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An Anabaptist Vision for Church Reform in late Sixteenth-Century Switzerland

The «vision of reform» that is my subject emerges from two Anabaptist writings that were being copied and circulated together in 1590. The «Simple Confession» and the attached writing «Concerning Separation» make up a lengthy codex of 460 pages that has been preserved in the Bernese city archives. These writings refer back to the 23-day public disputation between Reformed theologians and Swiss Brethren defendants held at Frankenthal in the Palatinate in 1571. The Frankenthal Disputation was considered a public relations victory by the magistrates of the Palatinate, and a «Protocol» of 710 pages was published that same year.

Shortly thereafter, some anonymous Anabaptist writers began a counter-response to the thirteen questions debated at Frankenthal, and this eventually became the «Simple Confession» and the expanded notes to «Concerning Separation». From the perspective of earlier Swiss Anabaptist apologies and defenses, these later writings present a significant new hermeneutical structure, that is, a new way of relating the Old Testament to the New, and they also re-conceive the church as a spiritual assembly of equals. This directly confronted Reformed hermeneutics and ecclesiology, but also went beyond traditional Swiss Brethren New Testament literalism. It is this «new vision of church reform» I want to describe for you today. But first, some historical context.

It is well-known that Ulrich Zwingli believed in a unified *corpus christianum*, a covenant community that encompassed state and church, and that the theocratic foundations he laid out were given further theological grounding and institutional form by his successor, Heinrich Bullinger.¹ Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 presented, in dogmatic form, the essentials of this Reformed vision of the church integrated into the state.² By the end of the century

¹ In the words of historian Emidio Campi, «Ulrich Zwingli [...] held firmly to the conception of a unified *corpus christianum*, where the civil and religious spheres were understood to be coextensive». Emidio Campi, *The Reformation in Zurich*, in Amy Nelson Burnett and Emidio Campi, eds., *A Companion to the Swiss Reformation*, Leiden 2016, 57–125, 82. Campi summarizes Bullinger's work: «[...] between 1531 and 1575 many rough attempts at reform matured into functional institutions, and at the same time further important elements appeared through which the work of the Reformation would be consolidated and assume tangible form.» Campi, *Reformation* 96.

² The Protestant states of Bern, Schaffhausen, St. Gallen and Graubünden accepted Bullinger's confession immediately; Basel approved in principle, but chose to remain with its substantively similar older confession.

Bullinger's view had grown into Reformed Orthodoxy, in which the church was tightly integrated into, and largely controlