131).

elders." The same was true of those who received a mark in Ezekiel 9. Although the righteous in Ezek. 9 also "sigh and moan," as did the martyrs, it is because of the sin that they see and not because of the sufferings that they have to endure. Yet, for Anna, they are a people who suffer.

For Anna it was the suffering that the saints had to endure that made the way to heaven narrow and travelled by few people. With an obvious reference to Matt. 7:13 & 14, she wrote:

Therefore enter in through the strait gate, receive the chastisement and instruction of the Lord, . . . Behold, this is the way which is found by so few, and walked by a still far smaller number; for there are some who well perceive that this is the way to life; but it is too severe for them; it pains their flesh.²⁸

She tied this to the references to discipline in Hebrews and to a passage in II Esdras that describes a beautiful city. To get there travellers must pass between "a fire on the right hand, and on the left a deep water."²⁹ To people whose fellow believers were being drowned in rivers and burned at the stake, the connection with their own experiences was obvious.

The importance of the theme of suffering in Anna's hermeneutics is also seen in her interpretation of the phrase from Romans 8:29, "conformed to the image of His Son." For Anna this conformity meant that Christians had to

28 MM, 453-454.

29 II Esdras 7:7.

suffer in the way that Christ suffered, at the hands of the enemies of God and unto death, as part of God's work on the earth.

The fact that the hermeneutics of the martyrs was centered on suffering is seen in particular in their interpretation of Matthew 11:12, where Jesus is quoted as saying: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." Modern commentaries agree that the verse is not entirely clear as to its meaning. J. C. Fenton suggests that the first part of the verse could refer either to opposition faced by Jesus or to the zeal and triumph with which people come to the kingdom. The second part could mean either that people were entering by repentance or that Zealots are trying to bring in the kingdom by violence. His preference is to see the verse as a reference to the opposition that was faced by Jesus.³⁰ David Hill sees in the verse a reference to Zealots who attempted to bring in the kingdom with violence, although he also allows for a reference to violent opposition to Jesus.³¹

The Anabaptist martyrs saw in the verse a clear reference to their own situation and the violence that they

³⁰ J. C. Fenton, Saint Matthew, Pelican Gospel Commentaries (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 179-180.

³¹ David Hill, The Gospel of Matthew, New Century Bible (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, Inc., 1972), 200-201.

had to face and endure. Jerome Segers referred to this when he discussed his suffering. To enter the promised land, the Israelites had to take it by "sheer force." He continued: "So must also we take the promised land by force; for Christ says that the kingdoms of heaven suffers violence."³² Segers used a combination of literal and spiritual interpretation. Force and violence were literally present. The kingdom, however, was spiritual. The battle was a combination of physical and spiritual. The violence suffered by the saints was physical but its endurance was a spiritual over-coming of the spiritual forces that manifested themselves in the people who opposed them.

Hendrick Verstralen, in a letter to his wife in 1571, wrote: "Maeyken and I are determined to use such force in order to take the kingdom of God, that flesh and blood shall remain on the posts and stakes."³³ In 1567 Christian Langedul wrote: ". . . [the flesh] must pass the strait gate, and O how narrow this is, so that flesh and blood will adhere to the posts."³⁴ The sense here is of the entrance into the kingdom, because of the suffering that is demanded, being so difficult that people have to force themselves into it, and in so doing they will scrape through but leave their flesh and blood on the gate posts. This, again, is a

³² MM, 505. See also *Ibid.*, 513.

³³ *Ibid.*, 877.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 708.

combination of literal and spiritual interpretation that is guided by the fact that they had to suffer torture and death.

Other martyrs used the words of Jesus in a similar way.³⁵ Jan Woutrerss wrote: ". . . one must . . . press through the strait gate, and take the kingdom by force through much affliction and adversity."³⁶ J. van Dort, after recounting how, according to Hebrews 11, various saints suffered and died for the faith, concludes: ". . . thus they took the kingdom of God by force, . . ." ³⁷ Because of their suffering, this interpretation of both Matthew 11:12 and Matthew 7:13 & 14, and the two together, was an obvious one for the martyrs. Their immediate situation was one of suffering and their faith had to make sense in that context. The interpretation of Scripture was therefore guided by their situation of suffering.

iii) The Call to Obedience and Discipleship

The idea of discipleship was also important to Anna.

³⁵ See, for example, Ibid., 883. Here Adriaen Janss Hoedemaecler writes: "For the kingdom of God suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Matt. 11:12), as I now experience myself; for we did indeed formerly have some temptations such as are common to man, but now we must strive unto blood." He then recounts how he has been scourged several times.

³⁶ Ibid., 907-908. See also Ibid., 917, 953, 954, 961, 968, 1045, & 1080.

³⁷ Ibid., 928. On the relationship between suffering and salvation, see Chapter 4.

She encouraged her son, Isaiah, to be a

faithful disciple of Christ; for none is fit to pray unless he has become His disciple, and not before. Col. 1:7; John 9:31. Those who said "We have left all." also said: "Teach us to pray." Luke 18:28; 11:1.³⁸

The significance of this theme of discipleship in her hermeneutics is particularly evident in her use of Hebrews 12:8, where Paul says that the one who is left without discipline is not a son but an illegitimate child. Luther's German translation reads: "Seid ihr aber ohne Züchtigung, welcher sie alle sind teilhaftig geworden, so seid ihr Bastarde und nicht Kinder." The sense in the text is of discipline as that which happens to the person. Anna, in writing to her son, had Paul saying: "If you forsake the chastisement, whereof they were all partakers, ye are bastards, and not children, and shall be cast out from the inheritance of the children of God."³⁹ For Anna, the chastisement was something which the person could choose to allow to happen to him. Without it he was no longer a child of God. The person's decision to be yielded to it, hence an attitude of willing discipleship, was of crucial importance.

The connection between the Scriptures and obedience was made by other martyrs as well. We noted in chapter one that the Anabaptists believed that God had given the Scriptures to the believers, was speaking by the written Word, was

³⁸ Ibid., 454.

³⁹ Ibid.

giving Christ's followers a clear understanding of the Word by His Spirit, and was regenerating people and giving birth to His church by the Scriptures. In all of this the response of the people was to be one of obedience. Without that obedience the Word was ineffective. Thus Jerome Segers could say that salvation came to all those who were born through the Word of God "and do His will;"⁴⁰ and Lauwerens van der Leyen said that the Word was given "that we should live according to it, and thus be saved at the last day."⁴¹ Joos Verbeeck claimed that his "life and doctrine agreed with the Word of God."⁴² It was obvious in their discussions with those who opposed them that the martyrs felt strongly that their doctrine had to be in accordance with the Word of God. They felt equally strongly that their lives had to be in accordance with that same Word. Both doctrine and practice had to follow the will of God as defined and described by the Scriptures if salvation was to be achieved.

In the writings of Menno Simons it is clear that obedience is not only an important response to the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 507. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Ibid., 637.

⁴² Ibid., 652. Emphasis mine. See also Ibid., 658, 668, 670, and 723. Here Hendrick Maelschalck writes: "Therefore, dear friends, let us always fear the Lord with all our heart and mind; let us obey Him and keep His Word, for they are blessed that hear the Word of God, and keep it, and they are also those who love Him, and keep His Word, and he that loves Him is known of Him."

understood Word, but is crucial for a right understanding of the Word. He wrote that the wisdom of God can be understood only by those "who are desirous of living and walking according to the will of God."⁴³ Disobedience and a heart set against the will of God would result in an incorrect understanding of the Scriptures. Obedience and a heart yielded to doing the will of God was a heart open to God's revelation. In the words of C. J. Dyck, for Menno and the other Anabaptists, "Knowing and doing became a reciprocal experience of understanding and obedience, obedience and understanding."⁴⁴

Although obedience was important, not all commands carried equal authority and the believers had to exercise caution so that by a strict adherence to one command, they did not violate another one. This became an issue in the keeping of the ban. Its very strict observance could result in hurt and bitterness and the breaking of the marriage bond. Matthias Servaes wrote from prison to the church: ". . . I should like to see carefulness exercised, and that one Scripture should not be observed so strictly and rigidly as thereby to violate another."⁴⁵ Jesus' example of patience

⁴³ CWMS, 107.

⁴⁴ Dyck, 37. See also p. 30; Keeney, Thought and Practice, 57; Ollenburger, 49; and Poetcker, "Encounter," 112-113 & 116; and Russell L. Mast, "Menno Simons and the Scriptures," No Other Foundation, 39.

⁴⁵ MM, 690.

and love and the person's own conscience and capacity to endure were to take precedence over a harsh avoidance of an offending brother.⁴⁶ Obedience meant being true to all of Scripture, not only some passages isolated from others and from the total message.

iv) Conclusion

In interpreting Scripture and applying it to her own situation Anna and the other martyrs saw themselves in solidarity with all of God's people, the faithful in the time of the Old Testament and the church in the time of the New Testament, whose experiences and situations they saw described in Scripture. In that sense, the time of the New Testament had not yet ended but was continuing and they were part of the age of the church which was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, had begun with Jesus, and was now continuing.⁴⁷ They understood the lot of God's people to be suffering and martyrdom. Their call was to live as faithful

⁴⁶ Bornhäuser writes of Menno: "Er bittet seine Glaubensgenossen, Gebot von Gebot zu unterscheiden und nicht alle Gebote für gleichwichtig zu erachten. So warnt er z. B. im Blick auf die Forderung, den gebannten Ehepartner zu meiden, man solle niemand weiter nötigen, als der betreffende in seinem Herzen von Gott gelehrt sei und in seinem Gewissen tragen un fühlen könne" (p. 59). See also Poetcker, "Menno Simons' View," 36.

⁴⁷ Bornhäuser suggests that Menno divided history into three ages. He continues: "Zu unterscheiden sei eine Zeit vor dem Gesetz, d. h. vor dem sinaitischen Dekalog, eine Zeit im Gesetz und eine Zeit des Neuen Bundes" (pp. 52-53). The Anabaptists were still living within the time of this new covenant.

disciples. This determined their hermeneutics.

Where Luther's hermeneutics was centred on Christ as Saviour⁴⁸ and Calvin's on Christ as Lord and Son of the sovereign God⁴⁹, the hermeneutics of the Anabaptist martyrs centred on the church of suffering disciples.⁵⁰ This was not unrelated to Christ, their Lord and Saviour, the one whom they followed and were obedient to, but it was Christ as the Example of true suffering obedience who was the head of the church. The Bible was therefore not primarily a book of soteriology nor of theology. It was the story of God's people within history and God's dealings with those people, his guidance, his deliverance, and his comforting presence,

⁴⁸ Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 79.

⁴⁹ See Wilhelm Niesel, The Theology of Calvin, trans. Harlod Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 28, and J. K. S. Reid, The Authority of the Scriptures: A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible (London: Methuen, 1957), 52.

⁵⁰ The importance of the church in the whole Anabaptist interpretation of Scripture and of life is pointed to by Kuiper, 225-227, and by Franklin H. Littell in "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1957), 119-134; idem, "The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the True Church," MQR 24 (1950):33-52; and idem, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964, [previously published as The Anabaptist Concept of the Church]). On the importance of the church in Biblical interpretation in the writings of Menno Simons see his "Menno Simons and the Word of God," 21-22.

as well as his wrath and discipline.⁵¹ It was also the book that described for them how God's people were to live within this history and as such was authoritative for all aspects of their lives. It described the church of suffering disciples.⁵²

An example of how these different hermeneutics resulted in different interpretations can be seen in how Luther, Calvin and the Anabaptist martyr, Walter of Stoelwijk, used the story of Joseph. Luther focused on Joseph's agony at the false accusations, wondering whether his name would ever

⁵¹ In writing of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists, Walter Klaassen says: "The Anabaptist concern was not primarily abstract theology, but life. This is most clearly seen in their use of the Scriptures. For them, this was not a doctrinal textbook but a book about life--first the life of the individual and then the life of the only true community, the church of believers, baptized on confession of their faith" ("The Early Anabaptist Thought on Word, Spirit and Scripture," Mennonite Life 15 [1960]:183). The same thing could be said of the Dutch Anabaptists.

This is not to suggest that Luther's and Calvin's theology were "abstract" in the sense of being unrelated to life. However, they were more theoretical and systematic than were the Anabaptists who by and large did not have the education nor settled existence that allowed the writing of well developed, systematic treatises. The Anabaptist writings came out of the immediate situation and addressed the immediate situation. Friedmann refers to their faith as an "existential Christianity." This, according to him, did not allow for a theological system (Robert Friedmann, The Theology of the Anabaptists [Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973], 27-35).

⁵² This is not to suggest that suffering was not an important theme in the theologies of Luther, Calvin and the Catholic church, or for that matter in the writings of people in England. However, in no other group did it have as significant a contribution to the development of a way of understanding the Bible.

be cleared, standing in desperate need of vindication.⁵³ Calvin saw the story as an example of "God's overruling providence." Although the intentions of the brothers were evil, in their sin they were doing the work of God, and providing for their own ultimate salvation.⁵⁴ Walter of Stoelwijk saw in the Joseph story an example of someone who remained true to God, no matter what the cost.⁵⁵ Each of the interpreters started with the same story, and each would have acknowledged the importance of Christ. Yet each came away with a different interpretation because of a different interpretive framework, shaped by a different experience of faith and life. Where Luther saw the need for vindication, and Calvin the sovereignty of God, the Anabaptists saw the obedient and committed disciples suffering for their faith.

In his dissertation on the hermeneutics of Menno Simons Henry Poetcker argues that Menno operated with a Christocentric hermeneutic. Bornhäuser⁵⁶, Keeney⁵⁷ and J. A

⁵³ Roland Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," The Cambridge History of the Bible, vol 3, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵ MM, 457.

⁵⁶ "Der Leser des Fundamentbuches versteht nach Mennos Meinung den Sinn der Heiligen Schrift erst recht, wenn er sich in allem ganz auf Christus richtet als auf den, der allein das biblische Wort erfüllt, eröffnet und aus legt" (Bornhäuser, 47). He speaks favorably of Krahn's idea of the "christozentrischen Schriftverständnis Mennos." He recognizes, however, that the label must be qualified (p. 52).

Oosterbann⁵⁸ agree with him, as do Russell L. Mast⁵⁹ and Cornelius Krahn.⁶⁰ Augsburg says that this is true of the entire Anabaptist movement.⁶¹ Poetcker returns to the idea again and again that for Menno's hermeneutics Christ was central.⁶² At the same time, without saying that he will do so, Poetcker qualifies that statement. For example, he writes:

Luther was interested in the Christo-centric divine work in history. Menno was interested in this also, but emphasized the correlation of divine activity and human response by faith.⁶³

It is these qualifications that are important to our study for they will lead us closer to the point made above that the Anabaptist hermeneutics centred on the church of suffering disciples and not on Christ only.

Poetcker says that in interpreting Scriptures Menno was controlled by an attitude of obedience to all that Christ

57 "Both Menno and Dirk started from a Christo-centric position, . . ." (Keeney, Thought and Practice, 37).

58 J. A. Oosterbann, "The Theology of Menno Simons," MQR 35 (1961):191.

59 Mast, 37.

60 Krahn, Menno Simons, 107.

61 "In an attempt to harmonize the expressions of interpretation found in Anabaptist writings, I present the following principle:

The Anabaptists had a Christocentric hermeneutic, . . ." (Augsburger, 19).

62 For example, see "Hermeneutics," 167-168, 204, 249, 309, 398.

63 Ibid., 167-168. Emphasis mine.

had commanded and by an approach that would confirm his own religious experience.⁶⁴ This experience had been one where the Scriptures had pointed him to what the church should be like, more so than who Christ was. A hermeneutics determined by his experience, therefore, would have been, for Menno, one that was closely connected to the life of the church within history.

Menno was interested, according to Poetcker, in "the Bible as a record of what God accomplishes in men."⁶⁵ This was seen most clearly in what God had done in Christ-- his life, his teachings, and his death and resurrection as well as the apostles' interpretation of this in the New Testament. However, it also included all that God had done since the beginning of time and was still doing. Since man's response to God's initiative was important, this activity of God was seen in combination with man's repentance and obedience.⁶⁶

Another important idea that Poetcker sees in Menno's hermeneutics and life is a concern for the church. He writes:

More than any of the others, Menno tried desperately hard not only to give forth the Gospel, but to build the pure Church, one that

⁶⁴ Ibid., 129. See also "Encounter," 115; "Menno Simons' View," 35; and "The Anabaptist View," 110.

⁶⁵ "Hermeneutics," 136, and "Menno Simons' View," 39. See also "Hermeneutics", 307.

⁶⁶ "Hermeneutics," 309 & 328.

would evidence also the ethical dimension of the faith which she professed, and one that would be a thank-offering to the Lord who had purchased her.⁶⁷

According to Poetcker, this concept of the church followed closely upon the centrality of Christ. Christ was the foundation of this church and the Lord of this church. He continues: ". . . this christo-centric and ecclesiocentric theology . . . reflects once again on the interpretation of Scripture."⁶⁸ Poetcker recognizes that Menno's hermeneutic was not just Christocentric but that the idea of the church also contributed in a significant way to the interpretation of Scripture.

When we examine the writings of Menno, we find that, although Christ is important in the interpretation of Scripture, to say that it is only Christ that matters is too narrow. The teachings and practices of the apostles are also very important. In his reply to Gellius Faber Menno said that he was rebuking false teachers "with the Spirit, Word, and life of Christ, and point[ing] them to the glorious example of the prophets, of the apostles of Christ,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 325. See also Ibid., 336, 381 and 394. Krahn concludes that the church was "the theme of [Menno's] concerns in all his writings' and that Menno loved nothing more than the church" (Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 193).

⁶⁸ "Hermeneutics," 391-392. Emphasis mine. Krahn, refers to Menno's theology in a similar way (Krahn, Menno Simons, 107 & 113). In a later work Krahn points out: "Menno Simons and his co-workers had a Christo- and ecclesio-centric approach to the Scriptures . . ." (Dutch Anapbaptism, 198).

and of all the true servants of God . . ."69 In other writings he based his arguments on both the teachings of Christ and the teachings and practices of the apostles70 and saw it as important that the teachings of Christ and of his disciples were in harmony.71 Together, Christ and his apostles pointed beyond Christ to the church.72 Although this church, in one sense, came into being with the coming of Christ and the coming of the Spirit, the church as God's people suffering in the world had existed since the time of Abel.73 It was this church that was of crucial importance

69 CWMS, 638-639.

70 ". . . but seek the true Christian baptism which was commanded of Christ Jesus and taught and practiced by His holy apostles, . . . (Ibid., 257). See also Ibid., p.264.

71 "Observe, my elect brethren, how harmonious are both Master and disciples in their teaching, . . ." (Ibid., 243).

72 In light of this evidence from Menno, it would also seem that his use of the phrase "Christ and the apostles" in statements like "instruction, counsel, and doctrine of the holy prophets, of Christ and the apostles," (Ibid., 212) was not simply as a technical term referring to the New Testament but as a phrase that meant to communicate the idea of Christ and his church. The difference between Menno and the Catholic church was that Menno saw that special authority of the church ending with the apostles whereas the Catholic church saw it continuing in the pope and the councils. For Menno, the church no longer had the authority of the apostles, but the church was still central in his interpretation of Scripture, both as a guiding principle and as the body that did the interpreting.

Even if "Christ and the apostles" was a technical phrase for Menno, "the whole doctrine of Christ and the apostles" (Ibid., 217 & 220) would include not only Christ but also the church.

73 Menno Simons, "The Cross of the Saints," CWMS, 588.

to Menno.

We need to note that other interpreters of the Anabaptists have seen the hermeneutics of the Anabaptists as centered elsewhere than in Christ. Douglas Shantz describes Dirk Philips' hermeneutics as being ecclesiocentric.⁷⁴ Ben Ollenburger concludes: "Anabaptist hermeneutics is the hermeneutics of obedience."⁷⁵ In the course of his arguments he points to the fact that Hans Hut had a hermeneutics of suffering.⁷⁶ C. J. Dyck argues that Anabaptist hermeneutics are a hermeneutics of discipleship.⁷⁷ Ethelbert Stauffer understands Anabaptist theology to be a theology of martyrdom.⁷⁸ Egil Grisliis argues that Menno had a "hermeneutical pre-understanding that had been shaped by the experience of persecution."⁷⁹ None of these would deny the importance of Christ in the Anabaptist interpretation of Scripture, but would recognize that to call Anabaptist hermeneutics Christocentric does not describe the principles by which the Bible was interpreted.

If we bring together our conclusions from our study of

⁷⁴ Shantz, 115-127.

⁷⁵ "Hermeneutics of Obedience," 59.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 54-55.

⁷⁷ Dyck, 44.

⁷⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," MQR 19 (1945):179-214.

⁷⁹ Egil Grisliis, "'Good Works' According to Menno Simons," 123.

the Martyrs Mirror, the qualifications that Poetcker places on the idea of a hermeneutics centred on Christ, the writings of Menno and the interpretations of other scholars, we can conclude that the hermeneutics of the sixteenth century Dutch Anabaptists centred on a church of suffering disciples. This was not unrelated to Christ. He was the example and Lord that they followed. He was the pivot around which God's people in the age of the Old Testament and God's people in the age of the New Testament circled. He was, in the words of Paul, quoted so often by Menno, the only foundation for the church (I Corinthians 3:17).⁸⁰ He had shown them what true obedience meant and gave meaning to their suffering. He did that as head of the church. But it was the church which was carrying on the work of God and the battle with the Evil One.⁸¹ It was the church that saw itself within Scripture and in that way understood what Scripture meant.

3. Summary.

Our study of the writings of the martyrs in the Martyrs Mirror has shown us that they were a people firmly convinced that the Scriptures were the only authority for faith and life for the believers. They rejected the use of the

⁸⁰ This quotation appears on the title page of each of Menno's tracts.

⁸¹ See Chapter 3.

theologies of the Church Fathers and the careful arguments of their opponents along with the use of the sword to enforce those arguments. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they found the Word to be alive, creating the church and comforting them in their struggles. In interpreting that Word they were guided by a hermeneutics that centred on the church of suffering disciples. This church, with Christ as its head, was most clearly defined in the New Testament. However, the Old Testament and the Apocrypha were also part of the Word of God, and could be correctly understood in light of the New Testament and its theme of the church of suffering disciples.

CHAPTER III

"PARTAKERS OF THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST":

THE MARTYRS' UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR SUFFERING

The Martyrs Mirror by its very nature is a book about suffering. Consequently, it follows naturally, as was noted in the previous chapter, that the experience of suffering contributed in a significant way to the Anabaptist martyrs' interpretation of the Bible. In order to understand the martyrs and their theology, it is important that we examine more closely how they understood their own suffering, how they made sense of an experience that was happening to them at the hands of people who claimed to be religious and doing the will of God. This chapter will do that after a brief look at the actual experiences of suffering that the Anabaptists endured.

1. The Experience of Martyrdom.

Scholars are not agreed on the actual number of Anabaptists who suffered and died for their faith in Europe during the sixteenth century. Many records have been destroyed and many people in all likelihood met their death without the dignity of an official trial, sentence and record in court documents.¹ Conservative estimates suggest

¹ Harold Bender indicates that when individual executions did not stop the growth of Anabaptism, mounted soldiers were sent out "to hunt down the Anabaptists and

as many as 4000 Anabaptists were executed,² with 2500 of these in the Low Countries,³ the area of particular interest to us. Claus-Peter Clasen's numbers are significantly lower because he restricts himself to documented cases.⁴ Van Braght, in the Martyrs Mirror, refers to almost 1700 individuals along with on occasion simply referring to "several" or "others."⁵ The Hutterite Chronicle lists 2169 martyrs up to the year 1581, but on a chart for each of the different areas indicates only 1396.⁶ Whatever the number, whether 2000 or twice that number, the persecution was fierce enough and widespread enough to imbue the entire theology of the Anabaptist movement.

The persecutions took many different forms. The Hutterite Chronicle summarizes the experiences, in part, as

kill them on the spot singly or en masse without trial or sentence" ("The Anabaptist Vision," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, 33).

² C. J. Dyck, "The Suffering Church in Anabaptism," MQR 59 (1985):5.

³ Kreider, 6. Both Kreider and Dyck rely on N. van der Zijpp, Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinde in Nederland (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1952), 77.

⁴ Claus-Peter Clasen, "Executions of Anabaptists, 1525-1618: A Research Report," MQR 47 (1973):118; and idem, Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1972), 370.

⁵ MM, 433, 437, 441, 447, 583, 979, & 1026.

⁶ P. Schowalter, "Martyrs," Mennonite Encyclopedia 3:524. See also The Hutterian Brethren, trans. and ed., The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, Volume I (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 217-220.

follows:

Some were racked and stretched until the sun could have shone through them.
Some were torn apart and died under the torture.
Some were burned to ashes as heretics.
Some were roasted on pillars.
Some were torn with red-hot tongs.
Some were locked into houses and burned together.
Some were hanged on trees.
Some were executed with the sword, strangled, or cut to pieces.
Many had their mouths gagged and their tongues fastened so that they could not speak or answer for themselves, and in that state they were taken to their death.
They witnessed with their blood to the testimony they made with their lips.⁷

Michael Sattler, an early South German Anabaptist, was tortured several times while in prison. After being sentenced to death, his flesh was torn twice with red hot tongs, his tongue was cut out, and he was then thrown into a wagon. On the way to the place of execution the hot tongs were used five more times. Finally he was burned to ashes. His wife was drowned a few days later.⁸

Ursel, a married woman who was thought to be weak and frail, and who had so sensitive a skin that the seams of her stockings had to be worn on the outside, encouraged her husband after he had been racked seven times. She herself was tortured on the rack twice and then drawn up by her hands. While "she was hanging there [the executioner] cut

⁷ The Hutterite Chronicle, 221. Menno Simons gave a similar description of the sufferings of the Anabaptists (CWMS, 599-600).

⁸ MM, 418; and Yoder, The Legacy of Michael Sattler, 66-85.

open her chemise with a knife baring her back, and severely scourged her with rods; this was done twice in one day. . . . But all this was patiently borne by Ursel,"9

Gerrit Corneliss was whipped, suspended by his hands, racked, beaten while on the rack, had urine poured into his mouth, and had burning candles held under his arms. Then he was suspended by his arms with a weight tied to his feet, and left that way for a while. "In short, he was so tortured, that he could not walk, but had to be carried in a chair."¹⁰

Burning at the stake was a common fate for the martyrs. Sometimes they were strangled just before the flames were lit. At other times gunpowder was placed under the person's chin, in his beard or in the mouth to hasten death. Martyrs were drowned, buried alive, and beheaded. Others spent long periods of time in prisons, where worms, rats, and other vermin were a constant aggravation. When public executions turned into a disadvantage to the authorities rather than an advantage--because the Anabaptists' testimony drew more converts or the authorities were embarrassed by their own actions--the martyrs were executed privately or under the cover of darkness.¹¹ The authorities were intent on

⁹ MM, 842.

¹⁰ Ibid., 876.

¹¹ Kreider, 21; and Schowalter, 523. For example, see the story of Wolfgang Pinder, who in 1571 was executed early in the morning without any judicial sentence, despite his

stopping the Anabaptist movement, employing whatever cruelties were necessary.

Along with the physical tortures the martyrs were separated from their family members who were either also in prison or forced to manage without a spouse or a parent. In at least two cases mentioned in van Braght's collection, babies were taken away from the parents and given into the care of people chosen by the authorities.¹² To avoid this, Janneken Munstdorp smuggled her newborn out of prison where the daughter was born and gave her into the care of friends, "to whom she heartily commended it, and also wrote a testament full of excellent instructions to this little daughter, when she was about a month old, which testament the friends preserved for her."¹³

Claus-Peter Clasen suggests that the Anabaptists were unconcerned about the family members who suffered because of their own faith.¹⁴ This conclusion is not born out by the evidence in the Martyrs Mirror nor does Clasen document it in his work. The example of Janneken Munstdorp shows the love and concern that a mother had for her daughter. Parents and spouses who wrote from prison expressed a

demand that he be given one (MM, 874-875).

¹² Ibid., 737 & 1086.

¹³ Ibid., 983.

¹⁴ "The Anabaptists were too concerned with saving their souls to waste much time worrying about their families" (Clasen, Anabaptism, 412).

similar concern and longing to be with their families.¹⁵ It was not that they were unconcerned. It was only that their commitment to their Lord overshadowed all other commitments.¹⁶

In all of this torture, according to the evidence that we do have, most of the martyrs remained true to their faith commitment. That some did recant is acknowledged by van Braght¹⁷ and that there were even more who could not endure the excruciating pain and the paralysing fear and despair is to be expected.¹⁸ We do not know how many left the

¹⁵ ". . . I am very sorrowful for your and for the children's sake, since I love you and them from the heart, so that I know of nothing under heaven for which I would be willing to leave you; but for the Lord and His invisible riches we must forsake everything, through the love of God, which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost" (MM, 798).

"O my dear wife, that I might see and speak to you once more, and bid you adieu" (Ibid., 770).

See also Ibid., 587, 627, 760, 771, & 877.

P. Schowalter reached a conclusion similar to mine. He writes: "They do not treat the natural bonds of marriage and family with contempt. They commend their dear ones to the loving care of the brotherhood, and mention how difficult it is to leave them alone" (p. 525).

¹⁶ William Klassen, "The Role of the Child in Anabaptism," in Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, & Literary Essays Dealing With Mennonite Issues, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), 31.

¹⁷ For example, in the story of a group of Anabaptists who were arrested in Flanders in 1568, the chronicler says that five were arrested but only three are named. The other two "did not valiantly adhere to the truth, [and] are not worthy to have their names recorded here" (MM, 726).

¹⁸ Gillis van Aken, a leader among the Anabaptists, recanted in the face of suffering, and offered to return to the places where he had previously preached Anabaptism and publicly to confess his errors (Verheyden, Anabaptism in

Anabaptist church when they heard of the persecutions nor how many decided not to join the group that would otherwise have been attractive to them. However, Clasen's assertion that "Many, indeed most, Anabaptists abandoned their faith when confronted with the power of the government,"¹⁹ seems to be made without any documented evidence. Both men and women, young people and old people had the inner resources that kept them true to their commitment to their faith.²⁰

2. A Theology of Martyrdom.

The Anabaptists were threatened, hunted down and executed; sometimes individually, sometimes en masse; sometimes with a trial, sometimes upon capture; at times mercifully speedily, at times only after excruciating torture; sometimes publicly, sometimes in secret under the cover of darkness; always, it seems, with a persistence and ruthlessness that spoke of a commitment to extermination.²¹ Many who were not killed, were banished and forced to live

Flanders, 1530-1650, 38). Verheyden mentions, in passing, another three who recanted (p. 41).

¹⁹ Clasen, Anabaptism, 369.

²⁰ Verheyden also argues that, though threatened, the church remained strong and many remained true to the faith (p. 73).

²¹ Verheyden argues that extermination was the intent of Titelman, an agent of the Inquisition in Flanders. Verheyden writes: "[Titelman's] strategy allowed only one means to make a final purification; namely, brutal extermination" (p. 45). See also *Ibid.*, 56.

as aliens and wanderers. All, surely, lived with the fear and anxiety that grew out of the experienced anger, hatred, antagonism and oppression. Yet, by and large, they remained steadfast and confident in their faith, often rejoicing in what was happening. They did so because they were able to make sense of and give purpose and meaning to their suffering. On the basis of their Scriptures, which for them spoke with authority to all of life, they were able to develop a theology of martyrdom.

In going to the Martyrs Mirror we will not find a systematic, well developed, articulated theology of martyrdom.²² The Anabaptists had to deal with that theology within the immediacy of suffering and death. Their concern was not a systematic theology but comfort, hope and meaning within the terror, grief and pain of the moment. It is as we read what they wrote within the experience of arrest, imprisonment, separation and torture, only half a step from death's door, that we gain an understanding of how they gave meaning to their experiences. They did have a theology of martyrdom and it was a vital part of all their theology and their understanding of life within the world.

²² C. J. Dyck argues: "It is not really possible to speak of a theology of martyrdom in this context. To do justice to the records we must be more descriptive than systematic" (Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 10). Yet, with Stauffer and Robert Friedmann, ("Martyrdom, Theology of," ME 3:519-521), I would say that a theology can be gleaned by reading the letters of the martyrs. I believe it is also fair to say that Menno's "The Cross of the Saints" (CWMS, 581-622) is a theology of martyrdom.

Central to the Anabaptist martyrs' theology of martyrdom was their identity with the sufferings of Christ at the hands of the Jewish religious and Roman political authorities.²³ They described this identity with Christ in terms of following an example, as Christ suffering in and through the suffering believers, and as continuing the battle that had been fought by Christ--through the holy men of old, in his own crucifixion and now by the sufferings of his church. Together with Christ they were confirming the truth and the validity of the Gospel message and the Christian faith. They also understood their sufferings as the loving discipline coming from the hands of a merciful and caring God.

i) Following Christ

Harold S. Bender, in his classic statement on the essence of Anabaptism entitled "The Anabaptist Vision,"

²³ For twentieth century interpretations of Jesus' suffering and death and its relationship to his followers see Brian E. Beck, "Imitatio Christi and the Lucan Passion narrative," in Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28-47; Morna D. Hooker, "Interchange and suffering," in Suffering and Martyrdom, 70-83; W. F. Flemington, "On the interpretation of Colossians 1:24," in Suffering and Martyrdom, 84-90; G. W. H. Lampe, "Martyrdom and inspiration," in Suffering and Martyrdom, 118-135; and W. H. C. Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church (New York: University Press, 1967), 83. Their interpretation of the New Testament materials is very close to that of the sixteenth century Anabaptists.

argued: "First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship."²⁴ Though others might argue that Anabaptism in its essence was characterized by other concepts--the church²⁵ or the idea of the two kingdoms²⁶--none would dispute the importance of the concept of discipleship (Nachfolge Christi) for the early Anabaptists. Christ, in His life, teachings and death, had set an example that was to be followed quite literally by those who now claimed to be Christians.

For the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century the life and death of Jesus were characterized by the cross. Van

²⁴ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), 42. See also idem, "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," MQR 24 (1950):27; and J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship," in Recovery, 135-136.

²⁵ Littell, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism.

²⁶ Robert Friedmann, A Theology of Anabaptism (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 36-48. Friedmann entitled Part Two of his book as "The Heart of the Implicit Theology of Anabaptism: The Doctrine of the Two Worlds; Kingdom Theology." See also his "The Doctrine of Two Worlds," in Recovery, 119-134; and idem, "The Essence of Anabaptist Faith: An Essay in Interpretation," MQR 41 (1967):8-9.

Friedmann's work is somewhat limited in its usefulness for our study in the fact that his sources were primarily the writings of the Swiss Brethren and, in particular, the Hutterites. Nonetheless, a careful reading of the Martyrs Mirror would show that the Dutch Anabaptists also understood history and their world in terms of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. Richard E. Weingart uses this two kingdom idea to discuss Menno Simons' understanding of sin ("The Meaning of Sin in the Theology of Menno Simons," MQR 41 [1967]:25-39).

Braght, in his summary of Jesus' life and death, wrote:

But His entrance into this world, as well as His progress and end, was full of misery, distress and affliction, indeed it may be said: He was born under the cross; brought up under the cross! He walked under the cross, and finally died on the cross.²⁷

Jesus' whole life was seen as one of hardship and suffering. His ultimate death, therefore, was not a unique event in terms of His time here on earth. It was, instead, a part of a life of suffering, suffering that was normative because it gave expression to God's will as His people encountered the forces of evil in the world. The cross was both an actual part of that suffering and the symbol of that suffering. It symbolized, for the Anabaptist martyrs, not so much the salvation that came through Christ's death but the way of life that had been Christ's and was now to be the way of life of all Christians.²⁸

The Anabaptist martyrs repeatedly called each other to follow Jesus in cross-bearing. Walter of Stoelwyk wrote:

Now it is the will of our heavenly Father, that we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus Christ. . . .

. . . But he suffered as Lord, and we as disciples; hence we servants and disciples must

²⁷ MM, 67-68.

²⁸ Stauffer, 180 & 195; Kreider, 13; Schwartzentruber, 130. Bornhäuser points out that for Menno Christ's death was important soteriologically as an offering. However Christ's willingness to give himself is paradigmatic for believers. He continues: "We ihn einmal als de 'volkomene Leeraer/ende dat waerachtige Voorbeelt der gerechtigheyt' erkannt hat . . . , wird ihm in seinen Fuszstapfen nachfolgen . . ." (p. 73).

not bear the cross reluctantly seeing our Lord and Master Himself bore it. . . .

. . . Hence all pious Christians must follow no other than Christ Jesus, who, as Peter says, suffered for us leaving us an example, that we should follow His steps. I Peter 2:21. . . . the good Lord and Master, who has given an example to all his servants and disciples, that they must suffer even as He suffered. . . .

. . . remember that Christ says: "He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, cannot be my disciple." Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:54; Luke 9:23.²⁹

Anna of Rotterdam described her suffering as the way that Christ Jesus went and called all his sheep to go.³⁰ Jerome Segers, like Walter of Stoelwyk, quoted I Peter 2:21 in writing to his wife. He encouraged her to take up her cross, remembering that the servant is not greater than his master. Therefore, if Christ suffered, his disciples would also have to suffer.³¹

Phrases like "follow Christ,"³² "take up the cross"³³ and "the servant is not greater than his master"³⁴ appear again and again in the stories and letters collected in the Martyrs Mirror. They described for all of the Anabaptist martyrs what it was they were enduring and what it was that

29 MM, 456-460.

30 Ibid., 453.

31 Ibid., 512 & 519.

32 For example, see Ibid., 439, 473, 547, 553, 586, & 615.

33 For example, see Ibid., 439, 578, and 590.

34 For example, see Ibid., 443, 447, 481, & 524.

was required of them. Alan F. Kreider felt that the last phrase, in fact, was central enough for the Anabaptists that he used it as part of his title for an article on Anabaptist martyrdom.³⁵

Van Braght, in his own introduction to the second part of the Martyrs Mirror, the part dealing with sixteenth century Anabaptism, discussed the suffering that was endured by the faithful in terms of a following of the example of Christ. He wrote:

They know that their Lord and Master suffered Himself, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps; . . . They are mindful of the words of Christ, that the servant is not greater than his master, Matt. 10:24, and that therefore, as Christ suffered, they must arm themselves with the same mind. I Peters 4:1. . . . They learned long ago that all that will live godly shall suffer persecution.³⁶

Menno Simons was equally convinced that the Christians are to follow Christ in suffering. He wrote:

[Those who wish to obey Jesus Christ] must take upon themselves the heavy cross of all poverty, distress, disdain, sorrow, sadness, and must follow the rejected, the outcast, the bleeding and crucified Christ. As He Himself said: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁷

Menno also referred his readers to Jesus' words that the

³⁵ Alan F. Kreider, "'The Servant is Not Greater Than His Master': The Anabaptists and the Suffering Church," MQR 58 (1984):5-29.

³⁶ MM, 356.

³⁷ CWMS, 583.

servant is not greater than his master³⁸ and encouraged them to take the "crucified Jesus" as their example.³⁹ The life and sufferings and death of Jesus were the example of how a person wholly committed to God was to live and what it was they could expect to experience at the hands of the enemies of God. In obedience and in a longing to be one with their Lord, the believers were to accept the way of suffering as the way of Christ and therefore the way of all those who would be faithful.⁴⁰

This was what it meant to be conformed to the image of Christ. Dirk Philips asked rhetorically: "Why then should his disciples be otherwise minded and not become conformed to his image?"⁴¹ They were to become like their Lord and this meant suffering. Stauffer writes:

What truly matters is to conform oneself to the Lord's passion (dem Herrn im Leiden gleichförmig werden): these words of Paul and the early "Theology of Martyrdom" are used more often than any other ones as the core of all their doing and suffering. The Nachfolge Christi becomes the "imitation" of Christ in the genuine sense of the old "Theology of Martyrdom."⁴²

This willingness to follow did not mean that the sufferings were not hard to bear, nor that the martyrs had a

38 Ibid., 597.

39 Ibid., 598.

40 Ibid., 583 & 584; Enchiridion, 415 & 416; MM, 455, 456, 472, 518, & 615.

41 Enchiridion, 414-415. See also MM, 453.

42 Stauffer, 196. See also Kreider, 14-15.

wish to suffer and die. It is true that at times their joy in the face of torture and cruel death made them appear to be fanatics with a masochistic death wish.⁴³ Yet, as C. J. Dyck wrote, in most cases the martyrs had "a healthy will to live."⁴⁴ When Jan Hendrickss was confronted with the fact that being burnt at the stake was not an easy matter, he replied:

"I know that well; I have no desire to be burnt-- it is not convenient to be burnt; if I did not know that I am right, I would rather ignominiously yield; than honorably lose my life; for it is no small matter to suffer one's self to be burnt at the stake; I am not so desirous of death. I would rather keep my life, if it were God's will."⁴⁵

Because of the fear of pain and of the will to live, others faced severe temptation and turmoil while awaiting torture and death.⁴⁶ These temptations and the desire to avoid death were, however, also experiences that they shared with Christ and were part of following him.⁴⁷ Therefore Menno,

⁴³ In the case of one Gotthard of Nonenberg we are told that "the executioner acted with reluctance, and received them with tears; for his heart misgave him. But Gotthard said to him: 'How I have longed for this day; why do you delay so long?'" (MM, 590-591). For other examples see Ibid., 474, 484, 506, 540.

⁴⁴ Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 14. See also Clasen, Anabaptism, 404 and Schowalter, 525.

⁴⁵ MM, 937.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 554, 555, 569, 703, & 969.

⁴⁷ ". . . and thus [Algerius] became like his Master, since he was also, even as Christ, when He came up out of Jordan, immediately assailed by the enemy, the tempter and his instruments, and cast into prison, in which he went through and endured many severe conflicts, . . ." (Ibid.,

the spiritual leader of these martyrs, wrote:

We well know that the cross galls and pierces our poor weak flesh, as we see it in the case of Job, Jeremiah, Elijah, and others, and that in a very similar way the Lord Himself desired that if it were possible the cup might pass from Him.⁴⁸

The believers saw themselves as experiencing what Christ had experienced.

The Anabaptist martyrs identified so closely with Christ in following Him in his suffering that they often referred to their enemies with names used in the Gospels to refer to those who had betrayed and crucified Jesus. The person who betrayed George Blaurock was referred to as a Judas, "bringing with him bailiffs and children of Pilate."⁴⁹ Two men imprisoned in 1537 were examined by

573).

⁴⁸ CWMS, 619. This willingness to drink the cup of suffering with all its bitterest dregs, including fear and despair, is similar to the advice given by John Calvin in the Institutes where he suggests that the cross is only truly the cross when we actually feel the bitterness and pain (III, viii, 8).

For Luther it was precisely these internal struggles, Anfechtungen, that constituted the cross for the Christian. These were not only trials brought on by the fear of torture and death but all internal struggles that threatened to separate the believer from his faith and his God (Friedmann, Theology of Anabaptism, 131-132 and Burkholder, 147). For a full discussion of Luther's theology of the cross see Walther von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman, 5th ed. (Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd., 1976).

For an example of one of the martyrs expressing views similar to Luther's see MM, 673.

⁴⁹ MM, 431. The phrase "children of Pilate" appears numerous times in the accounts in the Martyrs Mirror. For example, see pp. 441, 448, 473, 475, & 561.

"Caiphas[sic] and the priests."⁵⁰ Govert, martyred in 1550, turned to the people and said: "Thus stood the Jews when they brought Christ to death."⁵¹ In 1558, an executioner seeing criminals go free and the Anabaptists killed, is reported to have said: "They have crucified Christ, and released Barabbas."⁵² To the martyrs, these comparisons seemed natural. As true believers, they were suffering the same fate that had befallen and had been accepted by Christ. They were following in his footsteps. Therefore they were willing to accept the suffering and death joyfully, and at the same time embraced life and freedom and wanted to live.⁵³

Discipleship and suffering were so closely connected for the martyrs that to be a disciple was to suffer and to become a believer was to take up "the burden of the cross."⁵⁴ Following Christ and suffering could not be

50 Ibid., 447.

51 Ibid., 495.

52 Ibid., 584.

53 George Vaser and Leonhard Sailer, having been in prison for a year, were full of joy, and prayed that they might soon die, "for they had a good hope and great joy and a sincere desire to depart, and expected every hour, to die manfully and boldly, . . ." Yet, when they were released, it was attributed to a "special providence of God" that they were "wonderfully liberated," and "were joyfully received in the spirit, as good, worthy and beloved brethren (Ibid., 446). The joy in the face of death and the desire to die were not in opposition to their joy at life and celebration of return to life in the congregation and community.

54 Ibid., 483.

envisioned as separate from each other. Bornhäuser says that for the Anabaptists the suffering with Christ was a sign of true discipleship.⁵⁵ Stauffer points to the close relationship that existed between baptism and suffering in Anabaptist thought. To be baptized was to commit oneself to a life of suffering at the hands of the enemies of the cross of Christ.⁵⁶ To follow Jesus was to suffer and to suffer for the faith was to follow Jesus.

Because of this close relationship between discipleship, baptism and suffering, the Anabaptist leaders were convinced that all Christians would have to suffer persecution. Menno wrote: "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."⁵⁷ Dirk Philips wrote: "In short, the entire holy scripture testifies that the righteous must suffer much, and possess his soul in patience (Luke 21:19)."⁵⁸ Dirk softened that assertion in a letter to the churches, recognizing that persecution was not equally severe in all areas, but that severe suffering could

⁵⁵ "Sein Kreuzestod ruft alle Gläubigen auf zur Leidsamkeit. Den wahren Jünger Jesu erkennt man daran, dass er sich gerade in dieser Beziehung nicht von seinem Meister unterscheidet" (Bornhäuser, 141).

Desmond Tutu makes a similar argument in the context of the suffering of Christians in twentieth century South Africa (Desmond Tutu, "Persecutions of Christians Under Apartheid," Concilium 163 [1983]:64).

⁵⁶ Stauffer, 206-208.

⁵⁷ CWMS, 584.

⁵⁸ Enchiridion, 397. See also Ibid., 458.

come upon all at any moment.⁵⁹ They could not conceive of a life of discipleship without suffering.⁶⁰

The martyrs were equally emphatic on this point.⁶¹ Basing their understanding on verses like "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God," (Acts 14:22)⁶² and "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," (II Timothy 3:12),⁶³ they saw suffering as the common experience of all faithful disciples. Along with the words of Scripture, they had

⁵⁹ "And while the cross of Christ is at this time not everywhere alike heavy (Matt. 11:29), yet according to the will of God it may come suddenly. Therefore my admonition to all you who have bowed the neck under the easy yoke of Christ (Matt. 11:30) is, that you be at all times prepared to suffer, . . ." (Enchiridion, 436-437).

⁶⁰ Kreider points out that "always" was a favorite word with the Anabaptists (p. 17), pointing backward from Christ to the time of Abel and forward to the time of the sixteenth century.

Frend gives that same interpretation to the New Testament teachings on faith and suffering (Frend, 83). J. C. O'Neill argues that Jesus' intended the call to suffering to include only selective disciples, primarily those who were listening to him (J. C. O'Neill, "Did Jesus teach that his death would be vicarious as well as typical?" in Suffering and Martyrdom, 9-27). The Anabaptists in the sixteenth century would have responded by saying, "Look around you."

⁶¹ See, for example, MM, 441, 505, 837, 949, & 1013.

⁶² There are at least 14 specific references to this verse in the Martyrs Mirror (Yoder & Hochstetler, 219-220). For example, see MM, 439, 528, 670, 747, 953, & 1045.

⁶³ Yoder & Hochstetler list 25 occurrences of this reference in the Martyrs Mirror (pp. 328-329). A few examples are pp. 455, 631, 773, 986, & 1051.

their own experiences to verify the truth of these words.⁶⁴ According to their understanding of Scripture and their experiences within the world, it was impossible to live as a faithful disciple and not to suffer persecution.

One matter on which the Anabaptists seemed to diverge at times from this following of Christ was in their attitude towards those who persecuted them. The example of Jesus was forgiveness. According to the martyrs' understanding of the Biblical account, Jesus, while hanging on the Cross, had prayed that God might forgive his executioners (Luke 23:34).⁶⁵ Menno counselled the believers to respond in a similar fashion, writing:

Therefore, the true and chosen children of God must not, no matter how heavily the cross may be laid on them by these people, be angry over them but sincerely pity them and sigh sorely for their poor souls with all meekness and fervor after the example of Christ and Stephen, praying over their raging and cursed folly and blindness--for they know not what they do.⁶⁶

This advice was followed by some of the martyrs. Leopold Schneider prayed: "Therefore, I beseech Thee, O

⁶⁴ Hans Vermeersch wrote in his confession while in prison: "When I read ["Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake,"] I believed it, and now I find it to be true in me and in others, and believe that the Gospel is true" (MM, 631).

⁶⁵ Although this prayer may not have been part of the original book of Luke, it was in the texts that were used by the sixteenth century readers of the Scriptures and was understood by them as having been spoken by Jesus.

⁶⁶ CWMS, 585.

God, graciously to forgive those who put me to death."⁶⁷ After being sentenced, Francis of Bosweert said, addressing the judges: "I will forgive you all this from my heart."⁶⁸ Others prayed in a similar way for their torturers and forgave them.⁶⁹

There is, however, another way of responding to one's enemies that is evident in the Martyrs Mirror, expressed in the following words: ". . . but God gave them the recompense which they deserved, so that they might have wished that they had never been born."⁷⁰ The collection of stories and letters recounts examples of the sudden deaths of people who were involved in executions. A sheriff died suddenly.⁷¹ A town clerk was killed in an accident.⁷² One man who hunted down Anabaptists suffered severe pain and finally strangled on his own blood. The chronicler added: "And thus God has often (more than is shown in this book, or can be related) checked the wicked with like examples, . . ."⁷³ One town official⁷⁴ was told by the martyr that he

67 MM, 426-427.

68 Ibid., 472.

69 Ibid., 467, 471, 479, 495, 497, & 503.

70 Ibid., 431.

71 Ibid., 416.

72 Ibid., 422.

73 Ibid., 428.

would be before the judgment seat of God within three days. Immediately upon the martyr's death, the official became sick and died within three days, "which was a great sign of the all seeing eye of God, who would not suffer such cruelty to go unpunished."⁷⁵

The same attitude was expressed in the prayers and letters of the martyrs, asking God to avenge the blood of innocent martyrs and expressing hope in God's vengeance.⁷⁶ It seemed impossible to the Anabaptists that God would not punish. At times it seems that in their agony they wished this vengeance and suffering upon their enemies.

Dyck sees this not as a longing for vengeance but as "a note of warning and of coming judgment, within the context of missionary witness."⁷⁷ Although it would be nicer, considering the saintliness of the martyrs, not to think of the wish for vengeance as being part of their attitude towards their enemies, Kreider seems more true to the accounts when he recognizes that at times the longing for

⁷⁴ The text refers to him as a "burgomaster" (Ibid., 553).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 553.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 446, 453, 520, 547, 568, & 617.

⁷⁷ Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 22. For a discussion of the relationship between the attitude of the martyrs outlined here and their view of future punishment in the hereafter, see Chapter 5.

vindication bordered on vengeance.⁷⁸ Stauffer suggests that the cry for vengeance was a cry for God to show himself as the Lord of all history and to show that He would have the last word in redeeming His people and defeating His enemies.⁷⁹ Whether a cry for vengeance or a prayer for God's victory, we must be careful when we criticize this longing for God to punish. It did not come within the comforts of sofa and fireplace but rather in dungeons overshadowed by rack and stake and separation from friends and loved ones.

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century saw their suffering at the hands of the persecutors as part of the their discipleship, following Christ within life. As Christ had been willing to take up the cross, so they were to be willing to suffer for the sake of their faith. That was the way of true discipleship, the very "epitome of discipleship."⁸⁰

ii) In Union with Christ

Another aspect of the Anabaptist martyrs' identity with Christ in suffering is expressed in phrases like "the

⁷⁸ Kreider, 23. See also Keeney, Thought and Practice, 184. Stauffer sees this issue in the context of the battle between the two kingdoms (pp. 92-93). We will deal with that below.

⁷⁹ Stauffer, 203.

⁸⁰ Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 15.

sufferings of Christ abound in us,"⁸¹ a reference to II Corinthians 1:5, and "ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings,"⁸² a phrase taken from I Peter 4:13. There is a sense here not only of suffering in the way that Christ suffered and of following his example but of actually being part of the suffering of Christ; of Christ suffering in them. Jerome Segers, in one of his letters, suggested that when the Christians were being persecuted it was in fact their Lord who was being persecuted.⁸³ He based this interpretation of his and his fellow believers' sufferings on various Biblical texts. In Luke 10:16 Jesus is recorded as telling the disciples that whomever rejects them, rejects him. In Acts 26:14, Saul, when confronted by a voice, is told that in persecuting the church he is persecuting Jesus. In Zechariah 2:8, the prophet says: ". . . for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye." For Jerome Jesus was the apple of God's eye, and so to persecute the believers was to persecute Christ.⁸⁴

Menno saw a similar connection between the sufferings of the Anabaptists and the sufferings of Christ. He wrote that "the Lamb of God, the ever-blessed Christ Jesus, the

81 MM, 478-479. See also Ibid., 533 & 615.

82 Ibid., 480, 523, 529, 538, 567, & 573.

83 "If they then do not persecute us, but the Lord, fight valiantly, as a pious soldier of Christ, and contend for His glory" (Ibid., 512).

84 Ibid., 512.

real Head of all true believers . . . suffered from the beginning in those who were His own, . . . "85 and that many have "from the beginning to the present day . . . rejected and persecuted Christ, the lovely, peaceful, innocent, and obedient Lamb, and His holy members, . . ."86 Menno saw the union between Christ and the true believers to be so close that he could refer to the believing, suffering church of his day as "the Lamb."87

The Christians were not simply following the example of their Lord. Their Lord was suffering in their suffering. What they were enduring at the hands of their persecutors, they were enduring for Christ, that is, it was a continuation of his suffering and therefore part of their service of him. They were in mystical union with Christ.

This may explain, in part, why the martyrs often expressed joy at the prospect of their execution, thanking God that he had counted them worthy to suffer. In 1538 one woman prayed: "I thank Thee, O God, that Thou countest me worthy to suffer for the name of Christ, and to help bear

85 CWMS, 596.

86 Ibid., 597.

87 "Who verily is there that does not persecute, kill, and violate (whether with heart, word, or hand) the poor, innocent, peace-loving, defenseless Lamb? . . .

"The afore-mentioned Lamb has from the beginning of the wrath of the serpent been slandered, persecuted, and slain, and it seems that (as the Scriptures also say) this persecution will not cease so long as there are righteous and unrighteous people on the earth together" (Ibid., 582). See also Ibid., 331.

His reproach,"⁸⁸ an obvious allusion to Acts 5:41 and the feelings expressed by the apostles in that New Testament account.⁸⁹ Lijsken, in a letter to her husband, Jerome, wrote that Christ had made them fit to suffer for His name. Earlier, she wished them both "the crucified Christ."⁹⁰ The sense of rejoicing and of being counted worthy is repeated several times in the Martyrs Mirror.⁹¹ To be so joined to Christ and for God to recognize that union as real enough for them to be allowed to enter into Christ's suffering was very significant for them.

C. J. Dyck,⁹² Alan F. Kreider⁹³ and Ethelbert Stauffer⁹⁴ all refer to this participation in Christ's suffering or Christ participating in the suffering of the martyrs, but with hardly more than a passing reference. Dyck and Stauffer both seem more comfortable with discipleship, following and imitation, and do not deal adequately with the mystical nature of the union.

Kreider discusses this joining with Christ in terms of

⁸⁸ MM, 448.

⁸⁹ That same connection is made in other accounts and writings in the Martyrs Mirror. See pp. 467 & 567.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 515.

⁹¹ Ibid., 476, 497, 502, 524, 589, & 590-591.

⁹² Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 14.

⁹³ Kreider, 14.

⁹⁴ Stauffer, 190.

conformity, or being like Christ but then continues his discussion with reference to being members of Christ's body, the church. He makes the point, then, that Christ suffers in his followers collectively. He refers to Anna's letter to her son in which she wrote: ". . . for where you hear of the cross, there is Christ, from there do not depart."⁹⁵ Kreider makes that statement read: "'Where you do hear of the cross, there is Christ' in his Church."⁹⁶ That change has no justification in the context of Anna's letter. Although the concept of the Church was certainly important for the Anabaptists--at the heart of their separation from the Roman Catholics and the Protestant reformers--and a strong case for that could be made from the materials in the Martyrs Mirror, we must exercise caution less we see it where it does not exist. It is also true that the church as the body of Christ and therefore Christ's presence on the earth was an important idea for the Anabaptists. They were in union with Christ by being part of the church. This idea of the church as the body of Christ of which they were members was also part of their belief that there existed a special union between themselves and Christ in their sufferings.⁹⁷ At the same time, in the examples noted

⁹⁵ MM, 454.

⁹⁶ Kreider, 15.

⁹⁷ Joriaen Simons, in writing from prison, said: "When the head suffers, all the members suffer with it; hence, if we would be members, of Christ, we must also be

above, there is the sense of individuals in union with Christ in suffering, and in union as individuals, not just as members of a suffering church.

The Anabaptists saw their identity with Christ not only in the sufferings that they endured here but also in the glory that they would share with him in the next world. Van Braght wrote: "Our captain of the faith, Jesus Christ, had to enter into His glory through much derision, ignominy and suffering, and ultimately through the most shameful death of the cross."⁹⁸ The believers had to enter the same way. They had to "suffer with Him, in order to enter into the kingdom of God, even as Christ had to suffer, to enter into His glory."⁹⁹ In no way was the disciple above his master. To reign together in glory meant suffering with Christ and enduring to the end while still within this world of sin.

In the martyrs' insistence that Christ was suffering in their own sufferings we have another example of the Anabaptists understanding Scripture to be speaking directly to their situation and applying to them. What they read in the texts of the Bible they applied directly to themselves. Along with the examples of connections that they saw between themselves and the Biblical texts given above, they also

partakers of the sufferings of the Head; if we, then, suffer with Him, we shall also rejoice with him" (MM, 567).

⁹⁸ Ibid., 357.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 582. See also Ibid., 468 & 512.

referred to II Corinthians 1:5,¹⁰⁰ Galatians 6:17,¹⁰¹ Philippians 3:10,¹⁰² and Colossians 1:24.¹⁰³ They saw themselves and their own experiences in all of these passages.

Although the Anabaptist martyrs were in a special union with Christ in their suffering, that suffering did not bring about their salvation.¹⁰⁴ Nor did it bring salvation for other people the way that Christ's suffering and death on the cross had. Van Braght wrote, in summarizing the life and death of Jesus: "This, then, was the end, not of a martyr, but of the Head of all the holy martyrs, through whom they and we all must be saved."¹⁰⁵ Dyck writes: "Martyrs Mirror is the strongest documentation from the sixteenth century of a people relying on the salvatory work of Christ in behalf of sinful humanity."¹⁰⁶ Jesus' suffering for the salvation of humanity was unique. The martyrs did not participate in that. Yet, at another level, as the faithful one suffering for the sake of righteousness,

100 Ibid., 479 & 533.

101 Ibid., 533.

102 Ibid., 581.

103 Ibid., 689, 817 & 1044.

104 We will return to the question of suffering and salvation in Chapter 4.

105 MM, 69. Emphasis mine.

106 Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 15. See also Stauffer, 192.

Jesus' suffering continued in the lives of the saints.

The Anabaptist martyrs experienced themselves to be in a special union with Christ. This meant that when they suffered, he suffered. This meant that they would share in his glory in the same way that they shared in his sufferings. It also meant that they were continuing Christ's battle against the forces of evil.

iii) In Cosmic Battle with Christ

In his introduction to Martyrs Mirror van Braght wrote:

As there are two different peoples, two congregations and churches, the one of God and from heaven, the other of Satan and from the earth; so there is also a different succession and progress belonging to each of them.¹⁰⁷

With all of creation polarized into such radically different and opposing camps, conflict between them was inevitably fierce. Christ was engaged in this battle in his

¹⁰⁷ MM, 21. This way of perceiving the world and people within it was not unique to Dutch Anabaptism. The Swiss Brethren shared a similar perspective as is evidenced by the Schleithem Confession: "Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are (come) out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial and none will have part with the other" (Yoder, The Legacy of Michael Sattler, 38).

Outside Anabaptist circles this way of seeing the world goes back as far as Augustine, The City of God, and the book of Revelation in Scripture. In the Gospels Jesus is recorded as classifying all people as either against him or for him (Matt. 12:30. Luke 11:23, Mark 9:40). Considering the Anabaptist martyrs' use and interpretation of Scripture (see chapters 1 & 2), this two world or two kingdom (to use Friedmann's term) categorization of all people followed naturally for the Anabaptists.

life of suffering and death on the cross. It was, however, a battle that had raged throughout history, from the very beginning of time. Menno wrote: "Verily in the ungodly Cain has the bloody, murderous tyranny had its origin and has masterfully shown its essence, its fruit, and its true nature toward the pious and godly Abel."¹⁰⁸ Menno proceeded to trace the history of that conflict through the Old Testament, the Apocrypha and the New Testament. The martyrs whose letters are found in the Martyrs Mirror traced a similar history.¹⁰⁹ They understood that Christ "and his own have been slain from the beginning, and thus it shall continue."¹¹⁰ And now they, the martyrs of the sixteenth century, found themselves where the forces of Satan and the forces of God met, and continuing the battle by suffering.¹¹¹

Menno understood the believer's participation in the battle to be both that of a follower of Christ, i.e., imitating Christ and fighting as he fought, as well as that of the one through whom Christ was now doing battle. It was a battle that on the one hand had been won by Christ on the

¹⁰⁸ CWMS, 582.

¹⁰⁹ MM, 457, 491, & 527.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 470. See also Enchiridion, 148. Lampe argues that Paul and Luke understood Jesus' suffering as well as Paul's persecution to be part of the same history as the suffering of the Old Testament prophets (Lampe, 125).

¹¹¹ Stauffer, 201.

cross, but on the other hand was still continuing. It was particularly fierce because the defeated foe--Satan--realized that his time was limited.¹¹² Therefore Menno was writing to the persecuted believers so that they might "with all patience, with calmness and strength, courage and steadfastness, continue the assigned contest."¹¹³

This same view of life, persecution and martyrdom is evident in the Martyrs Mirror. Van Braght, after giving numerous Biblical and early church examples of suffering and death at the hands of persecutors, referred to the martyrs as "soldiers under the bloody banner of Christ."¹¹⁴ Hans Langmantel and two of his servants, in a letter from prison, referred to the persecuted saints as people who "have now entered the conflict, to fight for the truth." They pray that they may "win the field on this earth."¹¹⁵ Jerome Segers, in a letter to his wife, wrote:

For Christ means to show His wonderful power and strength in you, against the dragons and the

112 "The great dragon, the old crooked serpent who was cast out of heaven and whose head and power are now bruised and broken by the promised Seed of the woman, who is overcome because of the blood of the Lamb and for the Word of His testimony, burns with anger, knowing full well that his time is short" (CWMS, 581-582). See also *Ibid.*, 324; and Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 17.

113 CWMS, 582.

114 MM, 357. Stauffer points out that van Braght's title "Bloody Theater" has connotations of the place where battle is done (Stauffer, 186). See also *Ibid.*, 200 and Kreider, 8.

115 MM, 430.

generation of vipers; yea, against the ravening wolves, who daily resist Christ, and fight against you to destroy you.¹¹⁶

In her response she expressed a need for the Holy Spirit so "that we may prevail against all ravenous beasts, dragons, serpents, and all the gates of hell, which are now using great subtlety to seize, deceive, destroy, and seduce our souls."¹¹⁷

The use of words like dragon, serpent, wolves, and beasts are common in the stories of and letters from the martyrs.¹¹⁸ The Anabaptist martyrs also referred to their enemies as Babel, Babylon and the Roman antichrist.¹¹⁹ Clearly these are references to places in the Scriptures such as the books of Daniel and Revelation that outline the conflict between good and evil, God and Satan, the saints and the enemies of the cross. The Anabaptist martyrs saw themselves as being in the middle of that battle and fighting it by giving themselves in obedience to the suffering and death that was their lot.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 513. Hendrick Verstralen wrote: ". . . that with Him, we may through our death, overcome our enemies, with God nail our flag to the mast, and with peace and rest enter into our chambers . . ." (Ibid., 879).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 515.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 428, 445, 450, 511, 520, & 568.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 445, 455, 458, 492, 538, 549.

¹²⁰ All of this has obvious eschatological connotations. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

While on the cross, suffering in battle with Satan, Jesus, according to the Lucan account, turned to one of the thieves and promised: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Anabaptists, in their close union with Christ in this battle with evil, saw their reward as being equally swift and sure. John Claess, on the morning of his execution, said: "Oh, what joyful feast will be prepared for us before the clock strikes twelve!"¹²¹ In the story of twelve martyrs in 1558 we read that "they were very joyful, and hoped to get into paradise the same day."¹²² Their reward would be sure and therefore the suffering here was but a temporary, brief test of endurance and participation in battle that would be followed by eternal glory with Christ in heaven as their reward.¹²³

For the Anabaptists the world was a battlefield with the forces of Satan drawn up against the forces of God. The battle was raging fiercely and that meant torture and death for the saints, for that is how Christ had defeated Satan on the cross and was continuing to defeat Satan's forces. As obedient followers of Christ they followed their Master into battle and allowed Him to fight through them till the

121 MM, 471.

122 Ibid., 589.

123 Ibid., 434, 467, 475, 478, 500, 503, 518, & 566. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of whether the martyrs hope was placed in the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the dead.

ultimate victory would be achieved and they would enjoy their eternal reward.¹²⁴

iv) Confirm the truth with Christ

The Anabaptist martyrs also felt that they were one with Christ in their suffering in that through their sufferings they were confirming the truth of the Word of God. Jesus had confirmed that message by his death¹²⁵ and now it was also being confirmed by the martyrs. Michael Sattler wrote to his church, saying:

And let no man remove you from the foundation which is laid through the letter of the holy Scriptures, and is sealed with the blood of Christ and of the many witnesses of Jesus.¹²⁶

At other times the martyrs saw their suffering and death as

¹²⁴ Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 17-19; Kreider, 8, 15-20; and Stauffer, 189-201. Stauffer summarizes this well when he writes: "Conflict is the main feature of this aeon, and the path of discipleship of Christ remains for the entire span between Calvary and the end a way of martyrdom" (Stauffer, 214).

¹²⁵ "Hence Christ confirmed with His death His testament which He made with the house of Israel; . . . " (MM, 806). See also Enchiridion, 311-312.

¹²⁶ MM, 419. ". . . the Word of God, through the grace of the Lord, came again to the light, and was accepted with great desire by many, and attested and confirmed by the life and death of a great number, . . ." (Ibid., 441). See also Ibid., 464.

Maeyken van Deventer, in writing to her children, said: "Even as Christ our forerunner left such to us for an everlasting testament, and sealed it with His blood; such a testament I also leave you, and will likewise seal the same with my blood, even as the blessed Jesus did" (Ibid., 977).

confirming and sealing their own faith and testimony.¹²⁷

The Word of God had come from God through Jesus and had been confirmed by His death. They had accepted that Word as from God and were now suffering for it.¹²⁸ In their letters and testaments they described that faith for the sake of their families and fellow believers. Their own sufferings and deaths sealed and confirmed those testimonies as true and faithful and valid.¹²⁹ Since the truth that they stood for and lived for was the truth that they were willing to die for in the same way that Christ had died for the truth of God, it was to be trusted.

This is not unlike the view of John Calvin, who wrote in the Institutes of Christian Religion: "Now with what assurance ought we to enlist under that doctrine which we see confirmed and attested by the blood of so many holy men!"¹³⁰ Calvin saw this confirmation in the saints and martyrs of the past. The Anabaptists saw it in their own martyrs and their own experiences. The very fact of the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 513-514, 521, 550, 655, 656, 713 & 725. See also Keeney, Thought and Practice, 181-182.

¹²⁸ MM, 471, 522, 582, & 583.

¹²⁹ Stauffer, 209-211 and Clasen, 406. David Thiessen sees the suffering of the martyrs as being one major aspect of the sixteenth century Anabaptists being a missionary people (David Almon Thiessen, "The Church in Mission: Factors that Contributed to the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists Being a Missionary People," [M.C.S. thesis, Regent College, Vancouver, 1979], 83-96).

¹³⁰ Institutes, 92.

willingness of people to suffer and die for the Scriptures in the same way that Christ had suffered and died at the hands of the enemies of God, gave the Word and their proclamation of it in letters, testimonies and sermons a power, an authority and a credibility that was not to be doubted.

v) Disciplined by the Father

The early Anabaptists who suffered and died for their faith understood their sufferings as being the discipline of God within their lives. In this sense their suffering was not like that of Christ's but was unique to them. He had shown them obedience by his suffering but had done so without having to learn obedience. They, as sinful people within a sinful world, with so much of sin still within them, needed the sufferings to purify them and free them from sin and from the attractions and hold that the world had for and on them.

The martyrs took comfort in the words of Hebrews 12, which they attributed to Paul. And so Lijsken wrote to her husband, Jerome Segers: "Hence, let us not despise the chastening of the Lord; for, whom He loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth, as Paul tells us. Heb. 12:5, 6."¹³¹ The chastening which included arrest, prisons, tortures, separation from family, temptation, and

131 MM, 518.

despair, was sent by God and was a sign of their filial relationship with Him. To refuse the suffering was to refuse the chastening and to reject the father/child relationship with God. Therefore Anna of Rotterdam wrote to her son, Isaac, encouraging him to

receive the chastisement and instruction of the Lord, bow your shoulders under His yoke, and cheerfully bear it from your youth, with thanksgiving, rejoicing and honor; for He accepts or receives no son, whom He does not chasten.¹³²

She followed this with her quotation of Hebrews 12:6, telling Isaac that to forsake the chastening was to become a bastard and not a true son.

The chastening, according to the martyrs, served to make them better people and did not come close to equalling the sin for which they could be punished.¹³³ Their attitude towards it was therefore to be one of willing acceptance for they all wished to be purified in preparation for heaven. Conrad Koch, after enduring hunger and threats in prison for several months, prayed just before his execution: "O God, how gently Thou dost chasten me. Reach me Thy gracious hand, that my flesh may now shun all sin, vice and shame, that I may rend the old garment, and have eternal joy with Thee."¹³⁴ In writing to his mother from prison, Matthias

132 Ibid., 453.

133 "But let us remember that we are chastised of God, to make us better, and not for our destruction and that the punishment is far less than our sins" (Ibid., 658).

134 Ibid., 687.

Servaes said: "Receive this in good part, my dear mother, for it is all done for your good, that you may keep a pure heart, free from evil thoughts, and thus see God, and be saved."¹³⁵ The suffering was not the punishment inflicted by a wrathful God but the gentle discipline of a loving Father that prepared them for heaven.

Menno, in his carefully written, "The Cross of the Saints,"¹³⁶ also outlined the benefits of the suffering and martyrdom that the Anabaptists had to endure. The suffering, according to him, gave the believers a true perspective on life and the things of the world and the things that really mattered. For people who expected arrest, separation, and confiscation of goods at any time along with the consequent torture and death, material things dimmed in value.¹³⁷ They "let go of all the transitory things of earth, and that which delights the eyes."¹³⁸ To some extent this was also true of the relationships to wives and children and parents. True disciples had to "hate

¹³⁵ Ibid., 698.

¹³⁶ CWMS, 581-622.

¹³⁷ "Methinks it quite impossible, worthy brethren, that they who voluntarily bow their necks to the Word and will of God, who are willing and prepared to obey the word in all things, and for these things are constantly persecuted, afflicted, slandered, seized, robbed, and killed, that they should turn their hearts to the love of temporal things and to the vain lusts of earthly existence. (Ibid., 614).

¹³⁸ Ibid., 614.

father and mother, son and daughter, husband and wife, houses and lands, money and goods, and his life."¹³⁹

Menno concluded that the saints were chastened by the Father through suffering so

that they may hear and obey Him in His holy Word, will, and commandments, may put into practice devout instruction and piety, may fear God with sincerity of heart, may not allow themselves to conform to this world, may no longer live unto flesh and blood, and may be made partakers of the promised kingdom and inheritance.¹⁴⁰

Torture, separation, long imprisonment in dungeons, and the threat of cruel death seemed harsh and severe to the people and not reason to rejoice. Menno recognized that. However, he wrote:

. . . since [the cross] contains within itself so much of profit and delight, in that it constantly adds to the piety of the pious, turns them away from the world and the flesh, makes them revere God and His Word, as was said above, and since it is also the Father's holy will that by it the saints should be approved, and the pretender exposed in his hypocrisy, therefore all the true children of God are prepared to love, to do the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 583. Menno is using the words attributed to Jesus in Luke 14:26.

The martyr, Hendrick Verstralen, in a 1571 letter to his wife, tempered this somewhat by saying that believers should "love nothing above Him, neither father, nor mother, nor wife, nor child, nor our own life." To prevent this inappropriate love for his family, Hendrick had to be imprisoned and separated from them. He wrote: "And this is the reason, my dear wife, that, though you and my little children lie so deeply in my heart, you must, against my nature, be cast out from it; for you may not be an idol to me, nor I to you, as much as we love our dear-bought souls" (MM, 878).

¹⁴⁰ CWMS, 615.

will of the Father, rejoicing in it.¹⁴¹

The martyrs accepted the suffering as willing and obedient children, as a sign of God's love and concern for them.¹⁴² By it they learned obedience and believed that they achieved an identity and intimacy with Christ that allowed them to know the will of God.¹⁴³ Their commitment was tested and they showed that they were truly children of God and not of the world. Their understanding is well summarized in the words of Matthias Servaes in a letter to his wife:

But that the Lord permitted our imprisonment, is all for our best, that through such chastisement we may learn true obedience; for thus we can be truly cleansed, and also truly tried, whether we love aught more than our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 619. Emphasis mine. Bornhäuser summarizes Menno's position as follows: "Gottes Liebe wählt dieses Zuchtmittel, um die Seinen mehr und mehr der Liebe und Lust der Welt zu entreizen, die Frommen immer frommer zu machen und sie--auf keinem anderen Weg als diesem--zur verheiszenen Vollendung zu führen" (p. 142).

¹⁴² In a letter to her husband in 1572, Adriaenken Jans wrote: "And the only-wise, good and merciful God first tries us somewhat in this one chastisement; this is a token of grace and of special love, for He now deals with us unworthy ones, as a dear father deals with and bears affection to His children, whereby He confirms, according to His great mercy, that He does not know us as bastards, but as true heirs" (MM, 927).

Dirk Philips expressed a similar confidence in the loving hand of God: ". . . the heavenly Father reveals his love and paternal nature in this that he tries and chastens you as he has done with all his children and those dear to him" (Enchiridion, 416).

¹⁴³ Dyck, "Hermeneutics," 41.

¹⁴⁴ MM, 700.

Having come through the trials and suffering, they had been tried and purified as gold in the furnace (I Peter 1:7)¹⁴⁵ and were ready for their new existence within the kingdom of God.¹⁴⁶

3. Summary.

As a result of their interpretation of the Scriptures and their commitment to a way of life that followed that interpretation, the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century experienced the brunt of the intolerance and hatred of the religious establishment. Families were broken up, property was confiscated, and people were imprisoned, tortured and cruelly executed. In this situation the martyrs, their families and their fellow believers were able to make sense of and give meaning to their situation and their experiences by identifying themselves with Jesus Christ.

The martyrs saw themselves as disciples who were following the example of their Lord, following in the only way possible. In following Christ they saw Christ as suffering in them and through their sufferings continuing

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 444, 447, 527, & 923. See also Enchiridion, 413. It is interesting to note that, according to the references collected in Yoder and Hochstetler, there is not a single specific reference to Job 23:10 in the writings in the Martyrs Mirror, nor in the writings of Menno and Dirk (p. 37). Job 23:10 reads:

"But He knows the way I take;
When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold."

¹⁴⁶ Keeney, Thought and Practice, 183.

the battle with the forces of evil. Like Christ, by their willingness to suffer and die and the consequent actual persecution and death, they were confirming the validity and truthfulness of their faith. As they submitted to the chastening of the Father, they became more like Christ--more obedient and more pure, ready to share in Christ's glory in heaven. In this understanding of their suffering, they followed a literal interpretation of Scripture and saw the words of the Biblical texts applying directly to themselves.

The suffering that they were experiencing was, for the Anabaptists, closely tied to their salvation, for they believed that salvation was possible only as they walked the narrow way of suffering and death. At the same time that they identified closely with Christ and his suffering and saw their own suffering as being important in the salvation process, they recognized a uniqueness in Christ's death and its meaning for their salvation. In our next chapter we will take a closer look at how the Anabaptists understood their salvation, including the importance of Christ's death and their own sufferings for that salvation.

CHAPTER IV

"HE THAT ENDURES TO THE END":

THE MARTYRS' UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION

Salvation and how it could be attained was a crucial issue in the sixteenth century Reformation. In the Catholic church salvation was dispensed by the church, and yet was still dependent on the grace of God and the death of Christ. It was also dependent on the payment for sins, right-living, purgatory and personal merit. Luther, despairing under a load of guilt and the impossibility of ever meriting salvation, found new hope and vision in the words "justification by grace through faith." That discovery began his move away from the Catholic church. For Calvin salvation depended entirely on the sovereignty and grace of God expressed in divine choice and election. Within this milieu the Anabaptist martyrs had an understanding of salvation that had several unique characteristics. To appreciate these, we will, in this chapter, examine how they understood their salvation, including the fall and original sin, the death of Christ, repentance and obedience, the grace of God and endurance within the struggles of life.

1. Adam's Sin.

The Anabaptists' concern was primarily with present sin

in the lives of people and in society at large, sin as disobedience of God's commands,¹ and therefore they did not place a great deal of emphasis on the fall and original sin and the effect of Adam's sin on the rest of mankind.² The reason for this diminished interest in original sin and increased emphasis on obedience, as compared to the

¹ Hendrick Alewijns wrote a lengthy description of sin as part of his testament and confession of faith that he left for his children (MM, 754-757). In it he summarized: "Behold, thus you can perceive whereby sin becomes sin, namely, through the commandment, and the transgressing of the commandment; for where no commandment is, there is no sin, for without the law sin was dead" (Ibid., 755).

See also Richard E. Weingart, "The Meaning of Sin in the Theology of Menno Simons," MQR 41 (1967):25 & 28.

² Richard Weingart reaches the same conclusion in his study of Menno Simons ("The Meaning of Sin," 29).

Robert Friedmann in writing about the Swiss and South German Anabaptists and the Hutterites and N. van der Zijpp in discussing the Dutch Anabaptists both conclude that original sin is scarcely mentioned in the Anabaptist writings (Friedmann and van der Zijpp, "Original Sin," Mennonite Encyclopedia 4:79 & 82; and Friedmann, "The Doctrine of Original Sin as Held by the Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," MQR 33 [1959]:206). Weingart argues that this view needs modification, in light of his reading of Menno Simons ("The Meaning of Sin," 29, f.n. 23).

In my reading of Menno Simons and Martyrs Mirror I would agree with Weingart. The Anabaptists were certainly very aware of the idea and the actual presence of original sin. However, it was not a focal point for them the way it was for Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. C. J. Dyck writes: "Without exception they affirmed the historical reality of original sin, but most Anabaptists denied its existential power" ("Sinners and Saints," in A Legacy of Faith, 87). Alvin Beachy also concludes that the Anabaptists believed in the fall and original sin (The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation, Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica, vol. 17 [Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1977], 35).

Catholics and the Reformers,³ was the fact that they understood that the effects of original sin had been reversed by Christ's atoning death.⁴ Therefore, they were not dealing with original sin in the same way as their Catholic and Protestant "brothers and sisters." However, they did not disregard original sin all together, nor were they entirely free, by their own admission, of its effects.

The Anabaptists understood that God had created the world and had created man and woman within that world as sinless beings, in the likeness of God, and destined for eternal life. They were also created with a free will, being able "to choose what they would, so that they could fear, serve and obey their Creator, or, disobey and forsake Him; . . ."⁵ Adam and Eve chose to disobey and so, "with all their posterity, became subject that very day, to temporal and eternal death, and were thus divested of the divine virtue, which is righteousness, and true holiness, and became sinful and mortal."⁶ This choice was not due to God's sovereign will decreeing such a choice but entirely the result of

³ Friedmann suggests that "the most characteristic distinction between general Protestant theology and Anabaptist thinking may be found in the Anabaptist position regarding the doctrine of original sin" ("The Essence of Anabaptist Faith: An Essay in Interpretation," MQR 41 [1967]:15).

⁴ See #2 below, as well as Friedmann & van der Zijpp, 83.

⁵ MM, 377.

⁶ Ibid., 377. See also Ibid., 636, 804, & 862.

man's free and voluntary choice.⁷

In this act of disobedience all mankind lost its divine nature and was now, more than ever, inclined to sin, disobedience and rebellion against God, with no hope of reform and change.⁸ This did not mean, however, that mankind was devoid of all goodness, "so as to become like Satan in evil, but through the grace of God . . . retained many good principles."⁹ People still possessed their free will.¹⁰ People could still make the choice between seeking

7 ". . . hence they did not sin through the foreordination or the will of God; but as they had been created with a free will, and to do as they would, they sinned through their own voluntary desire, and transgressed the command of God contrary to His will" (Ibid., 379).

8 "[All generations] are all from their youth, by nature, inclined to sin and evil, and are therefore deprived of the beautiful pleasure garden, . . ." (Ibid., 377).

"We confess that Adam and Eve having thus fallen under the wrath and disfavor of God, and into death and eternal condemnation, together with all their posterity, so that no remedy or deliverance was to be found in heaven or earth, among any created beings, who could help, and redeem them, and reconcile them to God, the Creator of all things, . . ." (Ibid., 378).

See also Ibid., 384, 456 & 636.

9 Ibid., 385. Dyck, in his study of Hans de Ries, a second generation Dutch Anabaptist leader, writes: "The image of God, however, has not been totally lost" ("Sinners and Saints," 88). See also Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 37.

10 ". . . so that they were not utterly divested of their former wisdom, speech, and knowledge, above all other creatures, nor of their previous free will or power" (MM, 379).

See also Ibid., 694.

Weingart notes that Menno also insisted that the "free will of man is self-evident" both before and after the fall (Weingart, 31). See also Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 34; and Friedmann and van der Zijpp, 83.

the health of their souls on one hand, and resisting, rejecting and neglecting the offered grace on the other.¹¹ It was, now, however, only by God's grace that people could think the good and pursue it. It was God's grace that made renewal available to people and it was only by God's grace that people could recognize the good of that choice. Therefore, though still possessing the free will to choose, people would choose for the good only because it was revealed to them by the grace of God. The author of the Confession of 1600 wrote: "Hence all Christians are in duty bound, to ascribe the beginning, middle and end of their faith, with all the good fruits thereof, not to themselves, but only to the unmerited grace of God in Christ Jesus."¹² Without that grace, people, though still possessing a free will, and not subject to total depravity, were living in sin, subject to sin and death, and operating with a compulsiveness toward sin,¹³ the end of which was eternal condemnation in hell. To break out of that, the work of God in Christ was crucial for the person.

¹¹ MM, 379. See also Ibid., 728.

¹² Ibid., 379.

¹³ Menno Simons described fallen humanity as those who "are still altogether carnal, earthly, worldly and devilishly minded, and out of their depraved, native tendency prone and inclined to all manner of evil" (CWMS, 60). See Weingart, 32-33.

2. The Work of Christ.

The Anabaptist martyrs had various ways of referring to the work that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. They referred to it as setting people free.¹⁴ Enslaved and controlled by the power of sin, people were unable to do anything but sin. Christ's death released that grip of sin on people's lives and now made it possible for them to respond to the grace of God. They saw this release as being not only from sin within their nature but as the release from a personal, evil power. Hans Bret wrote in a letter in 1576:

. . . [Christ Jesus] is confessed and is the true living Son of God, who delivered us from the power of Satan, from eternal death and damnation, and opened our eyes when we were dead in our sins and unrighteousness, and brought us into this marvelous light; . . .¹⁵

In another letter he wrote: ". . . [Christ Jesus] has redeemed us from the power of Satan, whose slaves and servants we were through our sins and iniquities."¹⁶ By their disobedience, Adam and Eve had subjected themselves and all of their posterity to the control of Satan. By their own sins individual persons tightened that bondage.

¹⁴ MM, 579 & 995.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1048-1049.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1052. Jan Wouters, in a letter to his wife and daughter, wrote: ". . . Christ, by His great agony of death made us dead men alive, and delivered us from the power of the devil, and translated us into the kingdom of Christ; . . ." (Ibid., 912). See also Ibid., 627.

By his death, Christ released that grip and people could now repent and change their lives.

Others referred to this work of Christ as a deliverance or redemption from the evil world. This was not a physical deliverance from a world of evil but a deliverance from the ways of that evil world, allowing the person to live by the commands of God rather than by the demands of sin and man's evil nature. In a letter from prison Lauwerens van der Leyen wrote:

. . . the Lord be praised for His great grace, which He has manifested so richly towards me, in that He has redeemed me from this present evil world; and that, whereas you once saw me in so exceeding wickedness, the light of truth is now revealed to me, for which I greatly thank the Lord, and trust that I shall continue therein by the grace of the Lord; . . .¹⁷

That change from living in the ways of the world to living the way of Christ and His cross was possible only because of the work of Christ who had, according to Dirk Philips, "by his death and blood triumph[ed] over the devil, sin, death and hell."¹⁸

Although this deliverance was not necessarily removal from the geography of this world, at times it did include the move from life here to life in the hereafter. Death was also a deliverance, and because of Christ's work, death was a transition into heaven instead of into hell. As they had

¹⁷ Ibid., 639. See also Ibid., 514, 629 & 823.

¹⁸ Enchiridion, 130-131.

been freed from the grip of Satan and delivered from the wickedness of this world, they were also delivered "from the eternal enmity and the torment of hell."¹⁹ Death could therefore be anticipated as a deliverance from the struggles and sorrows and assaults of sin present within this world. Hans van Overdam, in his confession of faith written in prison, stated:

And we hope through the goodness of God; that our pilgrimage will soon end, and we shall be delivered from this miserable world and vale of tears, and that this earthly house of our tabernacle will be dissolved, that we may be brought home to our heavenly Father, and receive the crown of everlasting life, which is set before us, and which we hope no creature shall take from us.²⁰

Death or the return of Christ would complete the deliverance that had been begun by Jesus Christ. Then they would be eternally freed not only from a nature that tended to sin and a world that was always alluring them, but also from the conflict with the powers of Satan and all the sufferings that that entailed.²¹ The salvation experienced here and now was the beginning of that which was to be completed in the hereafter.²²

¹⁹ MM, 891. See also Ibid., 727-728, 870 & 882.

²⁰ Ibid., 486.

²¹ A more complete examination of this hope for and in the hereafter will be undertaken in Chapter 5.

²² "But all believers receive in this life the restoration or justification of Christ only through faith, in hope, and afterwards in the resurrection of the dead they shall receive it truly and actually, and shall enjoy it

There were those among the martyrs who described the work of Christ in terms of washing and purifying. Jesus died so "that He might thereby cleanse and wash us from all our uncleanness," wrote Lauwerens Andruess.²³ Hans Bret wrote: "[Jesus Christ] washed and cleansed us from all our sins and unrighteousnesses[sic],"²⁴ and in a later letter said: [Christ Jesus] loved us, and washed us in His blood, from all our sins and iniquities that we have done."²⁵ Joris Wippe, in writing to his children, said: "[Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people."²⁶ By his death, Christ had taken away the stain of sin, both the sin that infected everyone who was of Adam's race as well as the sin that was committed by each individual. The cleansing made the person fit to be part of God's people, the church, and qualified him for entry into the kingdom of heaven.

"Washing" and "cleansing" come close to another understanding of the work of Christ that, although present in the writings of the Anabaptists, did not receive the emphasis that it did in Luther. This was the idea of

forever" (MM, 378).

23 Ibid., 864.

24 Ibid., 1043.

25 Ibid., 1052.

26 Ibid., 587.

justification, of being made right with God. The Confession of 1600 referred to it, stating:

. . . so also, God Almighty, through this promise of the only Saviour Christ Jesus, redeemed, delivered, and justified from condemnation, and placed into the state of grace and reconciliation, all men, without exception of persons, without any of their good works, only from pure grace and mercy.²⁷

Jacob van den Wege mentioned it in a letter, saying: "He was buried and raised again the third day according to the Scriptures, for our justification, . . ." ²⁸ Hans Schlaeffer, a former priest, referred to the fact that Christ atoned for his sins.²⁹ Maeyken Detnoots wrote that Jesus had offered himself "as a propitiation for our sins, that He might deliver us from the future wrath that shall come upon all them that have not obeyed the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction . . ." ³⁰ Lauwerens van der Leyen referred both to atonement and to reconciliation. We can conclude therefore that salvation included for the Anabaptists the idea of being made right in their relationship with God. However, the idea of what Christ's work did within the believer and the consequent holy life that the Christian

²⁷ Ibid., 378.

²⁸ Ibid., 971.

²⁹ Ibid., 426.

³⁰ Ibid., 882.

could manifest³¹ were of much greater significance.³²

Both C. J. Dyck³³ and William Keeney³⁴ point to the fact that justification by faith was an important concept for Menno Simons. It is certainly more prominent in his writings than in those of the martyrs whose letters appear in the Martyrs Mirror. Keeney goes on to say that Simons preferred the concept of the new birth. In the context of Menno's writings with their emphasis on new birth and repentance and a changed life, we must conclude that Menno did not necessarily mean the same thing as Luther by justification. There was for Menno not only the being made right before God in a forensic sense but also the being made right in an ontological sense so that one now lived as one ought and therefore was right before God. In this Menno's views were similar to those of the martyrs whose stories and letters appear in the Martyrs Mirror.

Two of the martyrs expressly mentioned an aspect of

³¹ On this see #3 and 4 below.

³² Alvin Beachy, in his work of grace as understood by the Anabaptists, writes: "Whereas in the Magisterial Reformation grace was looked upon from man's side as God's act of forensic justification in which the sinner is declared righteous without actually being made so, in the Radical Reformation grace was rather regarded as the act whereby God through the agency of the Holy Spirit brought about an actual ontological change within the nature of man himself" (The Concept of Grace, 70).

See also Mast, 40.

³³ "The Life of the Spirit in Anabaptism," MQR 47 (1973):318.

³⁴ Thought and Practice, 66 & 76.

Christ's work that is prominent in the writings of Dirk and Menno, where it is more closely connected to the new birth, and is implicit in the call to obedience and perfection that was so prevalent in the writings of the martyrs. Maertern van der Straten in a letter to his wife, and Jacob van den Wege in a letter referred to earlier said that Christ "restored for us that which He had not taken away."³⁵ In Adam's disobedience the divine nature in man, the "likeness of God" had been severely tarnished. By Christ's death and resurrection that pre-fall, Adamic nature was now restored to man and he could again make the same choices as the ones that were made by Adam. Sin was a possibility but so was the choice to obey. In that sense Christ returned man both to primeval innocence and to the primeval, innate ability to do good. This was, however not because of who man was but because of what Christ had done and the new nature that man had received.

This restoration that happened for all people was not the same as the new birth which was experienced only by those who repented.³⁶ In a sense it was a partial restoration that made possible the response of repentance. Alvin Beachy in his major study of grace in the thinking of the Anabaptists argues that the Anabaptists understood there to be two levels of grace, designating

³⁵ MM, 955 & 971.

³⁶ See #4 below.

one as the grace of natural law and the second as the grace of supernatural regeneration, the former being sufficient to enable fallen man to turn toward Christ but not sufficient to restore or recreate the divine image.³⁷

There was a restoration that had occurred with the death of Christ. There was a further restoration that occurred upon repentance.

It was because of what Christ had done for all people in releasing the grip of sin and atoning for the sin of Adam that infants were seen by the Anabaptists as being innocent and free from the guilt of sin and consequently saved.³⁸ Laurens van der Leyen insisted on this in his disputation with someone whom he described as a monk.³⁹ When asked by the inquisitor if he believed that infants were born in original sin, Jacques d'Auchy replied:

David indeed says that he was conceived in sin, even as all infants are; but sin is not imputed unto them, since Christ has died to take away sin, as Paul testifies everywhere in his epistles. And as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, so grace has abounded through Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

In reply to a further question he said: "[Infants] are purified through the blood of Christ, since He is the Lamb

³⁷ The Concept of Grace, 67; and idem, "The Grace of God in Christ as Understood by Five Major Anabaptist Writers," MQR 37 (1963):13.

³⁸ Hans Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and the Reformation: Another Look," Church History 29 (1960):409.

³⁹ MM, 637-638.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 595.

which taketh away the sin of the world."⁴¹ A group of Anabaptist refugees who fled to England and were imprisoned there held a similar view, giving credit to Martin Luther for writing: "'Since, then, sin was taken away through Christ, and no longer condemns any one, there is also no sin can condemn infants if they die without baptism; for the children shall not die for the iniquity of the father, saith the Lord.'"⁴² They continued: "Those who demand [infant baptism], esteem Adam's sin greater than the merits of Christ; . . ."⁴³ Christ's work on the cross had been completed and had dealt with the sin of Adam. Infants were responsible only for their own sin, and since they were not capable of sinning because they did not yet possess the knowledge of right and wrong, they were saved.⁴⁴

The similarity between the martyrs on the one hand and Menno and Dirk on the other can be seen in the fact that the two Dutch Anabaptist leaders made the same point.⁴⁵ Menno,

⁴¹ Ibid., 595. See also Ibid., 370, 383 & 385.

⁴² Ibid., 1015.

⁴³ Ibid., 1015. See also Dyck, "Sinners and Saints," 90.

⁴⁴ Klassen, "The Role of the Child," 19.

⁴⁵ "Dirk and Menno, however, see the universal grace of Christ's atonement as efficacious for all infants and children, so that none may be condemned because of Adam's sin. This universal grace of the atonement removes all the guilt of original sin and leaves only an evil inclination, which is, for Christ's sake, not regarded as sin until it breaks out in the actual sin of the mature person" (Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 69; and idem, "The Grace of God," 16).

in his "Reply to False Accusations," argued that there were two kinds of sin. One kind is the evil nature that man has, "sin which is inherited at birth by all descendants and children of corrupt, sinful Adam and is not inaptly called original sin." However, because of what Christ has done, "it is not counted as sin unto us."⁴⁶ Dirk wrote:

Therefore let no man judge or condemn the sin of Adam and Eve, for Christ Jesus by his death and blood has taken it away . . . although [children] all descend from a sinful Adam, nevertheless for Christ's sake original sin (as it is called) is not imputed against them unto damnation, but they are in one respect like Adam and Eve were before the fall, namely that they are innocent and blameless, understanding neither good nor evil.⁴⁷

Like the martyrs, Dirk argued that once children reached a certain maturity, "as soon as they attain to the knowledge of good and evil," they became responsible and needed to be admonished to repent.⁴⁸ Menno called it the "years of understanding."⁴⁹

Once the children reached this "age of understanding," they were responsible to make a choice and to respond in a way that would deal with their own sins. The inclination at

See also Bornhäuser, 90-91; and James L. Gurley, "The Eschatology of the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists," (M.Th. thesis, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1958), 61.

⁴⁶ CWMS, 563.

⁴⁷ Enchiridion, 25-26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁹ CWMS, 90 & 123.

that point was, because of the sinfulness within them, towards sin and rebellion.⁵⁰ They were called, however, to respond in repentance and obedience to the commands of God. In a farewell and testament that he left for his children, Hendrick Alewijns wrote:

My dear children, lay this to heart. As soon as your little understanding can comprehend it, think of returning from the old rebellious man into the new man (Matt. 18:3); of the heavenly regeneration of water and of the Spirit (John 3:35): of the grace of God and improving the right time (II Corinthians 6:1, 2); of living peaceably with all men, if it be justly possible and lying in you . . . and also of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord, or enter into Christ's kingdom.⁵¹

Once they understood right from wrong, children became responsible for their own sins, and the condemnation that would follow if they did not repent.⁵² Similarly Menno said that children were to be carefully taught so that they

50 MM, 384.

51 Ibid., 751. See also Ibid., 564-565 & 947.

52 Valerius Schoolmaster, while in prison, produced two small booklets. In one of them he wrote: "Does not then men's condemnation proceed from their unbelief, disobedience, neglect, abuse, guilt, sin, obduracy, and ingratitude, because they will not by faith unto repentance accept this grace and incomprehensible love of God?" (Ibid., 728).

The Confession of 1600 declares: ". . . so that, in consideration of the death of Christ, none shall perish on account of Adam's sin; but God the righteous Judge will judge the world in righteousness, giving assurance unto all men, and rendering to every man according to his own works and deeds" (Ibid., 381).

could make the right choices.⁵³ If they chose to repent and follow Christ, such sins as they might commit due to their sinful flesh, would be covered by the death of Jesus, and the benefits lost by Adam, regained for humanity by Jesus, and lost again by each individual by his own sin, could be regained once again by repentance.

The Anabaptists were firmly convinced that because of Adam's sin, all humans were sinful. They were equally convinced that because of the Coming, the death and the resurrection of Christ, all humans were released from the bondage of sin.⁵⁴ They were convinced that "as by one man death came into the world, so by one man came life into the world, that all that believe in His name should obtain eternal life."⁵⁵ This grace of God expressed in the work of Christ had an affect not only on a select few, whether because of God's choice or because of baptism or because of faith, but on all mankind. However, for it to be truly of a saving nature it required a response of repentance and

⁵³ "Therefore they train them in the fear of God by teaching, admonishing, and chastising them, and with an example of an irreproachable life, in order that when they come to years of discretion they may themselves hear, believe, and accept the most holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, and receive the holy Christian baptism as Jesus and His holy apostles have taught all believers in many a place of the New Testament" (CWMS, 257).

⁵⁴ John Horsch outlines a similar position for the Swiss Brethren ("The Faith of the Swiss Brethren, III, " MQR 5 [1931]:128).

⁵⁵ MM, 1075. This is an obvious reference to Romans 5:12-21.

obedience, for to sin was to lose again the grace of God.⁵⁶

3. Repentance and Obedience

The work of Christ on the cross had broken the grip of sin on people's lives and had dealt with the guilt of original sin. People, still tainted by the sinful nature that they had received as descendants of Adam, found themselves, once they realized the difference between good and evil, to be living in wickedness and sin. For them to be saved required that they repent of their sinful ways and change their way of living.

The individual became aware of the true state of his sinful life and the need for repentance by reading the Word of God or by hearing the message preached.⁵⁷ This is nicely

⁵⁶ At the Emden debate between a group of Anabaptist ministers and a group of Reformed preachers, the Anabaptists made a similar point. During the debate one of the Anabaptist ministers, Brixius Gerridts, declared that "no one born of Adam has not been included in God's promise. Whenever people have fallen from it, such has happened through their own actual sins and disobedience" (Protocol. Das is/Alle handlinge der Gesprechs tot Embden in Oostevreislant met den Wederdoopenen/ die hen Vlamingen moomen/gehouden/ begonnen den 27 Februarij/ Anno 1578 ende den 17 May desselven Jaers gheeyndict. [Emden, 1579], fol. 173 recto - 174 recto, as quoted in Frank J. Wray, "History in the Eyes of the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists" [Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1954], 62). A similar argument was given by Brixius' colleague Peter van Ceulen at Leeuwarden in 1596 (Wray, 62).

⁵⁷ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 69-70; idem, "The Grace of God," 16; de Groot, 89; Dyck, "The Life of the Spirit," 321; Krahn, Menno Simons, 124-125; and Willis M. Stoesz, "The New Creature: Menno Simons' Understanding of the Christian Faith," MQR 39 (1965):6-7.

stated in a somewhat lengthy passage from a letter written in prison by Jacob van den Wege. He wrote:

But when men grow up, and have attained their years, the heart, as Jeremiah says, is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Hence there dwells no good thing in the flesh, but it departs from the Lord in every respect, since through evil lusts and desires the flesh is impelled to all wickedness and sin, whereby they often go astray and sin, because they have little or no right instruction; hence they lose Christ's death and merits, under which grace they were when they were first born. Men must therefore, according to the Scriptures, through the power of the divine Word, be taught to know sin; that sin and all unrighteousness are sin; and they must be exhorted to repentance and amendment, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; and to become new creatures, and regenerated children of God by faith, for we cannot see, nor enter into, the kingdom of God, except we be renewed and born again of water and of the Spirit.⁵⁸

Menno wrote:

This regeneration of which we write, from which comes the penitent, pious life that has the promise, can only originate in the Word of the Lord, rightly taught and rightly understood and received in the heart by faith through the Holy Ghost.⁵⁹

The Word served both to point to the sin in the person's life and to point to the way from sin to repentance, new birth and salvation. It brought conviction

⁵⁸ MM, 973. See also *Ibid.*, 432, 564-565, 618, 662 & 1043.

⁵⁹ CWMS, 92. See also *Ibid.*, 241, 265, & 341.

of the seriousness of sin and fear of its consequences.⁶⁰ It also outlined the commands of God that were to be obeyed, along with promising the grace that was available from God, making faith possible. Since sin was perceived primarily as disobedience to these commands, the teaching of the commands at one and the same time showed what the sin was and showed how people were to live.

The response of the individual was to be one of repentance. When asked how he understood the new birth, since he insisted that infant baptism had nothing to do with it, Jacques d'Auchy answered:

I understand it to be the new birth of him that was in the old Adam, in the body of sin; that we must put him off, and mortify and crucify the body of sin; together with all its lusts and affections, in order to be born again unto newness of life, after the new man Christ Jesus, as Paul testifies at length.⁶¹

George Friesen, in an admonition from prison, wrote:

I proclaim unto you, O men, a new message and glad tidings, . . . that you shall turn from your sinful life to God that your sins may be forgiven; cleanse your hearts, and forsake the world and its false show to which it lends so beautiful an

⁶⁰ Bornhäuser writes of Menno's view: "Furcht vor dem göttlichen Gericht war die geheime Triebfeder, die den Leser oder Hörer bewegen sollte, seinen bisherigen Lebenswandel aufzugeben, Busze so tun und den schmalen Weg zu gehen" (p. 75).

Egil Grisliis argues that for Menno "the clear and comprehensible Word of God is the only means of grace" ("The Concern for Christian Liberation According to Menno Simons," MQR 55 [1981]:286).

⁶¹ MM, 595.

aspect.⁶²

Valerius Schoolmaster, in the booklet mentioned earlier, asserted that people were "predestinated unto eternal damnation, unless they turn from their sins to God, and by faith rightly receive His grace unto repentance."⁶³ He continued:

If then we are to be saved through God's mercy, we must repent, must be obedient children of God, born again of Him, and must follow Christ in the regeneration and the footsteps of faith, through the narrow way unto eternal life; nor are we then saved through the merit of good works, but by the grace which came through Christ.⁶⁴

Jan Wouters, in a letter to his Catholic sister-in-law, wrote: "Again, if the sinner turns away from his evil ways, does that which is good and right, and walks in the way of the Lord, his sins shall be remembered no more, . . ."⁶⁵ Repeatedly, the Anabaptist martyrs called their fellow believers to repent and to live in obedience to the commands of God.⁶⁶ This was the only way in which sin could be forgiven and people could hope to be saved. It was only the obedient and those who lived as they ought to live who could hope to enter the kingdom of God--heaven.

⁶² Ibid., 662.

⁶³ Ibid., 729.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 730.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 919.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Ibid., 439, 432, 493, 507, 623, 663, 673, 675, 694, 735, 751, 853, 864, 866, 879, 953, & 1025.

In this conviction the Anabaptist martyrs followed their leaders, Menno⁶⁷ and Dirk. Menno wrote:

If you do not repent there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can help you, for without true repentance we are comforted in vain. . . . Wherever true repentance and the new creature are not (I speak of those who are of the age of understanding) there man must be eternally lost; this is incontrovertibly clear.⁶⁸

His colleague Dirk said: ". . . the true beginning of the Christian life in us is that we truly repent, and that we show genuine fruits of repentance, . . ." ⁶⁹ There was no other way to new life and salvation than by repentance and obedience to the teachings of Scripture.

This looks suspiciously like salvation by works, and many of the Anabaptists' opponents interpreted it as such. However, the martyrs refused to accept that accusation and regularly insisted that salvation was not by one's own merits but only by the grace of God and the innocent death of Christ. They would in one and the same paragraph call for repentance and obedience, and insist that salvation was only by grace. An example is the selection above taken from the booklet by Schoolmaster. George Friesen, calling for repentance, still insisted that Christ "healed us without

⁶⁷ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 63-64; idem, "The Grace of God," 9; Bornhäuser, 77; and Krahn, Menno Simons, 125-126.

⁶⁸ CWMS, 92. See also Ibid., 53 & 54.

⁶⁹ Enchiridion, 307. See also Ibid., 308, 434, 446, & 456.

merit on our part."⁷⁰ The grace of God was of crucial importance to the martyrs. It was at the very core of their thinking and their understanding of their salvation, but this did not decrease the necessity for repentance and obedience.

This reliance on the grace of God is also very clear in the writings of Dirk and Menno. Dirk wrote: ". . . let no one think or imagine nor say of us that we seek our salvation in any other way than in the grace of God and in the merits of Christ alone; . . ." ⁷¹ Menno proclaimed unequivocally:

But us He spared through His mercy, led us by His right hand, drew us by His goodness, renewed us by His Word, begat us by the Holy Ghost, and enlightened us by the clear light of His truth. Thus by His grace we bade farewell to the world, flesh, devil, and all and freely entered upon the path of peace, beneath the easy yoke of the Gospel. Methinks this is grace, if ever there was any.⁷²

Although the emphasis on discipleship and faithfulness,

⁷⁰ MM, 662. See also Ibid., 549-550, 694, 879, 986, & 1025.

⁷¹ Enchiridion, 312.

⁷² CWMS, 327-328. In another tract Menno wrote: ". . . nevertheless Thy fatherly grace did not forsake me, a miserable sinner, but in love received me, converted me to another mind, led me with the right hand, and taught me by the Holy Spirit until of my own choice I declared war upon the world, the flesh, and the devil, and renounced all my ease, peace, glory, desire, and physical prosperity and willingly submitted to the heavy cross of my Lord Jesus Christ that I might inherit the promised kingdom with all the soldiers of God and the disciples of Christ" (Ibid., 69).

See also Ibid., 98 & 116.

when read selectively, could suggest a works righteousness, as some have argued,⁷³ a reading of all the material points to a strong dependence on the grace of God.⁷⁴ Joos Verkindert emphasized the need for repentance and obedience because God had been merciful and gracious. The atonement and freedom given through Christ were the gift of grace. If the response to this was not one of repentance and obedience then that work of grace was in vain because those who remained in their sin and rebellion would be condemned because of their own sin. Christ would have made man free but man would have simply returned to bondage and eternal condemnation.⁷⁵ The grace of God could always be negated by man's refusal to accept it and to act upon it.⁷⁶

It is important, in attempting to understand the Anabaptists, that we distinguish between good works on the one hand and repentance and obedience on the other.⁷⁷ The

73 For example, de Groot, 79 & 80.

74 Bornhäuser concludes: "Menno war der Überzeugung, nur durch 'dat roode onbevleete bloet der Offerlammekens Christi' könne die verlorene Menschheit gerettet werden . . ." (71).

75 MM, 850 & 855.

76 On this Menno wrote: ". . . if they knowingly and willfully sin against the law and Word of God, and do not receive Christ in a pure and good conscience; if they live according to the flesh and despise the pleading voice of God, they will fall under the dreadful, eternal sentence and wrath of God" (CWMS, 336).

77 Friedmann makes the same point in his study of South German and Swiss Anabaptism. He writes: "They never conceived this activism to be a means of 'buying salvation'

Anabaptists had no illusions that their deeds and discipleship would in some way lead to them meriting redemption. Their sins merited far more suffering and punishment than they would ever endure.⁷⁸ Repentance and obedience did not "buy salvation," to use Friedmann's term. Repentance was possible only because of the prior grace of God that had dealt with Adam's sin and had freed the individual from the bondage to sin. Repentance and obedience were the response to the grace of God and were made possible by the grace of God. They were also the outward expression of an inner attitude and the manifestation of an ontological change that was occurring in the person, a change being worked by God. In his letter to the church Matthias Servaes wrote: "Not that I seek any merit by it. Oh no, but that what the Lord has put into me might become known and manifest before all men, to His Praise, and not to mine."⁷⁹ Jelis Matthijss said that

by meritorious works, which was the motive imputed to them by Luther and the Lutherans after him as they observed the endeavors of the Anabaptists toward discipleship . . .

Discipleship and works-righteousness are totally different attitudes and must not be confused" ("Essence," 20 & 21).

⁷⁸ "Hence, my dear wife, be patient in the tribulation that is upon us both; confess with Judith, that our punishment is less than our sins. Judith 8:27" (MM, 879).

". . . and whatsoever the Lord permits them, to that we will resign ourselves, for our flesh, with which we have offended the Lord so often, has merited it more than a thousand times" (Ibid., 891).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 696.

obedience would make it "clearly evident" that the individual was born again,⁸⁰ and Schoolmaster asserted that by obedience "we may prove ourselves."⁸¹ If there was no change in the person, no change from a life of wickedness to a life of righteousness, a change from disobedience to obedience, then obviously the person had no intentions of wanting forgiveness and so it would not be extended to him. It was not enough to pray and believe. For belief to be true belief and faith to be true faith, it had to be expressed in a changed life. In the words of Menno, who as a fugitive was not only a leader but also one with the martyrs:

. . . the true evangelical faith which makes the heart upright and pious before God, moves, changes, urges, and constrains a man so that he will always hate the evil and gladly do the things which are right and good.⁸²

That kind of lived faith was the only kind of faith that saved for it was the only kind of faith that was genuine.⁸³

The fact that individuals had the capability to repent and to obey did not indicate an optimistic view of man as

80 Ibid., 671.

81 Ibid., 727. See also Ibid., 624 & 671.

82 CWMS, 337. See also Ibid., 96, 342 & 399.

83 Rosella Reimer Duerksen reached the same conclusion in her study of Anabaptist hymns ("Doctrinal Implications in Sixteenth Century Anabaptist Hymnody," MQR 35 [1961]:40. See also Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 25; Bornhäuser, 76 & 77; William Keeney, "The Incarnation: A Central Theological Concept," in A Legacy of Faith, p.61; idem, Thought and Practice, 115; Stoesz, 19; and Weingart, 27.

opposed to a pessimistic one that would insist on total depravity and the total helplessness of man. The hope of the Anabaptists was not placed on man's innate goodness and strength and freedom apart from God, contrary to the view of de Groot.⁸⁴ Man was able to choose between good and evil and was able to repent and obey because of the saving work of Christ as discussed above. They were therefore guilty, not of an optimistic view of man, but of an optimistic view of God, God's grace and the saving work of God's Son. Man's sin and disobedience and the power of Satan could in no way limit the power of God to free man. The call to repentance was an expression of confidence in the saving work of God.⁸⁵

The ability to repent was not limited to a few chosen people. It had been imparted to everyone by Christ's death and resurrection. Consequently, the Anabaptists rejected what they perceived to be the contemporary view of predestination. The compiler(s) of the Confession of 1600 wrote:

⁸⁴ ". . . [the Anabaptists] urged the worth of natural human ability unto salvation" (p. 75).

⁸⁵ De Groot fails to recognize this when he concludes that the Anabaptists did not have a sense of man's depravity (p. 127). On the basis of the evidence in the Martyrs Mirror we can conclude that the Anabaptist martyrs recognized the sinfulness of man, but believed the grace of God to be greater and stronger than the sin of Adam and so, according to them, the depravity of man had been overcome in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Egill Grislis concludes that Menno believed that the efforts of man were possible because of Christ's initiative ("Concern for Liberation," 284).

. . . in no wise is it true that the gracious, merciful, and righteous God (who conforms to His holy nature) has from eternity foreseen, ordained or predestinated, and created at a convenient time, by far the greater number of the human race unto eternal damnation; . . . Far be it from us, to believe this from the only good and righteous God!⁸⁶

People would be condemned for their own sins, not for the sin of Adam nor by the choice of God.

This does not mean that the Anabaptist martyrs did not use the idea of predestination. However, it was defined differently by them. In the same Confession of 1600, predestination was described as being based on God's foreknowledge, not foreordination. God had not determined ahead of time what would happen. However, he did know that certain persons would repent and others would remain rebellious. The rebellious ones were therefore predestined to hell because they would choose rebellion. Those who would repent were predestined to eternal bliss because they would repent. The repentance and rebellion were, however, the people's free choices.⁸⁷

Because of Adam's disobedience, that which God had created in His likeness had become defiled and infected with sin and placed in bondage to evil. By His death and resurrection Christ had healed and cleansed the human race. This did not mean that humanity was returned to its original

⁸⁶ MM, 381.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 381. See also Ibid., 729.

undefiled innocence but it did mean that the original guilt had been dealt with, the grip of sin was broken and man could now respond to this gift of grace in repentance and obedience. Man could turn from evil and live as God commanded him to live as an expression of commitment to God and of a desire to experience the forgiveness of God. The repentance and obedience were man's continuation of the work begun by God and were possible only because of what God had done. Repentance was not an attempt to gain merit before God, but a humble, obedient response to God's grace.

4. The New Birth.

In the Anabaptist martyrs' understanding of salvation, the work of Christ in the person, the repentance on the part of the individual, the reading and preaching of the Word of God and the work of the Spirit within the person resulted in a new birth. This new birth was an ontological change within the person.⁸⁸ Keeney describes it as a "metaphysical but real change that will affect the total personality."⁸⁹ The nature that was defiled by sin and tended towards evil was replaced with the divine nature⁹⁰ that now made obedience

⁸⁸ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 70; idem, "The Grace of God," 17; and C. J. Dyck, "The Place of Tradition in Dutch Anabaptism," Church History 43 (1974):37.

⁸⁹ Thought and Practice, 73.

⁹⁰ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 28 & 70; idem, "The Grace of God," 17; Harold S. Bender, "'Walking in the Resurrection': The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and

and faithfulness possible. Jelis Bernaerts wrote:

Thus, my beloved, that by these you are a partaker of the divine nature, if you flee the corruptible lusts of this world, as you have also done, and by renouncing the same, and accepting regeneration, faith, and manifestation of obedience, which you proved by baptism, in which you put on Christ, and thereby became a partaker of the divine nature.⁹¹

In another letter he referred to Christians as being "flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone."⁹² Jan Block, who was burnt in 1572, in a letter from prison encouraged his fellow believers to "show forth the mind and nature of Christ."⁹³ The martyrs' leaders, Menno⁹⁴ and Dirk,⁹⁵ returned

Discipleship," MQR 35 (1961):97; Bornhäuser, 77; Dyck, "The Life of the Spirit," 321; and Stoesz, 8-9.

91 MM, 624.

92 Ibid., 628. Menno uses the same phrase (CWMS, 402), as is noted by Krahn (Menno Simons, 127) and Stoesz (13 & 14).

93 MM, 896. See also Ibid., 905.

94 "The new birth consists, verily, not in water nor in words; but it is the heavenly, living, and quickening power of God in our hearts which flows forth from God, and which by the preaching of the divine Word, if we accept it by faith, quickens, renews, pierces, and converts our hearts, so that we are changed and converted from unbelief to faith, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from evil to good, from carnality to spirituality, from the earthly to the heavenly, from the wicked nature of Adam to the good nature of Jesus Christ" (CWMS, 265). See also Ibid., 55, 56, 58, 139, 402, & 411.

95 ". . . not every one who professes regeneration and babbles much of the new creature is therefore a newborn creature born of God, but he that has partaken of the divine nature . . . , and of the attributes of Jesus Christ and the power and character of the Holy Spirit and has become conformed to the image of Christ, and serves God in all submissiveness, obedience and righteousness . . ." (Enchiridion, 295). See also Ibid., 16, 135, 297, 315, 317,

repeatedly to the idea that the true Christians now had the divine nature and character within them. Believers could live as Christ lived, they could be followers of Christ, and they could be obedient to God in the way that Christ was obedient because they had Christ's nature within them. This meant they could also expect to share in His glory in heaven.

This birth into the divine nature was the reverse of the incarnation.⁹⁶ In the incarnation, Christ had become human flesh without partaking of its sinfulness. Now man, without ever becoming completely God, received a God-like nature that made it possible for him to live as God required and therefore to be taken to heaven rather than to be condemned to hell. The forensic justification of Luther was not required because it was possible for man to live as he ought to live if he wished to be in the presence of God.⁹⁷

This change in man was begun by the Word of God and achieved by the Spirit. The Word of God was the

& 434.

⁹⁶ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 70; idem, "The Grace of God," 17; Bornhäuser, 79; and Keeney, "The Incarnation," 59.

⁹⁷ This sounds like perfectionism, and seems to have been understood as such by some. The Anabaptists however denied that they believed that man could be sinless. See pp. 152-155 below.

incorruptible seed that grew into the new man.⁹⁸ By reading or hearing the Word of God the person came to understand what it meant to live as God's children. This knowledge, acted upon by repentance and empowered by the Spirit,⁹⁹ brought about the change.

The new birth was to be followed by a life of discipleship that was a following of Jesus' life and teachings and a lifelong growing to be like him. The new birth, even though it meant receiving the divine nature, did not mean immediate perfection and Christ-likeness. The believers had to strive, in all of life, to be conformed to Christ¹⁰⁰ and to live out their faith. Krahn, in interpreting Menno, describes the Christian as one who is "becoming," bringing his life ever closer to that described

⁹⁸ MM, 509 & 862; CWMS, 325. Keeney draws the same conclusion from his reading of Menno and Dirk (Thought and Practice, 114).

⁹⁹ MM, 491, 751, 866, & 905. See also CWMS, 57, 58, & 60; and Enchiridion, 298, 301, & 315.

¹⁰⁰ "Behold, my dear friends, it is not enough that we are baptized in the name of Christ, that we are called brethren or sisters of Christ, that we bear the name of Christians. Oh, no, all this cannot save; . . . For it is utterly in vain to bear the name of Christ, so long as we are not conformed to Him in word, work and thought; . . . If He then has called and predestinated you, use diligence that you become conformed to Him so that you may be found true Christians in deed when you come into the tribulation in which we now are; . . ." (MM, 508). See also Ibid., 524, 565, 580, 668, 728, & 800 among others.

by the Bible and seen in Christ.¹⁰¹ In his own tract on the new birth Menno wrote:

Yes, my friend, if you were thus born of God in your baptism and had received the Holy Ghost as you comforters assure, then certainly the new spiritual life and its new spiritual fruits would also be manifest . . ."¹⁰²

Living in conformity to the Word of God should be natural to the Christian.¹⁰³

The martyrs lived this conviction in their day to day lives. This was recognized by their opponents.¹⁰⁴ It also caused more suffering. Dirck Willems took the call to be like Christ so seriously that, when his pursuer, a sheriff's officer, fell through the ice, he returned and rescued the official. Once saved from the icy water, the officer arrested him at his superior's orders. Dirck was consequently tortured and burnt to death.¹⁰⁵ To claim to be

¹⁰¹ "So ist der Christ durch die Wiedergeburt ganz neu geschaffen un göttlichen Wesens geworden, aber er ist dabei dennoch ein Werdender. Mennos Ermahnungen gehen immer wieder dahin, dasz der Wiedergeborene Christus und der Schrift 'gleichförmig' werden müsse" (Menno Simons, 128).

¹⁰² CWMS, 97. See also Ibid., 396.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 338 & 391.

¹⁰⁴ The Dean of Ronse, in dialoguing with Claes de Praet, an Anabaptist prisoner, was reported by de Praet to have said: "As regards your life, your walk or conversation is good towards all men, and you do unto your neighbours as you would have men do unto you, and live in peace, love and unity with one another, which is very good; and you assist each other in need and distress, and lay down your lives for one another, which is also very good, I can say nothing against it; . . ." (MM, 557).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 741.

born of God and yet not to live as God described in His Word was simple hypocrisy that indicated that the new birth had not occurred.¹⁰⁶

The new birth did not mean that man was now sinless. In an interview with "the lady of Friesland" Jacques Dosie was asked whether it was possible for the believers to sin.

Jacques replied:

Yes, my lady, for this appears very clearly from the words of Paul; since we are still clothed in a weak and sinful body, and sin in many things. Rom. 7:14, 18; Gal. 5:17; Jas. 3:2. But we must constantly crucify and mortify it, and not practice or fulfill the works of the flesh; or the righteousness of God will condemn us to eternal death.¹⁰⁷

The Confession of 1600 reads:

. . . the innate sinful nature, affection for, and proneness to sin are not utterly removed by regeneration, but remain until death in the regenerated; so that the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the lust of indwelling sin wars against the law of the new mind, so that the regenerated enter upon a continuous warfare, . . .¹⁰⁸

As in other aspects of their soteriology, the martyrs here followed the lead of Menno and Dirk who were convinced that even after the new birth, perfection would elude the

¹⁰⁶ Scholars agree that the importance of discipleship in the lives of those who claimed to be born of God was a central idea for the Anabaptists.

¹⁰⁷ MM, 499.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 385.

grasp of the believer.¹⁰⁹ Menno, in a personal way, spoke of himself as struggling with sin. He wrote: "Think not, beloved reader, that we boast of being perfect and without sins. No at all. As for me I confess that often my prayer is mixed with sin and my righteousness with unrighteousness; . . ."¹¹⁰ Christians, he said, "daily sigh and lament over their poor, unsatisfactory evil flesh, over the manifest errors and faults of their weak lives."¹¹¹ Dirk, in his pamphlet on the new birth, instructed the believers that "they must also with the apostle confess and realize, that they have not yet attained, nor as yet have become perfect."¹¹² They were not perfect, but they were always "to seek holiness with all earnestness."¹¹³

Had the Anabaptists expected that they would be perfect after the new birth, they would not have needed the constant reminders and encouragements to remain true to their commitment and to overcome sin and to be obedient. Being

¹⁰⁹ Beachy, The Concept of Grace, 75 & 77; idem, "The Grace of God," 22 & 24; Dyck, "The Life of the Spirit," 319; Grislis, "Concern for Liberation," 277; Keeney, Thought and Practice, 118 & 120; Weingart, 37; and John C. Wenger, "Grace and Discipleship in Anabaptism," MQR 35 (1961):60 & 64.

¹¹⁰ CWMS, 506.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 95.

¹¹² Enchiridion, 318.

¹¹³ Ibid.

involved to the very end in a battle with sin,¹¹⁴ meant that they had to remain alert and had to guard against a return to sin. Since Adam, created in God's likeness, had been able to sin, so they were also quite capable of sinning, particularly since they were also encumbered with a flesh, received from Adam, that still tended towards sin.¹¹⁵

The tension between the view, on the one hand, that people have a new nature and do not sin, and the view, on the other, that they are not perfect and continued to battle with sin is not resolved in the letters in the Martyrs Mirror. We gain some help in understanding this apparent paradox when we read Menno's tract, "Reply to False Accusations."¹¹⁶ Menno lists four kinds of sin: first, original sin that has corrupted all people; secondly, actual sin which is the fruit of original sin and includes adultery, avarice, drunkenness, envy, murder and idolatry; thirdly, "human frailties, errors and stumblings;" and fourthly, deliberate sin after one has been born of God.¹¹⁷

114 Menno wrote: "And against these in turn the devil and his accomplices, such as the world and the flesh, being very envious, have declared war and have become their deadly enemies. The regenerate in turn have now become enemies of sin and the devil and have taken the field against all their enemies: (CWMS, 56).

115 Horsch reaches the same conclusion in his study of the Swiss Brethren (pp. 131 & 137), as does Friedmann in his discussion of the South German and Swiss Anabaptists ("The Doctrine of Sin," 207; and Friedmann and van der Zijpp, 79).

116 CWMS, 541-577.

117 Ibid., 563-566.

Original sin has been dealt with by Christ on the cross and no longer condemns the person. Actual sin is the result of original sin's ongoing influence in life and must be overcome through repentance and the new birth. As long as people give in to this sin and live in wickedness, they stand in condemnation. However, as they battle against it and are given the new birth, sin's hold is broken and they are released from it. This is the sin that they must battle in all of life. To give in to it, after having been reborn (the fourth category of sin), is to stand condemned again. The third kind of sin is sin that people live with at all times and fall into inadvertently, without intending to sin. These do not condemn for they are readily forgiven by God.

The difference between sin that condemns the person and sin that does not seem to be the person's attitude. Sin committed deliberately and without resistance is sin that shows the person's wickedness and unrepentant character. Inadvertent sin, however, when noticed, is responded to with great remorse and is not true to the person's new born character. It is, therefore, not the kind of sin that condemns.

In the process of salvation and the receiving of a new nature the person moved from deliberate sin and rebellion to a new life of battling against sin. The new nature made it possible not to want to sin and to resist sin. "Errors and stumblings" were still part of life but were not destructive

of this new character.¹¹⁸

In the new birth, the Anabaptists understood that people, as the result of God's grace, the preaching of the Word, the work of the Spirit, and the repentance on the part of the individual, received a part of the divine nature and were able to live in obedience to God. They were, however, in constant danger of experiencing again the fall and so they warned each other to be true to the end lest they lose their salvation.

5. Endurance.

In the face of temptations brought on by the severity of the persecutions, the desires of the flesh for comfort, security and safety, and the longing of the heart for spouses and children, compromise and apostasy were ever-present threats for the martyrs. As a result their letters were filled with calls to faithfulness and requests for prayer that God might keep them true and faithful. Jerome Segers, in a letter to his wife who was also imprisoned, wrote:

O my dearly beloved wife, continue faithful to the Lord unto death; for the crown is not at the beginning, nor in the middle, but at the end. If

¹¹⁸ Hans Hillerbrand concludes that "perfection was, for the Anabaptists unlike the Reformers, the potential goal, though perhaps not necessary empirical reality" ("Anabaptism and the Reformation," 416).

See also idem, "Menno Simons--Sixteenth Century Reformer," Church History 31 (1962):396-397; and Egil Grisliis, "'Good Works' According to Menno Simons," 126.

you continue faithful to the Lord, He will not forsake you; He will give you the crown of eternal life, and lead you into His kingdom.¹¹⁹

The martyrs frequently encouraged each other with the words from Matthew 24:13: "He that endures to the end will be saved,"¹²⁰ and the similar message in Revelation 2:10-11 and 21:7: ". . . he that overcometh shall inherit all things; he that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death."¹²¹ Jan Wouters asked: "What will it avail them to have borne the name of a Christian, if one does not continue steadfast? Then we must ignominiously perish, like the ten unbelieving spies."¹²² Jan Matthijss wrote:

Hence, my faithful, dearest flesh and blood, be warned, that you may not, through slothfulness and heedlessness, find yourself deceived with the heedless, foolish virgins, Therefore be watchful in the spirit, and give diligence still from day to day, to put off more and more (Eph. 4:22); for, my dear lamb, it is necessary that you watch, since not all shall enter into the promised land, who have gone out of this present spiritual Egypt and Sodom; and this because of the power and might of the old serpent, who does not rest nor pause day or night, but goes around the camp, seeking whom he may find drowsy; whom resist stoutly in the faith take[sic] upon yourself a valiant and

119 CWMS, 1048.

120 See, for example, *Ibid*, 512, 672, 837, 870, 891, 975, & 1004.

121 *Ibid.*, 929. See also *Ibid*, 626, 640, 735, 934, 966, & 1053. Dirk Philips reached a similar conclusion on the basis of reading Psalm 118:7-15. He wrote: "All those then who believe the truth and remain steadfast and immovable by it, and love the church of God shall be forever blessed (Psalm 118:7-15)" (Enchiridion, 438-439).

122 MM, 904.

believing heart.¹²³

As was the case in our discussion of repentance and obedience, the call to endure to the end for the sake of their salvation has the appearance, on the surface, of salvation by works.¹²⁴ However, a more careful examination makes it obvious that this was not what the Anabaptists meant. Even in enduring, they were very conscious of the grace of God and the strength that they received from Him. As far as they were concerned, it was possible to endure only because God gave them the strength to bear up under the pain of torture. Therefore, Jelis Strings asked his fellow believers "to pray for us, that we may finish our course to the praise of God and the salvation of our souls."¹²⁵ Nelleken Jasper, a young woman imprisoned in Antwerp, also asked her fellow Christians to "entreat the Lord in my behalf, that I may finish it to the praise of the Lord, and to my eternal salvation."¹²⁶ Then, in an expression of hope and confidence, she wrote:

. . . do not depart from the Lord; He will not permit you to be tempted above that you are able to bear; for He is a faithful succorer, a strength in weakness, and a comforter in sorrow to those that are afflicted in heart. Let us nestle close into His arms, and cast all of our care upon Him,

123 Ibid., 676.

124 It is interpreted in this way, erroneously, by de Groot (126, 131, & 133).

125 MM, 659.

126 Ibid., 762.

for He cares for us, and will Himself watch over us; that we may partake of the supper with all the saints in heaven, where Christ Himself will gird Himself, and serve at the table.¹²⁷

Such a confidence in God's care, both hoped for and experienced, was expressed again and again by the martyrs.¹²⁸

Endurance to the end was a prerequisite for salvation because of how the Anabaptists understood their salvation and how they defined sin. As was discussed above, according to the Anabaptist martyrs, Christ's atonement had dealt with Adam's sin and in the new birth the believers had now received a new, divine nature. However, it was still possible for them to fall as Adam had fallen. Menno, in a 1556 letter of encouragement to his flock, wrote:

But take heed that you walk circumspectly, preserve your wedding garment, have oil in your lamps at all times, lest the Lord meet you in an unexpected time and find you unprepared and naked, and then close the door on you or cast you into outer darkness.¹²⁹

He continued:

. . . the spirit of Antichrist who would rob you again, and all the pious, of the precious light of revealed truth which so graciously has appeared to us poor children in these abominable last days, and would fain lead you on a crooked path of death under the semblance of Scriptures.¹³⁰

127 Ibid., 762.

128 See, for example, Ibid., 439, 481, 496, 506, 513, 540, 563, 681, 706, 840, etc.

129 CWMS, 1048.

130 Ibid., 1048.

To break under severe torture and to deny their faith and their Lord was perceived as an act of disobedience. All disobedience separated the person from God and was, consequently, a return to the separation, alienation and condemnation suffered by Adam and Eve in the fall. Therefore endurance was crucial, but also possible because God could be trusted to give the strength and the courage to endure to the end. Salvation was only sure once they entered the eternal rest, either by death or at Christ's return. Till then they had to continue the struggle with sin and exercise all diligence to maintain their faithfulness. Because of the grace of God this was possible.

C. J. Dyck writes that with reference to the Anabaptists' ideas on salvation and endurance, "care should be taken against lightly concluding in favour of . . . incipient Socinianism in the martyrs' serious attitude toward discipline."¹³¹ It is true that the Anabaptists' own experiences and reading of the Scriptures could well have brought them to the conclusions that they reached. At the same time, we should realize that Lelio Sozzini did travel

¹³¹ Dyck, 14. Socinianism was a sixteenth century movement founded by Lelio Sozzini that taught, among other things, "nonresistance; the separation of church and state; and the doctrine of the death of the soul with the body except for selective resurrection of those who persevered in obeying Jesus' commands" (Robert G. Clouse, "Socinianism," in The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978], 912).

through Switzerland, Holland and Germany during this time¹³² and therefore there may well have been influence both ways between Lelio and the Anabaptists.¹³³ The Anabaptists did not write or speak about selective resurrection but they certainly emphasized the need for endurance if one wished to be saved, that is, participate in the glory of heaven.¹³⁴

6. Suffering and Salvation.

We noted in chapter three that although the Anabaptist martyrs saw themselves in union with Christ in their suffering, they nonetheless saw his death as unique in bringing salvation for all people. We need to examine this more closely because there is a sense in which it seems that the martyrs thought their own sufferings as necessary for their own salvation. In describing the martyrdom of Andrew Claessen who was beheaded for his faith in 1535, the chronicler wrote: ". . . we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of heaven (Acts 14:22); as also our Saviour says that the way is narrow, and the gate is strait, that leadeth unto life; . . ." ¹³⁵ Anna of Rotterdam, whose

¹³² Clouse, 912.

¹³³ C. J. Dyck considers this influence as a possibility with regards to Philips' christology (Dyck, "Christology," 153).

¹³⁴ We will return to the matter of resurrection in chapter 5.

¹³⁵ MM, 444. See also *Ibid.*, 468, 495, 528, 567, 582, 759, 913, & 961.

testament we examined in chapter 2, wrote: "Behold, all these could not attain to [the new Jerusalem], without first suffering judgement and chastisement in their flesh;. . ."¹³⁶ Of Has den Duytsch it was said: ". . . he chose rather to die a temporal death for the truth, and thus gain eternal life, than to purchase a short wicked life with everlasting death."¹³⁷

The martyrs were not paying for their own salvation by suffering and dying. That salvation had been obtained for them by Christ. The suffering was important, however, as part of their endurance to the end. Since they understood suffering to be the lot of all disciples, suffering was the only way to salvation. The only way to avoid suffering was to desert the faith and therefore one's salvation. Because suffering was the natural way for the Christian, it was the way to salvation.

Suffering also contributed to salvation in that it purified the individual.¹³⁸ It exercised ones faith,¹³⁹ and therefore was conducive to salvation.¹⁴⁰ Through this discipline the believer became more and more like his Master and therefore more and more prepared to enter heaven. And

136 Ibid., 453.

137 Ibid., 583.

138 See the discussion on chastisement in Chapter 3.

139 MM, 677.

140 Ibid., 708.

yet, finally, that entrance was gained solely because of the work of Christ.

Suffering also gave the martyrs the sense that they were truly God's children and therefore on the way to their ultimate salvation. Jelis Matthijss had struggled with the fear that he was not truly one of God's children and headed for salvation in the kingdom of God. Since he was now in prison and facing death, Jelis was convinced that God had prepared him for suffering and death and that therefore he would be saved. The suffering was a sign that he was one of God's own.¹⁴¹ Jan Woutersss saw his suffering as a sign of God's love and consequently also a sign of his salvation.¹⁴² It placed him in the company of all the other saints.

Finally, death was the door into heaven, the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Through death the martyrs were able to leave the sufferings of this world and enter into a glorious new existence within heaven.¹⁴³ Death completed the process of salvation and so, by their martyrdom, they were being saved, for by death they were

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 674.

¹⁴² "Dear beloved sister, it is nothing strange that I suffer; it is a sign that the Lord loves me, and I count it for my salvation" (Ibid., 920). See also Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," 199.

¹⁴³ "But our dying is nothing less than an introduction into eternal life, to reign with God and Christ" (MM, 838). See also Ibid., 772, 819, & 848.

entering the next life.¹⁴⁴ Once there, their salvation was guaranteed, for there would be no opportunity to be tempted and to fall away from the faith.¹⁴⁵ Salvation would then be complete.

7. Summary.

De Groot argues that personal, individual experiences of salvation were not important to the Anabaptists and that they had "shallow conceptions of grace, faith, and regeneration [that] cast a shadow of a legalistic form of oneness over the conception of what the church ought to be."¹⁴⁶ This "legalistic form of oneness" certainly seems to be present in some of the harsh and unyielding church discipline practiced in parts of the Dutch Mennonite church.¹⁴⁷ In the writings of the Anabaptist martyrs, however, and in the writings of both Menno and Dirk, the experience of hearing the Word of the Gospel, responding in repentance, and being given a new nature were described as deep and individual experiences that led the people as a congregation and as individuals to wholehearted commitment

¹⁴⁴ Keeney reaches a similar conclusion in his interpretation of Dutch Anabaptist thought (Thought and Practice, 118; and "The Incarnation," 60 & 66).

¹⁴⁵ MM, 737. See also Ibid., 707.

¹⁴⁶ pp. 129 & 130.

¹⁴⁷ For examples see Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 233-234 and Verheyden, Anabaptism in Flanders.

to Christ. They were deeply appreciative of the grace of God that made it possible. This serves as a balance to the legalism that showed itself in stern and unyielding church discipline.

The sixteenth century Anabaptist martyrs understood that by their disobedience Adam and Eve had brought sin into the world and infected all of humanity with this sin. The bondage created by that disobedience had been broken by Christ in his death and resurrection and so people were now free to respond to the grace of God and the hearing of the Word by repenting of their evil ways and living in obedience. That faith resulted in a new birth within them and a change in their character that led to further obedience and conformity to Christ. The responsibility of the believer was to obey and to endure in his obedience, whatever the cost. Disobedience and apostasy were as real a possibility as they were for Adam and had to be guarded against. Finally, by death, often violent and at the hands of their enemies, their salvation was completed as they entered their eternal rest. We can conclude with William Keeney: "The life of the new creature was dynamic. Salvation was not merely an event; it was also a process as long as man remained in the flesh."¹⁴⁸ The person was truly saved only when that redemption had been completed by his removal from this place of sin and suffering and his entry

¹⁴⁸ "The Incarnation," 62.

into Christ's glory with Him.

CHAPTER V

"EVEN NOW THE AXE IS LAID TO THE ROOT OF THE TREES":

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE MARTYRS

In chapters 3 and 4 we noted that in the Anabaptist martyrs' understanding and explanation of their experiences of suffering and salvation, they displayed an eschatological orientation towards a future event that would mark a radical change from the life that they were currently experiencing. We must now return to this orientation towards the future and examine it more closely.

Harold S. Bender defined eschatology as "literally the doctrine of the last things, i.e., of the end, also called the doctrine of the future, but in its fullest sense the teaching about the Christian hope or the outcome of history and God's program."¹ It is in this fuller sense that we will be studying the eschatology of the Anabaptist martyrs. We will include in our examination a look at their view of history and of current times along with an investigation of their understanding of the return of Christ, the future hope of the believers and the fate of the wicked. This will include a look at the martyrs' attitude towards death.

Apocalyptic language and the forming of eschatologies

¹ Harold S. Bender, "Eschatology," Mennonite Encyclopedia 2:247.

has had a long history within the Christian church.² Walter Klaassen writes: "Apocalyptic was part of the Christian interpretation of reality from day one."³ The Anabaptists were therefore not unique in having an eschatology, nor in having one that spoke of Christ's imminent return and that saw the present age as the time just before the new age would break in. That view was shared by men such as Joachim of Fiore, the most prominent apocalypticist of the Middle Ages,⁴ as well as by Luther and Calvin, contemporaries of the Anabaptists. According to Cornelius Krahn: "The Reformation in general ushered in a renewal of the eschatological hope and the awareness of the tension which exists between the world as it exists and the expected

² See Walter Klaassen, "Visions of the End in Reformation Europe," Visions and Realities, edited by Harry Loewen and Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Ltd., 1985):11-57. Klaassen briefly traces the history of apocalypticism up to the Reformation and outlines the various views that emerged within the different Anabaptist groups.

³ Klaassen, 14. On the relationship between eschatology and apocalyptic, see pp. 212-215 below.

⁴ Klaassen, "Visions," 22. On Joachim of Fiore see Bernard McGinn, Visions of the End, 126-142; idem, Apocalyptic Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 97-148; and Marjorie Reeves, Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future (London: SPCK, 1979). On a discussion of medieval apocalypticism see the two books by McGinn as well as Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Klaassen, "Visions," 13-27.

kingdom of God."⁵

The eschatologies, like other theologies, were not identical among those who broke away from the Catholic church. There was an "immediacy" and an "aliveness" about the Anabaptist eschatology that was not present in the thought of Luther and Calvin.⁶ Both of these mainline Protestant reformers placed a significant emphasis on the ordering of present life and establishing institutions within history, an emphasis that is not present within the writings of the Anabaptist martyrs. Frank J. Wray contends that Luther expected Christ to return soon, "perhaps within his own lifetime," whereas Calvin projected "the cataclysm into the indefinite future."⁷ It was left to the Anabaptists to give expression to an eschatology that expected Christ's return and cosmic change at any moment. The persecutions that the Anabaptist martyrs suffered were the stage immediately preceding the return. The suffering set in motion the events that would culminate in the return

⁵ Dutch Anabaptism, 114. See also Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, 419; Bornhäuser, 144; Krahn, Menno Simons, 111; and T. F. Torrance, "The Eschatology of the Reformation," Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers, 2 (1953; reprint, 1957):38.

⁶ John Howard Yoder writes: ". . . but only with the Anabaptists did eschatology take on present historical relevance" ("The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, 101). See also Kenneth R. Davis, "Anabaptism as a Charismatic Movement," MQR 53 (1979):221.

⁷ Wray, 229.

of Christ.

1. Hoffmann and Münster.

A study of the eschatology of the Anabaptist martyrs must include a brief look at its relationship to Melchior Hoffmann and the Münsterites, both because of the martyrs' historical and geographical proximity to Hoffmann and Münster and because of the relationship that was seen between the groups by enemies of the peaceful Anabaptists and denied unequivocally by Menno. By their closeness to the peaceful Anabaptists, Hoffmann and Münster were both a positive and a negative influence on the Anabaptism that survived in the Low Countries,⁸ and so their ideas need to be outlined in this context.

Melchior Hoffmann⁹ began his move away from the Catholic church by turning to Lutheranism, then to Zwinglianism, and finally to Anabaptism. He is credited

⁸ Klaassen argues that the apocalyptic of the post-1535 Anabaptists must be seen in continuity with the more radical thought of Hoffmann and his followers, including the Münsterites. He writes: ". . . to posit radical discontinuity between the Dopers and the Doopsgezinden is to do violence to history. It is therefore not surprising that it is possible to see continuities between the highly sensational apocalyptic of the Melchiorites and Münsterites and the quieter, reserved apocalyptic of the post-1535 Anabaptists" ("Visions", 54).

See also Dyck, "The Suffering Church," 19-20.

⁹ This summary of Hoffmann is based on Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), 75-81; and Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 80-117.

See also Klaassen, "Visions," 34-37; and Wray, 245-247.

with introducing Anabaptism in the Netherlands. His followers were responsible for baptizing Obbe and Dirk Philips. It was Obbe who later ordained Menno Simons. The connection between Hoffmann and the people that concern us in this study is therefore obvious.

Hoffmann is known in particular for his strong eschatological views.¹⁰ He saw himself as the "Elijah" who was to precede the coming of Christ. As this Elijah he preached with a fiery enthusiasm the imminent return of Christ and the establishment of his millennial kingdom at Strassburg. Hoffmann did not hesitate to set a date for the return of Christ. That return was to be preceded by Hoffmann's own imprisonment and his miraculous release from prison six months later to point to and welcome the coming Lord. According to Obbe Philips' account, Hoffmann rejoiced at his arrest and vowed to eat only bread and water till Jesus would come in the clouds of heaven to establish the kingdom of God. Hoffmann died in prison ten years later.

With Hoffmann's imprisonment and the failure of the kingdom to arrive in Strassburg, the leadership of the Melchiorites passed on to even more enthusiastic and visionary men, first Jan Matthijs, and then Jan van Leiden. The site for the establishment of the kingdom of God was now

¹⁰ Keeney, Thought and Practice, 175; and W. J. Kühler, "Anabaptism and the Netherlands," in The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer, ed. James M. Stayer & Werner O. Packull (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1980), 93.

moved from Strassburg to Münster.¹¹ No longer were the believers merely to wait eagerly for the coming of Christ's reign. They were now given an active role to play. Hoffmann's peaceful eschatology¹² was replaced with a view that advocated the use of the sword to destroy all evil and to impose adult baptism on all the residents of Münster in order to prepare for the coming of Christ. People from all over the Netherlands were invited to come and join the movement. As the strength of the movement grew within Münster and the armies of the bishop of Münster continued their siege of the city, van Leiden had himself proclaimed the new King David.

This new kingdom at Münster was characterised by visions, violence, polygamy, and the community of goods. The king set up his throne in the city square and ruled with an iron hand. Capital punishment was not too severe for relatively minor crimes. Soon, with the siege by the bishop continuing, survival of the city became a major concern. In May of 1535 a Münsterite guard betrayed his city and the bishop's forces were able to enter and take over the city and begin killing its inhabitants. The leaders were arrested and eventually executed. With the end of the

¹¹ For a more detailed study of Münster see Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, 118-164; Klaassen, "Visions," 37-42; and James M. Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1976), 203-328.

¹² Keeney, Thought and Practice, 175; and Kühler, 92.

Münster regime, the peaceful Anabaptists emerged as the main group in the Netherlands advocating adult baptism.¹³

Although the focus of the Münsterite activities was in the city that gave its name to the movement, the missionaries that were sent out by van Leiden and his colleagues found disciples all over the Netherlands and established pockets of Münsterites in various villages, towns and cities. It was the massacre near Witmarsum of a group of Münsterites which included Menno's brother that finally induced Menno to leave the Catholic church and to commit himself to oneness with the peaceful Anabaptists.¹⁴ Because of the widespread popularity of this movement and its willingness to use violence, the visionary eschatology of these Anabaptists was a threat not only to the area of Münster but to the whole country. As a result, it was met with fierce opposition. The Anabaptists' opponents did not make careful distinctions between those Anabaptists who rejected violence, visions and polygamy and those who accepted these. What the Anabaptists all had in common was their belief in adult baptism. That was enough for their

¹³ W. J. Kühler suggests that with the fall of Münster, "the future belonged to the peaceful Anabaptists" (p. 102).

¹⁴ For a description of the episode and a discussion of its importance for Menno's break with the Roman Catholic Church see James M. Stayer, "Oldeklooster and Menno," Sixteenth Century Journal 9 (1978):51-67. Menno points to the influence that the uprising and massacre at Oldeklooster had on him in his own autobiographical response to Gellius Faber (CWMS, 669-671).

enemies to see them all as one group.

Menno Simons did not deny a common heritage with the Münsterites. His christology seems to have been received from Hoffmann as was his expectation that Christ would return soon. However, he vigorously denounced the heresy of Münster and denied any present associations with the Münsterites and their ways.¹⁵ In a tract that he addressed "against the great and fearful Blasphemy of John of Leiden,"¹⁶ Menno argued that the true King of all the earth is Christ Jesus. He continued:

Seeing then that Christ is King both of all the earth and of His believing church, as we have shown by the plain Scriptures, according to the grace received of God, how can John of Leiden call himself a joyous king of all, the joy of the disconsolate?¹⁷

Menno added: "Greater antichrist there cannot arise than he who poses as the David of promise."¹⁸

In the tract Menno admitted that the wicked will be punished but this will be done by God, not by the Christians

¹⁵ Gurley, "The Eschatology of the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists," 12 & 13; John Horsch, "Menno Simons' Attitude Toward the Anabaptists of Muenster," MQR 10 (1936):55-72, esp. p. 63; Krahn, Menno Simons, 110 & 113; and J. C. Wenger, "Chiliasm," Mennonite Encyclopedia, 1:557-558.

¹⁶ CWMS, 32. In CWMS the tract is entitled "The Blasphemy of John of Leiden" and is dated 1535. It appears on pages 33-50.

Questions have been raised about the authenticity of this tract. For a discussion of the issue see Stayer, "Oldeklooster and Menno," 63-67.

¹⁷ CWMS, 35. See also Ibid., 199.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37.

and only after Christ has returned and the Christians have entered the kingdom of God.¹⁹ The use of the sword is to be left to the "physical Israelites." Christians are to restrict themselves to the Word of God "which is a two-edged sword."²⁰

In his famous tract "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," Menno, clearly and frankly, gave his opinion of the Münsterite sect. In a section entitled "To the Corrupt Sects" he wrote: "Is it not a grievous error that you suffer yourselves to be so woefully seduced by such worthless persons, and so sadly misled from one unclean sect to another: first to that of Münster, . . ."²¹ With obvious reference to Münster, he continued in the tract:

O miserable, erring sheep, notice that in the preceding I have pointed out to the magistrates that the kingdom of Christ is not of this visible, tangible, transitory world, but that it is an eternal, spiritual, and abiding kingdom which is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. In it no king reigns except the true King of Zion, Christ Jesus. . . . Neither this King nor His servants bear any sword but the sword of the Spirit, . . .²²

Later in the same tract he wrote: "Münster and Amsterdam may well be to you an eternal warning and example. When a prophet, said Moses, speaks in the name of the Lord, if the

19 Ibid., 46-48.

20 Ibid., 42-43.

21 Ibid., 215.

22 Ibid., 217

thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is not the thing which the Lord hath spoken."²³ The defeat of Münster was clearly a sign that what had been attempted in that city was not the will of God.

In his "Reply to False Accusations" Menno specifically addressed the charge that he and his followers were Münsterites. He wrote:

. . . we consider the doctrine and practice of those of Münster in regard to king, sword, rebellion, retaliation, vengeance, polygamy, and the visible kingdom of Christ on earth a new Judaism and a seductive error, doctrine, and abomination, far removed from the Spirit, Word, and example of Christ. . . .

Besides, I can fearlessly challenge anybody that none under heaven can truthfully show that I ever agreed with the Münsterites in regard to these points.²⁴

Menno was clearly not about to accept any identification with Münster.

In the accounts and letters in the Martyrs Mirror we do not find many sharp denunciations of Münster. One example can be found in a letter written by Hans van Overdam to the authorities. He wrote: "But we are daily greatly slandered by those who say that we defend our faith with the sword, as did those of Munster[sic]. May the Almighty God preserve us from such abomination."²⁵ There may be few denunciations of Münster but there is also no evidence that the ideas of

²³ Ibid., 218.

²⁴ Ibid., 547. See also Ibid., 129, 525, 526, & 602.

²⁵ MM, 492.

Münster were accepted by any of the martyrs.²⁶ With the evidence from Menno we can safely assume that the martyrs had no wish to establish an earthly kingdom. They had some definite views about life and history here on this earth and about the coming end of history, but the establishment of a visible kingdom of God was left to another age, an age that would follow the coming of Christ.

William Klassen argues that "the Kingdom had come on this earth in visible form for Menno and Dirk as much as for the Münsterites."²⁷ Keeney seems to agree with this.²⁸ Kühler, on the other hand, says that for Menno, "the belief of remaking the congregation into an earthly kingdom of Christ" moved "more and more into the background."²⁹ It is true, as seen in the examples noted by Klaassen, that there was a sense in both Dirk and Menno of the church as the kingdom of God. At the same time, there is also a suggestion that the two are different. Menno wrote: "Now

²⁶ That the people of Münster died for their faith and practices is clearly evident in the accounts of the massacre that followed defeat and in the stories of the executions of the leaders. However, these people were not perceived by the compilers of the martyrologies, including van Braght, to be part of the group of Anabaptists that they considered worthy to have their stories told. In this sense, the Martyrs Mirror is obviously not an unbiased source of theology but presents us with the materials that are congruent with the picture that van Braght and others wanted to present.

²⁷ "Visions," 56.

²⁸ Keeney, Thought and Practice, 180.

²⁹ Kühler, 103.

all things . . . proceed according to the true apostolic rule and criterion in the church, by which the kingdom of Christ comes to honor and the kingdom of Antichrist is going down in shame."³⁰ Here the kingdom of Christ is benefitting by what is happening in the visible church, but is not coterminous with it.

In the Martyrs Mirror the kingdom is always referred to as being part of the future life of the believers. Hans van Overdam saw it as that place where the saints would meet after death and where all suffering would have ceased.³¹ For Jerome Segers receiving eternal life and entering the kingdom both happened at the end of a faithful life.³² In another account we read:

. . . in order that they might take the kingdom of God by force, where they in the new Jerusalem, shall have Him for an everlasting light, and shall with all those who have valiantly contended for the truth, live in everlasting and imperishable joy.³³

The kingdom was not the church in the present but the life with Christ and all the saints in heaven.

We must conclude from this that the kingdom of God and the church were not the same in the minds of the Anabaptists. The church was a small expression of that

30 CWMS, 962-963.

31 MM, 486.

32 Ibid., 507.

33 Ibid., 759.

spiritual kingdom here on earth and the sufferings being endured by the church were part of the battle between the two kingdoms. However, the kingdom of God would become fully visible only upon the return of Christ.

2. The Martyrs' View of History.

In his study of the apocalypticism of the Middle Ages Bernard McGinn points out that apocalypticism (and therefore eschatology) is really a way of understanding and giving meaning to life within the present moment. He writes: "Apocalypticism was a way in which contemporary political and social events were given religious validation by incorporation into a transcendent scheme of meaning."³⁴ He continues:

"The most fundamental appeal of apocalypticism is the conviction it holds forth that time is related to eternity, that the history of man has a discernible structure and meaning in relation to its End, and that this End is the product not of chance, but of divine plan."³⁵

Consequently, the eschatology of a people includes their view and understanding of history, of what happened in the past and what is happening now, along with what will happen in the future.³⁶ This was also true of the Anabaptist

³⁴ McGinn, Visions of the End, 31.

³⁵ McGinn, Visions of the End, 36.

³⁶ William Manson indicates that this is also the case with New Testament eschatology. He writes: "The new Testament Eschatology, as it makes this world the scene and stage of the final redemption of man by God, gathers also

martyrs.³⁷

i) The Battle Between God and Satan

In our study of the sufferings of the martyrs in chapter three we noted that van Braght understood all people to be divided into two groups, "the one of God and from heaven, and the other of Satan and from the earth."³⁸ This, we said, resulted in the fierce battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan within which the martyrs were engaged by their suffering. This battle, in their understanding, had been going on since Cain killed Abel and showed the enmity that existed between the two kingdoms. "This," writes Ethelbert Stauffer, "is the essential dualism of the Anabaptist theology of history. History is the contest between the people of God and the powers of this world, a contest which presses to a final decision through the suffering of the martyrs."³⁹

within its scope the full course of human history" ("Eschatology in the New Testament," Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers 2 [1953; reprinted, 1957]:15).

³⁷ Keeney, Thought and Practice, 175; and Klaassen, "Visions," 44.

³⁸ MM, 21. See also Ibid., 996. For comparison with Dirk Philips see Enchiridion, 371-372.

³⁹ "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," 189. See also Bender, 247; Gurley, 100; Hans Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and History," MQR 45 (1971):115-116; Kreider, 15-16; Keeney, Thought and Practice, 176 & 183; and Weingart, 38.

Wray points out that a group of martyrs who were sent to work in the galleys and then escaped, wrote a letter that said "that the godly and the sinners each prefer association

This was a battle that had begun before the dawn of time and the creation of the world. At that time God had created the angels to be ministers in God's presence, "to minister unto their Creator, and to offer Him praise, honor, and thanks;" and to be messengers to the people. Some of these angels "became unfaithful and apostate to God" and were cast out of heaven and into hell, where they were bound with chains. They continue, however, in fellowship with all unbelievers and will share their destiny.⁴⁰ All of history is now the story of these two forces in battle.

Menno Simons held a similar view. He wrote: "For I

with their own kind both as a principle of history and of natural law" (pp. 105-106). Van Braght' Martyrs Mirrror has a record of the incident but does not include the letter (pp. 451-452).

The Anabaptists were by no means the only ones within history to hold to this view. Frank J. Wray traces a brief history of this way of understanding history beginning with the Israelites and continuing through to the Reformation, including Luther, the Calvinists, and the English martyrologist, John Foxe (pp. 88-93). Kreider also notes this similarity between Foxe and van Braght (p. 8).

⁴⁰ MM, 376. Dirk Philips understood the beginning of the church to be with the creation of the angels in heaven, and then begun on earth by the creation of Adam and Eve. The first apostasy in the church was the rebellion of the angels; the second, the sin of Adam and Eve (Enchiridion, 369-370).

The view that the battle between the two forces began with the fall of the angels was not unique to the Anabaptists. Richard K. Emerson sees it as common to all Christian apocalypticism. He writes: "This view of history traces the great controversy between the forces of good and evil from the rebellion of Lucifer to the final judgement, when Satan and his supporters are totally defeated" (Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981], p.14).

know and am persuaded that the lamb will never be at peace with the wolf, the dove with the eagle, and Christ with Belial."⁴¹ And in another tract he said: "Your life is but an incessant warfare on earth."⁴² This battle had found its first expression in the murder of Abel by Cain, was intensified by the coming of Christ⁴³ and found its current expression in the persecutions of the Anabaptists by the authorities.⁴⁴

There is no sense in the writings of the martyrs that they were waiting for some future time when the forces of God would be arrayed against the forces of evil in some cosmic battle of Armageddon, nor that the beast or the antichrist would appear on the earth at some future day to harass the saints. For the Anabaptists, all the images of eschatological battle within Scripture were pictures of the present conflict that they were enduring. By his death

⁴¹ CWMS, 225.

⁴² Ibid., 621. See also Ibid., 324.

⁴³ "Since then this old crooked serpent, which from the beginning has been proud and arrogant and false, a cruel murderer, has been put under the feet of Christ and His church, and must endure and see his lying seed destroyed and trampled underfoot through the revealed truth, therefore he gnashes his teeth and breathes out the accursed, infernal breath of heresy through his prophets and preachers in the most frightful manner. He casts out of his mouth the terrible streams of his tyranny, by means of the rulers and mighty ones of the earth, at the glorious woman pregnant with the Word of the Lord, in hope of exterminating and destroying her seed" (Ibid., 324).

See Keeney, Thought and Practice, 177.

⁴⁴ Keeney, Thought and Practice, 175-176.

Leonard Bernkop "gained the victory over the beast and his image, over the abomination of desolation and his mark. Rev. 15.2."⁴⁵ Jan Hendricks wrote to a fellow prisoner, suggesting that they pray for each other because of "this great conflict which we now have with the great red dragon, which draws the third part of the stars from heaven with his tail. Revelation 12:3, 4."⁴⁶ In another letter he said: "Fight valiantly against Satan with his manifold lusts and desires and false insinuation, and trample his head in pieces under your feet, . . . for Satan comes down with great wrath, knowing that his time is brief. Rev. 12:17."⁴⁷ Lijsken Segers described herself as having to "remain so long in the den of lions, and await the howling and ravening wolves and lions, and the old serpent, which was from the beginning, and shall be unto the end."⁴⁸ The martyrs were described as being in the "wilderness, among these ravening beasts."⁴⁹ Ephesians 6:12 was a well known verse for the martyrs.⁵⁰ Although the metaphors changed, the idea was

45 MM, 465. See also *Ibid.*, 621 & 718.

46 *Ibid.*, 941. See also *Ibid.*, 525.

47 *Ibid.*, 943.

48 *Ibid.*, 517. References to lions, wolves, and bears are common in the letters of the martyrs. For examples, see *Ibid.*, 507, 527, & 859.

49 *Ibid.*, 515 & 568.

50 See, for example, *Ibid.*, 521, 543, & 829. Yoder and Hochstetler list at least nine examples of references to this verse (p. 301).

always the same: they were in the middle of a battle that had raged since the beginning and would rage till the day of judgement and final retribution and reward.

While within this world, the battle seemed to be going against the Christians.⁵¹ Menno wrote: "Ultimately the bloody tyranny of Antichrist gained the upper hand, and men were interfered with who did not agree with the pope and his abominations. So it still stands as may be seen in many places."⁵² The blood of the martyrs flowed and people suffered with no apparent end in sight. Yet, in the end that would change. At the return of Christ, the martyrs would be victorious.

On that day, the two groups of soldiers would meet again, but under significantly different circumstances. Following the ideas found in the Wisdom of Solomon, the Anabaptists believed that the saints and the wicked would meet face to face, but now the wicked would finally see who they really were in light of the glorious triumph of the saints of God. Jan Hendricks wrote:

⁵¹ Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and History," 118-119.

⁵² CWMS, 65. See also Ibid., 544.

Reytse Aysess, executed in 1574 in Leeuwaerden, in reply to statements made by a priest who came to examine him, said: ". . . the children of God have always been persecuted and dispersed, so that they have always been in a minority, and sometimes very few in number, . . . but the ungodly have always been powerful, and have prevailed, and therefore you do not know the children of God, neither did your fathers know them, and you think that they have only now arisen" (MM, 996).

Then shall we stand in great boldness before the face of such as have afflicted us and they shall say: 'These are they whom we so often had in derision, and a proverb of reproach. We fools have missed the right way, and the way of truth hath not appeared unto us.' Wisd. 5:1.⁵³

According to Menno and Dirk, not only would the tyrants meet the ones whom they had tortured and killed, but they would stand face to face with Christ and realize that it was the Lord whom they had been persecuting.⁵⁴ Then roles would be switched and it would be time for the wicked persecutors to cower in fear and trembling at their lot, not merely a brief, torturous session of human cruelty, but eternal and unending agony in the flames of hell.⁵⁵ The saints, on the other hand, would be enjoying the fruits of their victory, the crown of life, the eschatological banquet, and eternal fellowship in the glorious presence of Christ. Then the battle would be over and the victory would be won. Therefore, Menno wrote: "Do battle! The crown of glory is prepared for you! Shrink not, neither draw back; for yet a little while and He that shall come will come and not

⁵³ MM, 935. See also Ibid., 928, 992 & 1008; and Enchiridion, 148-149.

In a letter written to his brothers while he was in prison, Joos Verkindert wrote: "O dear brothers, be afraid of that day which shall burn as an oven, and when all the proud despisers, and all the wicked shall be as stubble; but they that have kept the laws of their God shall then grow up as calves of the stall, and they shall go in and out, and tread down the wicked like ashes under their feet. Mal. 4:1" (MM, 861).

⁵⁴ CWMS, 622; and Enchiridion, p.459.

⁵⁵ Stauffer, 202-203. See below pp. 210-211.

tarry."⁵⁶

ii) The Will of God

Since this earth and history as it unfolded was the scene of this battle between the forces of Satan and the armies of God, not everything that was happening was the result of the will of God. The wickedness that was present in the world was not decreed by God but was in fact in opposition to his will, brought about by the free choices and actions of the unrighteous and those who opposed the will of God. At the same time the martyrs had a real sense that what was happening to them was the will of God and should be accepted by them as such.⁵⁷ Those who were imprisoned and executed saw this as being the will of God for them.⁵⁸ Those who escaped also felt that it was because of the will of God.⁵⁹ The severity of the persecution was limited by the will of God. They were convinced that the authorities could do only what the Lord permitted them to do.⁶⁰ Whatever the wicked did in their sinfulness and in rebellion against God, God would use for the benefit of His

⁵⁶ CWMS, 622.

⁵⁷ MM, 657, 1050, 1061, 1071, 1089, & 1100.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 514, 627, 642, 692, 721, 840, 1034, & 1047.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 452, 474 & 1037.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 523, 569, 662, 701, 892, 1039, & 1048. For comparison see Enchiridion, 419, 420, & 458.

people.⁶¹ In all of this the role of the believers was to give themselves over to God's will.

The attitude that characterized the martyrs is well shown by Jerome Segers and his wife Lijsken in an exchange of letters while both were in prison. Jerome wrote:

. . . I would fain wish, had it been the will of the Lord, that you had been released; but now the Lord has willed it otherwise, because He means to try you, and to reveal His power and strength in you, against all those who resist the truth. Hence, I can do nothing against the will of the Lord, lest I tempt Him; but I will much rather praise and thank Him, that He has made us both worthy to suffer for His name; for thereto are all His chosen lambs elected; . . .⁶²

He continued:

. . . this has cost me many a tear, and I am very sorry; yet I can do nothing against the will of the Lord (Rom. 9:19), and had it been his will, He would have provided a deliverance for us; but He has appointed our bounds, which we can not pass.⁶³

Lijsken replied, in part:

. . . if it had not so been the will of the Lord, it would not have happened; the Lord's will must be done, for the salvation of both our souls, for He will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able. Be of good cheer therefore, my most beloved in the Lord, and rejoice in Him as before, praising and thanking Him for having chosen us to be imprisoned so long for His name, having been found worthy thereto; He knows for what end He has ordered it so.⁶⁴

61 "From this it can be seen, that, though the ungodly devise many things against the pious, God always turns it for the best to His people" (MM, 452).

62 Ibid., 514.

63 Ibid., 514.

64 Ibid., 515.

God did not will for the believers to suffer just for the sake of suffering. According to the Anabaptists, it was not God's will that the non-Anabaptists arrest, torture and execute the Anabaptists. The tyranny and torture that was being practiced was done by the choice of the wicked in opposition to God. Since the battle between Satan and God was raging, God willed for His people to be part of the battle and to suffer the persecution, thereby participating in what would be eventual victory. Since the wickedness did exist, God willed that the Anabaptist martyrs face it and experience the suffering that it inflicted. They still had the choice not to accept the suffering by recanting their faith. That was their option, but it was an act of disobedience and faithlessness that would end in condemnation. Their willingness to accept the suffering and to bow to the will of God would serve for the continuation of the work of God within history.

For the Anabaptist martyrs the will of God was not an imposed will that was executed without regard for the choices of men. It was not a will that determined the actions of people. Rather, it was a will that called people to obedience but one that could be disobeyed. God could still use that disobedience but it was not that which he willed.

iii) Present Judgement

The judgment that was to occur at the end of time had its beginnings in the here and now of present history. Quoting from I Peter 4:17, the martyrs wrote: "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it now begin at us, and if the righteous shall scarcely be written in the book of life, what shall the end of the ungodly be?"⁶⁵ The sufferings they were enduring were part of the judgment that God was imposing on the people within the world. It would show whether they were truly the children of God. They were being tried in the fiery furnace that would burn away the dross and reveal the pure gold.

The same judgement was also already falling on the wicked. Therefore, Hans van Overdam could write:

. . . we will be patient herein, committing vengeance to God; for we know Him that hath said, 'Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord.' And again. 'The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' Hebrews 10:30, 31. And the spirit testifies, that this is at hand, and has already commenced.⁶⁶

The martyrs recounted the deaths and sufferings of certain of their enemies as examples of this judgement of God. The chronicler recorded an example related to the execution of George Bauman in 1529. He wrote:

The nobleman who caused his execution, and nearly all who had sat in judgment, and condemned him, died almost everyone of them a miserable death,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 958. See also Ibid., 426, 453, 549, 934, 978, & 1084.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 492-493. Emphasis mine.

and came to a dreadful end, so that their happy days in this world terminated in sorrow.⁶⁷

In the conclusion to the story of Wolfgang Pinder, who was betrayed and executed in 1571, we read:

The traitor who had informed against him, subsequently fared very badly, as did also the chancellor, who had apprehended him; their good days soon came to an end, as it generally goes with such Judases, who sin against the pious, innocent sheep of the Lord, and thirst for their blood: misfortune overtakes them through the wrath of God, and does not suffer them to remain long at ease.⁶⁸

The judgment of God on all people was beginning within history. The times were characterized by the phrase, "The axe is now laid at the root of the trees,"⁶⁹ a quotation of the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3:9. In Luke, John's words are an announcement of the coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God. They served a similar function for the Anabaptists. The judgement, "the cutting of the trees," had already begun with the persecution of the church and the punishment of some of the persecutors. With the coming of Christ it would come to its completion and would be followed by the rule of Christ.

iv) The "End Time"

The battle in which the Anabaptist martyrs were engaged

⁶⁷ Ibid., 438.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 875. See Chapter 3 for other examples.

⁶⁹ MM, 509, 642 & 1074.

characterized all of history. At the same time, they thought themselves to be living at the very end of this history, that time just before the return of Christ.⁷⁰ Jan Wouteress, in a confession of faith presented to the authorities, wrote: ". . . the day of the Supreme Judge is at the door: this is apparent from the pestilence, dearth, rumors of wars, and many other signs."⁷¹ Hans van Overdam, in the letter to the authorities mentioned earlier, wrote:

Therefore, mark! O thou eagle, the end of thy time is very nigh; art thou not the fourth beast? Oh, yes, thou art the beast seen by Daniel (Dan. 7:7), which devoured everything with his iron teeth, and stamped the residue with his feet, and brought forth the most wicked little horn.⁷²

In the same letter he added: "Princess, repent and amend your ways; for the end of all things is at hand."⁷³

⁷⁰ Klaassen, "Visions," 57; and Stauffer, 197.

⁷¹ MM, 926.

⁷² Ibid., 491 Wray points out that the interpretation of the fourth beast as the fourth major monarchy in world history and the one just before the fifth and eternal one was a common one in the Middle Ages and during the Reformation (pp. 130-133). He goes on to say: "While some Anabaptists used Daniel and II Esdras to support their eschatological expectations and their contention that Antichrist had already come, the four monarchies themselves apparently had little or no significance" (p. 133). The example quoted from the letter by van Overdam would indicate that the Anabaptists were certainly aware of that interpretation and that, though not necessarily popular with them, it was used by them. They may have seen more significance in political power and its changes than Wray gives them credit for.

⁷³ MM, 492. Menno expressed a similar view when he wrote: "Remember that the angel of Revelation has sworn by the eternal and living God who made heaven and earth that after this time, there shall be time no more" (CWMS, 109).

Other martyrs used similar "end time" language, applying it to their own time. They referred to the Catholic church as the whore of Babylon,⁷⁴ combining references, in the book of Revelation, to Babylon as the city opposed to Jerusalem and references in the same book to the harlot who leads people astray and is "drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (Revelation 17:6). To the Anabaptists who saw themselves and their enemies and their situation in all of Scripture, the connection was obvious. The pope was, according to them, the antichrist.⁷⁵ This label is used by the writer of I and II John in referring to a person or

⁷⁴ MM, 549, 631, & 653. See also Enchiridion, 163 & 356. Helmut Isaak suggests that Menno also used this phrase to refer to the Protestant churches ("Das Weltverständnis Menno Simons," Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter 31 [1974]:56).

⁷⁵ MM, 653, 742, & 823. Menno used the term "antichrist" to refer more generally to all the forces of evil that opposed the church, including, of course, the pope. See CWMS, 66, 83, 133, & 152. Stauffer points out that the Anabaptists referred to various individuals among their opponents as the "antichrist" (p. 198).

The idea of "Antichrist" as the type as well as historically present leader of the forces of evil against God and his people was a common one in the Middle Ages. For a discussion of this theme see Emerson, Antichrist in the Middle Ages. The people of that time found types of antichrist in the Old Testament, in the inter-testamental period, in the New Testament, and in history since the time of Christ. Antichrist himself would be revealed only just before the end (Ibid., 25ff). Here the Anabaptists differed from the medieval view in that Antichrist did not have to be a specific person who would come in the future, but rather was a category that found expression in various individuals and institutions, in the past and the present. Menno, for example, referred to the pope, the Protestant reformers and John van Leiden as antichrist.

persons who will come in the end time and appear to be true followers of Christ but will in actuality work against Christ. For the Anabaptists this clearly pointed to the Catholic pope who claimed to be a disciple of Christ yet was persecuting what the Anabaptists perceived to be the true church. The beast of Revelation 13 was seen in their enemies.⁷⁶ The abomination of desolation of Daniel 11:31 (and referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24:15 and the parallel in Mark 13:14) and the other aspects of the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 were either present or very near.⁷⁷ Lenaert Plovier quoted at length from Revelation to make his point, using Revelation not to describe a future happening but a present reality.⁷⁸ Tijds Jeuriaeness made similar use of Revelation.⁷⁹ Jan Quirijnes saw John's writings about the last days fulfilled in his own time, in his experience and the experiences of his Anabaptist brothers and sisters.⁸⁰ Menno wrote in a similar way about the current times,⁸¹ as did Dirk Philips.⁸² The "end time" described in Revelation

76 MM, 621, 715, & 718.

77 Ibid., 420, 548, & 549.

78 Ibid., 643.

79 Ibid., 829.

80 Ibid., 836.

81 CWMS, 517.

82 Enchiridion, 162.

was the time in which the Anabaptists were living.

For the Anabaptist martyrs that which had been foretold by Jesus and Paul about the last days was now fulfilled. Using Matthew 24, one of Jesus' apocalyptic sermons, Jan van Hasebroeck wrote:

. . . now is the time of which Christ said (Matt. 24:24) that many false prophets and false Christs should arise, yea, that even the very elect, if it were possible, should be led into error.⁸³

In conversation with his interrogators Peter van Olman told them that their teaching was a fulfillment of what Paul had said in I Timothy 4:1&3, "That in the latter times some shall depart from faith, . . . forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats." He continued, "Now I see that you teach this; for you forbid to marry, and command to abstain from meats."⁸⁴ Herman Vleckwijk saw those words of Paul fulfilled in a similar way,⁸⁵ as did Veit Greyenburger.⁸⁶

The martyrs understood themselves to be living in that time just before the end of history. In a sense "the end" had already begun and was now unfolding, with Christ's return being the culmination. The persecution that they were enduring and the prevalence of evil in the world

⁸³ MM, 773. See also Ibid., 672; CWMS, 528; and Enchiridion, 119.

⁸⁴ MM, 537.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 798.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 841.

convinced them that the end was here.⁸⁷ They did not indicate when this end had started⁸⁸ but they were sure that they were in it and that it was moving inevitably towards Christ's return, like a final countdown.

The Anabaptist martyrs understood all of history to be a battleground between good and evil. Their participation in it as suffering disciples was directed by the will of God. Within this battle, judgement was already beginning in the suffering that the believers had to endure and in the punishments visited upon their enemies. This battle was nearing its end in their own times and was about to culminate in the victorious return of Jesus Christ.

3. The Return of Christ.

Although Hoffmann, the founder of Anabaptism in the Netherlands, had made predictions about when Christ would come back to earth, the martyrs did not make any such predictions concerning the return of Christ. However, it would be soon and without warning, as "a thief in the

⁸⁷ This was consistent with the views of the end times present within the Middle Ages (Emmerson, 16 & 84).

⁸⁸ Walter Klaassen, argues that only Pilgram Marpeck, among the Anabaptists, thought of the last days as having started with the birth of Christ ("Visions," 53). The others, he suggests, felt that the end had begun with the preaching by Luther (p. 57). This is how Krahn interprets Menno's position (Menno Simons, 112). Though this may have been the start of "the end" for Menno, he also wrote that the Antichrist had already reigned at the time of Augustine (CWMS, 775).

night."⁸⁹ Jan Hendricks wrote to his wife:

See, my most beloved, mark these words, and watch for the coming of the Lord; for He shall come as a thief in the night; and always have oil in your lamp and do not suffer it to go out but always be ready with the wise and good virgins to let the Lord your Bridegroom in; . . .⁹⁰

Since it was impossible to tell when the return would occur, the task of the believers was to make sure that they were always ready for the coming so that they would not be surprised. The martyrs often referred to the parable of Jesus about the ten virgins, five of whom had enough oil for their lamps and five who did not.⁹¹ Because of the temptations of the times and the constant pressure to forsake the faith, it was easy to be a "foolish virgin" and find oneself unprepared, that is, not living right, when Christ returned. Believers were always to be on their toes and make sure that whenever the end would come, they would be able to greet it joyously, ready to live with Christ, like the five wise virgins.

The Anabaptist martyrs were convinced that Christ would

⁸⁹ This phrase is used in I Thessalonians 5:2. Other places in the New Testament refer to the coming of Christ or the day of the Lord as coming like a thief--Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, I Thessalonians 5:4, II Peter 3:10, Revelation 3:3 & 16:25. The martyrs combined these with verses such as Luke 21:34 to interpret the phrase to mean suddenly and unexpectedly.

⁹⁰ MM, 934. See also Ibid., 515, 523, 524, 641, 643, & 1042.

⁹¹ Ibid., 892, 934, & 960. See also CWMS, 109; and Enchiridion, 305.

return soon, as were Menno⁹² and Dirk.⁹³ As discussed earlier, they felt that they were living in the time just before the end. Therefore, they believed Christ could come back through the clouds at any moment. Jelis Matthijss, in a letter to his wife, wrote: ". . . for the day of the Lord is not far off, in which He will reward every one according to his works."⁹⁴ Maeyken de Korte felt that Jesus would come soon because he had promised to return soon and his promises were to be trusted. Jacob the Chandler, writing from prison to the church, suggested that the only reason that Christ had not yet come was because of his patience with and mercy towards those who were not yet part of the true church.⁹⁵ As it was, he could return at any moment.

This return of Christ was waited for with eager anticipation.⁹⁶ At that time the dead would be raised⁹⁷ and

⁹² Bornhäuser, 144; Klaassen, "Visions," 54; and Wray, 239.

⁹³ Enchiridion, 436. See also Wray, 240.

⁹⁴ MM, 678.

⁹⁵ "For if the Lord had come eighteen or twenty years ago, we would, it is to be feared, not have been prepared yet; therefore His having been longsuffering to usward will be for our salvation, if we are now found without spot and blameless in the peace of God" (Ibid., 813).

⁹⁶ ". . . we desire and long so greatly for the appearing of our Lord in the clouds, that we may be caught up to Him in the clouds, and become like Him" (Ibid., 838).

⁹⁷ "I also believe in the resurrection of the dead, as it is written that all men shall rise from the dead in their own bodies, when the Lord shall come in the clouds, with His angels; then He shall judge everyone according to his works"

together with the living, faithful Christians would join their Lord in a new heaven and a new earth, free from all suffering and pain and tears. In the words of Jacob the Chandler:

. . . then shall the pilgrimage be over, then hope shall cease, then shall we receive what we now hope for, namely, we shall inherit all things, for the marriage shall then be at an end, for the bridegroom shall come for His bride, the church. . . then shall the tears be wiped from the eyes; for there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.⁹⁸

This was the hope that sustained them in their suffering and martyrdom. It was their comfort and assurance that the present agonies were not all there was to life. It made them wish for Christ's return.

The return of Christ could be waited for with eager anticipation by those who were ready for that return, those who had their lamps full of oil, because Christ was returning as Saviour and Redeemer. He was also returning as Judge,⁹⁹ and that meant that there were many who could only fear the return.¹⁰⁰ At his coming Christ would gather all people before him and would judge them on the basis of how

(Ibid., 592). See also Ibid., 773.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 812-813.

⁹⁹ Bornhäuser attributes a similar understanding to Menno (p. 145).

¹⁰⁰ For Menno's description of the inevitability of this punishment and the fear of the wicked see CWMS, 163, 204 & 613.

they had lived within this life. Joost Verkindert wrote: ". . . at the last day, when we shall all be placed before the judgment seat of Christ, . . . everyone shall receive reward[sic] according to his deeds, whether they be good or bad. II Cor. 5:10."¹⁰¹ The believers and true disciples would then go to their eternal reward and the wicked to eternal condemnation.¹⁰²

Without making any predictions as to the exact date, the Anabaptist martyrs expected Christ to return at any time. They were living at the very end of history. With Christ's return the time of the antichrist would end,¹⁰³ the dead would be raised to life¹⁰⁴ and all mankind would be gathered before him to be judged by him according to how they had lived. The faithful would be rewarded and the wicked condemned to punishment. This expectation encouraged the martyrs to remain faithful and gave them hope within the sufferings and tears of the moment.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ MM, 861. See also Ibid., 592, 1008, & 1032; and CWMS, 47 & 833.

¹⁰² We will return to a discussion of the destinies of the faithful and the wicked on pp. 209-212 below.

¹⁰³ There is no indication that the Anabaptists believed in a period of time between the destruction of the antichrist and the return of Christ, a view held by medieval apocalypticists (Emmerson, 105-107).

¹⁰⁴ See pp. #4 below.

¹⁰⁵ Dirk also used this idea to comfort the people of his church. He wrote: "Herewith comfort one another, so that no one may become discouraged or despondent . . . and that no one may lose that which he has and another receive

4. The Hope of the Martyrs.

The Anabaptist martyrs saw themselves involved in a battle in which they were surrendered to the will of God. As soldiers of the Lord they experienced the wrath and tyranny of the forces of evil. Within those sufferings they did not despair for they were convinced that death was not the end and that Christ would return soon to usher them into their glorious reward. We need to examine this hope more closely, specifically with regards to the question as to whether their hope was placed in the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the dead. We will also look at how they faced death because of this hope and what they understood the destinies of all people to be, both those who were faithful and those who were wicked.

i) Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead

If we were to do a careful study of the Biblical texts, including the Apocrypha, related to this question, we would find it difficult to give an unequivocal answer to the question of whether the Bible teaches the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the dead. The Bible gives various answers to this question¹⁰⁶ and scholars do not

your crown" (Enchiridion, 460). See also Keeney, Thought and Practice, 186-187.

¹⁰⁶ See Murray J. Harris, Raised Immortal: Resurrection & Immortality in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983). For a discussion of this issue in the literature of the Second

agree on the interpretation of those answers.¹⁰⁷ The writings of Paul seem to give differing answers, sometimes suggesting immortality of the soul and at other times resurrection of the dead.¹⁰⁸ Our study of the Anabaptist martyrs will show a similar lack of complete unanimity.

In a confession of faith that Jacob the Chandler left for his children he wrote:

Lastly I believe in and confess a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust. . . . For the dead that are in the grave shall hear the voice of Christ, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the

Temple Period see George W. E. Nickelsburg, Jr., Resurrection, Immortality, and the Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism, Harvard Theological Studies, 26 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1972).

¹⁰⁷ For example, Oscar Cullmann and Harry A. Wolfson, in the Ingersoll lectures of 1955 and 1956, showed that on this question the interpretation of the story of Jesus' agony in the garden can give two quite different answers. See Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the dead?" in Immortality and Resurrection, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965), 12-20; and Wolfson, "Immortality and Resurrection in the Philosophy of the Church Fathers," in Immortality and Resurrection, 54-55.

Henry J. Cadbury, in a subsequent Ingersoll lecture (1959) argued that in the teachings of Jesus according to the Gospels this was not an important question and was part of the tomorrow that was not to worry the disciples. Jesus' concern was with present conduct ("Intimations of Immortality in the Thought of Jesus," in Immortality and Resurrection, 115-149).

¹⁰⁸ In a study of the relevant Pauline texts I have concluded that Paul believed in both immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body. These two do not need to be mutually exclusive. Wolfson concludes the same in his study of the Church Fathers, writing: ". . . to the Fathers of the Church these two beliefs were inseparably connected with each other" (p. 55).

resurrection of damnation.¹⁰⁹

This belief was shared by many of the martyrs.¹¹⁰ At the return of Christ the bodies would be raised to new life, joined with the souls, and enter their eternal destiny. The Confession of 1600 summarized this as the belief of all the martyrs.¹¹¹

Both the confession of Jacob the Chandler and the Confession of 1600 stated that the resurrection of all people is possible because of the resurrection of Christ. Death had come upon all by the sin of Adam and resurrection was now possible because of Christ. The Confession of 1600 added further that the resurrection is necessary so that people can be judged and given their rewards, either the bliss of heaven or the torments of hell. These will only be fully experienced within the resurrected body.¹¹² Until then, the souls wait for the time to come.

The martyrs' favorite way of describing this interval

109 MM, 808.

110 See, for example, *Ibid.*, 500, 523, 629, 676, 700, 916, 999, 1018, & 1088.

111 *Ibid.*, 406-407.

112 "And as a sleeping man cannot receive and enjoy any good gifts, either according to the soul or the body, much less any punishment, pain and torment, unless he be previously awakened from his sleep; so also, believers cannot receive the perfect heavenly existence, nor unbelievers the eternal death or the pain of hell, either in the soul or in the body, except they have first been awakened from the sleep of death, and have arisen, through the coming of Christ" (*Ibid.*, 407).

between the death of the body and the resurrection was the phrase, "resting" or "waiting under the altar."¹¹³ This was a place of rest and peace from the tribulations of this world. It was not yet the glory of heaven but it was a beginning of the experience of the presence of Christ. Once the number of martyrs had been fulfilled¹¹⁴ and the battle on earth had ended, the resurrection would occur and they would enjoy perfect bliss.

There were those who referred to this time as a time of "sleep." The Confession of 1600 used this idea to say that the body was completely at rest but the soul still had some life, though not the life of a living soul before death or after the resurrection.¹¹⁵ Hans Vermeersch of Flanders refused to speculate what "falling asleep meant" or where the soul existed during this time of sleep. In his own description of his interrogation he wrote:

"[Those who die] fall asleep in the Lord, as the Scriptures testify, namely, the believers." Acts 7:60. [The inquisitor] asked whither the souls went. I replied: "Paul said that he was willing to fall asleep according to the flesh, and to be present with the Lord; and thus am I minded;" II Cor. 5:8. He then asked where the other souls went to. Ans. "The Scriptures say nothing about

¹¹³ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 526, 563, 644, 852, 864, 928, 931, 991, 1056, & 1075. Yoder and Hochstetler list 23 specific references to Revelation 6:9-11 or part thereof (p. 390). Along with these times when the reference was given, the martyrs would often quote the verse without specifying its source.

¹¹⁴ MM, 473, 928, 931, 1039, & 1048.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 406-407.

it; neither can I say whither they go." Ques.
"What do you think about it. They go somewhere."
Ans. "I leave this to Divine Providence."¹¹⁶

For him it was enough to know that he was in the hands of God.

The martyrs expected that at the resurrection their bodies would be returned to them. A man known simply as Old Pieter is reported to have said, just before his death, "These members, which God has given me, I will gladly surrender for his honor; for hereafter, when I rise, he shall give them to me again."¹¹⁷ Others described these resurrected bodies as changed bodies, bodies fit for life in the eternal presence of God. Pieter Bruynen van Weert wrote from prison:

For it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. I Cor. 15:43, 44. Hence, the house of this tabernacle must be dissolved, if we would obtain the building prepared us by God.¹¹⁸

Jacob van den Wege wrote to his fellow prisoners saying:

. . . we know, and are sure through our faith, that if they kill our body, our Redeemer liveth, and that He shall hereafter raise us up from the earth, and then we shall in our flesh see God; our eyes shall behold Him and not another. Job 19:25. And Paul says, that we look for the Saviour, Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that He may fashion it like unto His glorious body.¹¹⁹

116 Ibid., 632.

117 Ibid., 759.

118 Ibid., 523. For comparison with Dirk see Enchiridion, 414.

119 MM, 975-976. See also Ibid., 980.

In the account of the martyrdom of Lauwerens Verkamer this change in bodies was described as putting off mortal clothing and receiving from Christ Jesus the immortal clothing.¹²⁰

The resurrected bodies would be like the present bodies in that the soul would again be embodied and that the resurrected martyrs would have mouths to sing and eyes to see. Their limbs would again be intact. The bodies would be new in that they would now be immortal, no longer infected with the dreaded disease, death.

Although the more prevalent hope among the martyrs was the resurrection of the body, there were those martyrs who described their hope in such a way as to be more like a hope in the immortality of the soul with the full blessings of new, eternal life bestowed upon the individual upon death. John Claess, who, together with an eighty-seven-year old man was facing execution, said, in comforting his companion: "Fear neither fire nor the sword; Oh what a joyful feast will be prepared for us before the clock strikes twelve."¹²¹ There was no waiting here for the eschatological banquet at the return of Christ. That banquet would be ready for them as they walked through death's door. The same idea is present in the brief account of Lijntgen Kemmels' martyrdom. The chronicler wrote: ". . . [she] was burnt there, and

120 Ibid., 740.

121 Ibid., 471.

thus went boldly, with her lamp burning, to meet her bridegroom, who also joyfully took her as a wise virgin in to his (marriage) feast."¹²²

Jerome Segers also took a symbol more generally used to refer to death, waiting and resurrection, and used it to describe entrance into the full glories of heaven immediately upon death. He wrote:

. . .and you shall also come under the altar to all the dear children of God, where all tears shall be wiped from our eyes. Rev. 2:10; 6:9; 21:4. There all tribulation will have an end, and there shall our vile body be glorified, and be like unto the image of His glory. Philip. 3:21. Then shall our weeping be turned into laughter, and our sorrow into joy (John 16:20); then shall we, . . . triumph forever, and live eternally with the Lord.¹²³

For Jerome being under the altar was not an intermediate state preceding the resurrection. Being under the altar was to be fully in the presence of Christ with gloriously changed bodies, enjoying the reality of the kingdom of God. There was no more waiting.

Many of the Anabaptist martyrs understood their hope to be in the resurrection of the dead at the coming of Christ. In the interval they were enjoying only the partial benefits of the new life in the kingdom of God. Others understood that they would enter the full glories of heaven immediately

¹²² Ibid., 848. See also Ibid., 655. The more common way of using this parable was with reference to Christ's return.

¹²³ Ibid., 506. See also Ibid., 628.

upon death and be in the full presence of Christ. We should not be surprised that both these views were present among the martyrs. The writings and comments preserved for us in the Martyrs Mirror are those of people who were experiencing torture and facing almost certain death. They were not in the process of working out careful, systematic theologies in the comforts of their homes and offices. They were looking for hope in a desperate situation, any hope that would take them through their grief, sufferings, and death, and be congruent with their faith and discipleship. They were operating from memorized portions of Scripture or from parts they could read in the discomfort of prison between sessions with interrogators and torturers, without the benefit of commentaries and theology books. In those situations they grasped whatever promises within Scripture they could find. This meant that some expected their souls to enter immediately into the eternal bliss of heaven, whereas others expected a time of waiting "under the altar" till the coming of Christ and the resurrection of their bodies.¹²⁴

ii) Facing Death

Because of their hope in a new life after death, either

¹²⁴ Althaus argues that Luther overcame this difficulty by saying that there is no time in eternity and therefore the Last Day comes immediately after death. One can hardly speak of an intermediate time (p. 416). There is no evidence that the Anabaptists attempted a similar explanation.

immediately or after the resurrection, the Anabaptists faced death without fear. For them death was not the end but the door into new life,¹²⁵ to be waited for with anticipation for it would end all the miseries of life and begin their glorious life with Christ in the kingdom of God. When the spectators were amazed at the joy with which Gotthard of Noninberg and Peter Kramer faced death, Gotthard explained: "We do not die, but pass through death into life eternal, to God and to all His dear children; of this we have a sure hope; hence accept this death with joy, and trust that we shall please God."¹²⁶ George Friesen prayed: "O Lord that Thou wouldst speedily come to me in prison, deliver me from my chains, and free me from my bonds, and protect me from the wicked--O then I should stand well before Thee!"¹²⁷ In light of the comments of other martyrs, referring to death as release and redemption¹²⁸ this was not a prayer for deliverance from prison to return to life in the community but a plea for death and the release from all sin and pain and torture and fear of this life. Dying was not to be feared for it was "nothing less than an introduction into eternal life, to reign with God and Christ."¹²⁹ Torture was

125 Kreider, 23.

126 MM, 591.

127 Ibid., 663.

128 Ibid., 530, 635, 639, 707, 955 & 1047.

129 Ibid., 838.

something to be feared, but not death.¹³⁰ Death was eagerly anticipated and greeted with joy.

iii) Heaven and Hell

With the coming of Christ, the resurrection of the bodies and the judgment of all people, would come the designation of all to their eternal destinies. There were only two, according to the Anabaptist martyrs, eternal bliss in heaven for the faithful and eternal condemnation in hell for the sinners. In the conclusion to one of the accounts in Martyrs Mirror we read:

. . . these with all the children of God shall be taken up into everlasting joy and gladness, while [the tyrants] themselves standing on the left hand will have to go into everlasting sorrow, and that the time of repentance shall then be utterly taken away from them.¹³¹

Words often seemed to fail them when they attempted to describe the glories of heaven, but they tried. Tijs Jeurianenss gave a lengthy description in a letter to his friends.¹³² G. Kleermaecker, after trying to describe heaven concluded: "In short, we shall find more there, than it is possible to tell us or to describe."¹³³ The life they were waiting for was simply unlike anything they could

130 Ibid., 704.

131 Ibid., 759.

132 Ibid., 830. See Enchiridion, 421-422, for a similar attempt made by Dirk.

133 MM, 966.

imagine or compare it to.

The martyrs expected heaven to be a place of joyous reunion. Those who had been separated here on earth by the authorities, first by arrest and then by death, would meet to part no more. Fathers and mothers would be joined by their children and men and women by their wives and husbands. Maeyken Wens wrote to her son: "Oh my dear son, though I am taken from you here, strive from your youth to fear God, and you shall have your mother again up yonder in the New Jerusalem, where parting will be no more."¹³⁴ Hans van Munstdorp expected to be remarried to his wife by Christ.¹³⁵ Jesus' response to the Sadducees with regards to marriage in heaven¹³⁶ seems to have been ignored by the martyrs in their desperate wish to be reunited with their loved ones. Since love, marriage and family were part of the beauties of this life, and since they were often deprived of them by the viciousness of their enemies, they expected to experience those joys in the life to come.

The lot of the sinners would be as terrible as that of the saints was blessed. The punishments that were inflicted

¹³⁴ Ibid., 982.

¹³⁵ "I hope, though men separate us here, that the Lord will again join us together in His eternal kingdom, where no one will be able to part us, and we shall reign forever in the heavenly abode" (Ibid., 984).

For other examples of this expectation of meeting see Ibid., 521, 569, 713, 772, 921, 966, 977, 1031, & 1074.

¹³⁶ Mark 12:25.

upon them in this life by the hand of God were but a beginning of the eternal torments in the hereafter.¹³⁷ Hans Bret described it as a place of "eternal darkness and torment, where there will ever be weeping and gnashing of teeth, where the flames shall never be extinguished, where the smoke shall ascend forever and ever, where the worm shall never die; . . ."138 This, for the Anabaptists and their literal reading of Scripture, was no figurative hell, but a hot, smoking, burning, torturous certainty.

Within the sufferings that were inflicted upon them for their faith, the Anabaptist martyrs lived with hope. Either immediately upon death or after the resurrection they would enter the glorious presence of Christ and receive their reward for their faithfulness. Death at the hands of their enemies was therefore not to be feared but to be greeted with anticipation of what was to come. In the end they would be rewarded and their enemies punished. Therefore they could continue as soldiers in God's army.

5. An Apocalyptic Eschatology.

Paul Hanson, in his study of the beginnings of apocalyptic, makes the distinction between prophetic

137 MM, 1097.

138 Ibid., 1049. See also Ibid., 664, 730, 755, 771, & 820. For comparison see CWMS, 197, 205, 210, & 585; and Enchiridion, 305, 420, & 425-426.

eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology.¹³⁹ Prophetic eschatology came earlier within Judaism. It operated with an anticipation of the end, but interpreted that end with reference to historical events, "within the context of [the] nation's history and the history of the world."¹⁴⁰ It had a reasonably optimistic view of history and the world.

Apocalyptic eschatology developed out of this earlier eschatology, among others,¹⁴¹ when the events within the world damped the optimism and there seemed to be no reason to believe God's goals could be achieved within history.¹⁴² This eschatology was more visionary, anticipating an end that would completely transform everything that was. God would bring in a new heaven and a new earth. This view offered "an escape from the growing contradiction between glorious promise and harsh reality."¹⁴³ Because this view of life and history developed within the immediate moments of disintegration and alienation and suffering and not in a

¹³⁹ The Dawn of Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 1-31. See also idem, "Apocalypticism," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Suppl:28-34.

¹⁴⁰ Hanson, Dawn of Apocalyptic, 11.

¹⁴¹ Hanson, "Apocalypticism," 29.

¹⁴² "This optimism yielded to the pessimism of apocalyptic eschatology, held by people clinging to the prophetic promises of restoration, but failing to see how the order of this world could accommodate those promises, prompting them to leave the vision of restoration on the cosmic level of myth" (Hanson, Dawn, 26). See also idem, "Apocalypticism," 30.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 27; and Hanson, "Apocalypticism," 30.

context of safety and security,¹⁴⁴ it was "concerned less with systemic consistency than with the demands of the immediate crisis, especially those of defining identity within a hostile world, and of sustaining hope for deliverance."¹⁴⁵

Hanson argues that apocalyptic movements consistently arose in social settings where the very existence of the group was called into question because of the opposition and oppression it faced within the larger society. In response to this strain, the group formulated a way of thinking about the world, life within it, and its end, that allowed them to maintain their own identity and gave them the hope of ultimate vindication. In this way of thinking the significance of current institutions and structures was replaced with a "vision of 'higher' reality and of what that reality implie[d] for the future."¹⁴⁶

For the apocalypticists, all of history was divided into two ages, the present evil age and the age which was to follow the breaking into this reality of the cosmic reality that they envisioned.¹⁴⁷ People were divided into two groups, the wicked and the elect.¹⁴⁸ When the envisioned

144 Hanson, "Apocalypticism," 33.

145 Ibid., 30.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid.

reality would break into history, the elect would be swept up to be with God¹⁴⁹ and the wicked would receive their deserved judgement.¹⁵⁰ The new age would be characterized by "a new eternal (e.g., messianic) kingdom . . . unlimited prosperity and glory, the transcendence of death, and transformation into new forms of existence."¹⁵¹

The Anabaptist martyrs stood in line with this early apocalyptic eschatology. Experiencing the harshness of persecution, believing that the evil in the world was so great that it could not be overcome, and looking for a hope that would carry them through these difficult times, they placed their hope in a transformation of history and of the cosmic world. Facing alienation and persecution, they looked beyond present realities for their hope and ultimate vindication. Like the earlier apocalypticists, they seized upon any idea that was available within their accepted literature (the Bible) and system of thought in order to create a way of thinking that would help them. Therefore their views of issues like the resurrection and the immortality of the soul were not necessarily consistent. They agreed, however, that the new reality that they envisioned would break into history with the return of Christ. At that time the righteous, i.e., the Anabaptists,

149 Hanson, Dawn, 28.

150 Ibid.

151 Hanson, "Apocalypticism," 31.

would be receive their eternal reward and be vindicated and the wicked, i.e., their opponents and persecutors, would be condemned to eternal punishment.

6. Summary.

The Anabaptist martyrs viewed all of history as a battle between the forces of Satan and the armies of God. With the coming of Christ that battle had intensified and was now, in their own time, reaching its end when Christ would return in glorious victory. He would return as Saviour and Redeemer for the saints and as Judge for all. Those who had proved faithful within the furnace of life would be rewarded with eternal and glorious life in heaven. Those who had been in rebellion against God would suffer the eternal torments of hell, forever separated from God and enduring excruciating pain. That ultimate victory over their enemies gave them the hope, encouragement and strength that they needed faithfully to follow their Captain into battle and death.

As we compare the eschatology of the martyrs with that of Menno Simons and Dirk Philips we notice that by and large they agree. The eschatology of the leaders of the Dutch Anabaptist church was also that of the people within the church, certainly those people whose letters were preserved by the church and latter collected into a martyrology. It was also an eschatology that they shared with their brothers

and sisters in South Germany and Switzerland.¹⁵²

¹⁵² See Klaassen, "Visions," 42-57.

CONCLUSION

1. The Theology of the Martyrs.

The Anabaptist martyrs whose stories, letters and confessions are collected in the Martyrs Mirror lived and operated with a firm commitment to the Scriptures as the only authority in matters of faith and discipleship. They resisted the use of explanations and teachings handed down by church tradition. They equally firmly resisted the temptation to speculate about matters that they said went beyond Scriptures. According to them, what the Bible taught was enough and when that teaching was not clear and did not answer all the questions raised by human reason, the questions were to remain unanswered.

All of Scripture was authoritative for them, including the Apocrypha. However, the New Testament carried an authority beyond that of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha and was to be the final authority in all instances where there might appear to be a disagreement between the different bodies of Scripture.

The martyrs showed a commitment to both the literal word as well as the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture. The words were to be taken as they were written and were authoritative, and were not to be replaced or overshadowed by visions or special insights attributed to the Spirit. At the same time, the words could be understood

only as the individuals were filled with the Holy Spirit and were enlightened by that Spirit.

In interpreting the Scriptures for their situation, the Anabaptist martyrs operated with a conceptual framework that had the church of suffering disciples at its centre. As members of the church of Jesus Christ they were within a tradition that went back to Abel. As the true church (in their own estimation) they were a persecuted church, tortured and executed for their faith. As the church they were to live in obedience. All of these came together and contributed to their interpretation of the Scriptures.

As a people who were suffering at the hands of other church groups and suffering for their commitment to the Bible and to a certain interpretation of it, the Anabaptist martyrs identified with Christ and his suffering in his life, his arrest, trial and crucifixion. In their own sufferings they were not only following the example of their Lord but also continuing the sufferings that He had endured. He was suffering in their sufferings. He was also, in their sufferings, continuing the battle with the forces of evil. In their willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ they were confirming the truth of the Gospel message. They were also experiencing the discipline of God, purifying them and ridding them of the sin and commitments to this world that were still present within them.

Although their suffering was closely related to their

salvation, the Anabaptists did not cast aside the grace of God in favour of a works-righteousness. By the grace of God He had released them from the bondage to original sin by the work of Christ. By grace God had made it possible for them to repent of their sins and to commit themselves to a life of discipleship. By grace God had given them a new being, making this life possible, not without failings and errors, but without rebellion and without a return to a life of sin. In response to this grace they were to remain faithful, for to desert the faith was to experience the fall of Adam again within their own lives and to stand condemned. If they did remain faithful, by the strength that God gave to them, they could expect ultimate and complete salvation as they were, by death, ushered into Christ's glory in heaven.

For the martyrs heaven was a reality that awaited them, either upon death or after the resurrection. Till then they were involved in an eschatological battle with the forces of evil, a battle that was the precursor of the End when Christ would return in glory to complete a judgment that had already begun in the sufferings of the believers and the punishment of the evil ones. After the judgment, the believers would live in and share in Christ's glory for ever and ever while the wicked would suffer the eternal torments of hell. Then as God's faithful ones they would finally be vindicated.

2. A Lay Theology.

In his major study of Swiss and South German Anabaptism, Walter Klaassen refers to Anabaptism as a "layman's movement."¹ This does not mean that they did not have leaders. They did, among them Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz in Switzerland, Michael Sattler and Pilgram Marpeck in South Germany, Jacob Hutter and Peter Riedemann in Moravia, and of course Menno Simons and Dirk Philips in the Netherlands. Some of these might well have been seen as lay leaders in that they did not have the education nor church background of men like Luther and Calvin. However, to refer to the Anabaptist movement as a lay movement means more than simply that their leaders were relatively uneducated. It means that it was a movement where the views and the guidance of those who were not perceived as leaders were important and where the formulating of theology was not restricted to those who were the leaders.²

Our study of the Martyrs Mirror leads us to a similar conclusion. In the Martyrs Mirror we have the writings of the rank and file of the Anabaptist church. The only high profile leaders whose writings appear in this Dutch

¹ Walter Klaassen, "Word, Spirit, and Scripture in Early Anabaptist Thought," (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford, 1960), vii.

² The missionary activity of the Anabaptists was also carried out by the laity, not only the leaders (Wolfgang Schäufele, "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity," MQR 36 (1962):99-115; and Thiessen, "The Church in Mission").

martyrology are Michael Sattler and George Blaurock. The rest are the letters and confessions of men and women who were part of the church and whose views and ideas were important, not because they were leaders, but because they were fellow believers.

In our study we noted that the theology of the martyrs and that of Menno Simons and Dirk Philips were very similar. Where Dirk and Menno disagreed,³ we find the same kind of variance in the writings of the martyrs. Through our study we see therefore, that the theology of the Anabaptists was not simply a theology formulated and written down by the leaders.⁴ It was a theology that had been learned by the people and was an integral part of the thinking of the people. It is when people are face to face with pain and death that they have to rely on their instincts and that which they really believe, and not upon something imposed or memorized. Under these conditions the Anabaptist martyrs spoke and wrote their own theology and it was a theology that they shared with their leaders. It was a theology held to by the leaders. It was also a theology held to by the

³ For example, Menno preferred to remain with a literal, historical interpretation of Scripture whereas Dirk was inclined to use the allegorical method. See pp. 48-51 above.

⁴ This is not to suggest that this could not also be said of Lutheranism and Calvinism. It is only to say that it is true of the Anabaptists.

people. It was a lay theology.⁵ Walter Klaassen refers to this kind of theology as a Gemeindetheologie, "a theology to which every person has contributed and in terms of which he can articulate his faith."⁶

3. Relationships Within the Community.

In our study of the theology of the martyrs we can also draw some conclusions about their views of women, family and the relationship of the Anabaptist martyrs to the state.⁷

⁵ Poettcker argues that for Menno it was "regeneration that [made] a man fit for the office of teaching the Word" (Menno's Encounter," 118). Since regeneration had been experienced by all those who were in the church in Anabaptist circles, all the believers who had been baptized upon their confession of faith could be interpreters and teachers of the Word. It did not require a special office or calling.

Jacob the Chandler, whose letters appear in the Martyrs Mirror, wrote to a fellow Anabaptist, encouraging him not to let the fact that he had no office dissuade him from teaching. Jacob wrote: "And if you will assign as a reason [for not exercising your spiritual gift], that it is not your office, know that they must not all be teachers who exhort the church; this is no rule laid down in the Scriptures" (p. 814).

Yoder, in his study of Anabaptist hermeneutics based primarily on Swiss and South German sources, concludes that the Anabaptists believed that the "text is best understood in a congregation" (Hermeneutics, 301).

⁶ Klaassen, Neither Catholic nor Protestant, 42. William Klassen uses the same word to describe Pilgram Marpeck's theology. Klassen argues that for Marpeck theology was "the corporate exposition of Scripture by the band of believers, or what we today might call Gemeindetheologie" (Community and Covenant, 81). See Ibid., 78-87, for Klassen's discussion. See also Davis, "Anabaptism as a Charismatic Movement," 231-232.

⁷ This is by no means a complete study of social relationships as found in the Martyrs Mirror. That could in and of itself be a major study. Rather, I will seek to

1) Women⁸

We can conclude from the evidence in the Martyrs Mirror that women had an important role within the movement.⁹ There is little, if any, evidence in the Martyrs Mirror that they were part of the formal church leadership, although such evidence may exist elsewhere.¹⁰ Though not formally leaders, they were still an important part of the movement.¹¹ The very fact that so many of their stories and

outline a few suggestions in a certain direction. More complete studies have been done on parts of this topic and hopefully others will follow.

⁸ For more complete studies see Miriam U. Chrisman, "Women and the reformation in Strasbourg 1490-1530," Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 63 (1972):143-168; Irwin, Joyce, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, 1525-1675 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1975); John Klassen, "Women and the Family among Dutch Anabaptist Martyrs," MQR 60 (1986):548-571; M. Lucille Marr, "Anabaptist Women of the North," MQR 61 (1987):347-362; Wayne Plenert, "The Martyr's Mirror and Anabaptist Women," Mennonite Life 30 (June, 1975):13-18; and Keith L. Sprunger, "God's Powerful Army of the Weak: Anabaptist women of the Radical Reformation," in Triumph Over Storm: Women in Protestant History, ed. Richard L. Greaves (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 45-74.

⁹ Van Braght's own conclusion was: "The army of God, which at this time prepared itself for the conflict and the sufferings of Jesus Christ, consisted not only of men, who are sometimes judged to be strongest, but also in women, for God's power is made strong in weakness, . . ." (p. 1120). It is interesting to note that van Braght, though recognizing that common consensus had it that men were stronger than women, does not necessarily agree with that sentiment.

¹⁰ John Klassen, "Women and the Family Among Dutch Anabaptist Martyrs," MQR 60 (1986):550, f.n. 8. Keith L. Sprunger concludes: "The history of Anabaptism contains many stories of women who appointed themselves to places of leadership" (p. 53).

¹¹ Sprunger, 52-53.

letters were preserved for the church points to this.

A certain Elizabeth was arrested in 1549 because she had been identified as a teacher. She did not deny that role nor did she agree that she was in fact a teacher.¹² She was also identified as Menno Simons' wife, undoubtedly in error. Jerome Segers' wife, Lijsken, was seen as "the biggest heretic in the city."¹³ That suggests that she did not simply stay at home to tend to household duties but was actively involved in communicating the Anabaptist teachings to others. Jelis Matthijss encouraged his wife to communicate to the church whatever truths God had given her.¹⁴ The women's letters from prison were directed not only to their children and husbands but also to the church.¹⁵ The contents of these letters, as evidenced in the many examples used in this study, were as full of theology and references to Scripture as were those written by the men. Under torture and in the face of death they were as courageous as were the men.¹⁶

In the same way that the Anabaptist movement was not a

12 MM, 481.

13 Ibid., 505-506.

14 Ibid., 676-677.

15 Ibid., 667.

16 John Klassen suggests: "Women equalled, and according to some even excelled, the men in displaying courage" (p. 551). See also Plenert, 17; and Sprunger, 59 & 66.

movement mainly of leaders with people who followed quietly, so it was not a movement comprised mainly of men with women who followed quietly for the sake of their husbands or fathers. Women were full members in their own right and contributed significantly to the Anabaptist movement, in courage, in suffering, in writing and in theology.

ii) Family¹⁷

Strong family ties existed within the Anabaptist families. The letters in the Martyrs Mirror expressed deeply felt love for spouses and children and a longing to be with the family members.¹⁸ They hoped to see each other again, if not in this life, then the next. Parents were concerned for the physical and spiritual welfare of their children and, where possible, made provision for them. They wished for their children to learn the Anabaptist faith, to choose vocations consistent with that faith and to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ. The spouses and parents left their children and partners, not because they did not care for them, but because they were separated by the cruelty of those who attempted to destroy the Anabaptist

¹⁷ For a more complete study see William Klassen, "The Role of the Child in Anabaptism," 17-32; Hillel Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas About the Nature of Children," MQR 47 (1973):102-114; William Richard Wohlers, "The Anabaptist View of the Family in its Relationship to the Church," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1976; and the articles on women in footnote # 7 above.

¹⁸ J. Klassen, "Women and the Family," 558.

movement. To desert the faith for the sake of family would have been to deny the commitment that overshadowed all other commitments, including those of marriage and home.

iii) The State¹⁹

The Anabaptists felt strongly that laws regarding religious uniformity and the enforcement of those laws was unacceptable and illegitimate. By their willingness to accept suffering at the hands of the authorities they declared that the state was not the ultimate authority even if it could invoke the death sentence, and execute people by cruel means. Living within society they did not necessarily

¹⁹ For more complete studies see Harold S. Bender, The Anabaptists and Religious Liberty in the Sixteenth Century (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970). It was previously published in Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 44 [1953]:32-50; and MQR 29 [1955]:73-100); idem, "The Pacifism of the Sixteenth Century Anabaptists," MQR 30 (1956):5-18; W. R. Estep, Jr., "Were the Anabaptists Subversive? The Birth of a Counter-Culture," Mennonite Life 26 (January, 1971):14-18; Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and the Reformation," Church History 29 (1960):404-424; idem, Die Politische Ethik des Oberdeutschen Taufertums (Leiden-Kohn: Brill, 1962); Walter Klaassen, "The Anabaptist Critique of Constantinian Christendom," MQR 55 (1981):218-230; idem, "The Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," MQR 45 (1971):291-311; idem, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant (Waterloo, Ont.: Conrad Press, 1973), 48-63; Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptists and the State," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, 180-193; James M. Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword; Paul P. Peachey, "The Radical Reformation, Political Pluralism, and the Corpus Christianum," in The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism, International Archives of the History of Ideas, # 87, ed. Marc Lienhard (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 10-26; and Carl Sachsse, "Die politische und soziale Einstellung der Täufer in der Refomartionszeit," Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 74 (1963):282-315.

accept the rules and norms of that society.²⁰ At the same time they did not deny the legitimacy of the state.²¹ They showed themselves to be peace-loving and willing to obey, at times even to the point of refusing to escape when such an opportunity presented itself.²² They declared, by letter and by their willingness to accept death, that they were opposed to the merging of church and state within Constantinian Christendom.²³ They also refused to accept the fact that the role of the church was to deal only with the inner, spiritual man. For them, that inner, spiritual life had specific consequences for life within society.

²⁰ W. R. Estep, Jr., concludes: "There is little doubt from the standpoint of the sixteenth century world that the Anabaptists were subversives. Yet, it appears that they were no more so than the early Christians of the primitive church, who determined to obey God rather than men" ("Were the Anabaptists Subversive?" 18).

²¹ They were in fact very willing to admit the legitimacy of government and its task of maintaining order within society. In a letter to the authorities Hans van Overdam wrote: "Be it known to you, lords, councilors, burgomasters and judges, that we recognize your offices as right and good; yea, as ordained and instituted by God, that is, the secular sword for the punishment of evildoers, and the protection of the good and we desire to obey you in all taxes, tributes and ordinances, as far as it is not contrary to God" (MM, 492). See also Ibid, 592.

²² Joris Wippe obeyed a summons to appear before the magistrates instead of fleeing before they caught him (MM, 584). Trijken Keuts did the same (Ibid, 618). Dirck Mieuwess refused escape to protect the jailer who had given him various freedoms (Ibid, 872). Hans Misel refused escape when friends tried to help him out of prison the day before his scheduled execution (Ibid, 893-894).

²³ See Hillerbrand, "The Anabaptist View of the State," 109; and Klaassen, "The Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," 298.

That included the refusal to take up arms, to participate in the magistracy or to go to war.²⁴

In a sense they were the forerunners of modern day radicals who engage in civil disobedience in their protests against racism, apartheid, and nuclear arms.²⁵ One significant difference between the Anabaptist martyrs and some of our modern day crusaders is that we find no evidence that the Anabaptists engaged in civil disobedience for the sake of civil disobedience. They disobeyed the laws and stood up to the authorities only when the laws themselves forced upon them a way of life and faith that was contrary to their understanding of the teachings of the Bible. They were like those blacks who refused to sit in the back of the bus during the sixties and like those individuals who are helping Central American peasants set up cooperatives, but not like those activists who break into nuclear installations to pour blood on blueprints and important documents.²⁶

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The stories, letters and confessions of faith of the

²⁴ Bender, "Pacifism," 13; Hillerbrand, "Anabaptist View," 100; and Klaassen, "Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," 307.

²⁵ Klaassen makes a similar comparison ("Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," 311).

²⁶ This is not to suggest that those latter actions are not worthwhile, necessary and consistent with faith. It is only to distinguish different kinds of protests and civil disobedience.

Anabaptist martyrs that are preserved for us in the Martyrs Mirror are a rich source for understanding Anabaptist theology. Their importance is not in bringing a new or significantly different theology into discussion. Rather, they confirm what we already knew about Anabaptist theology in the Low Countries through the writings of Dirk Philips and Menno Simons. They also demonstrate to us that this theology was a theology of the people, of the church, and not just of the leaders. It was a theology of the peasants and people on the street and it was a theology that took them through the most difficult crises in life.

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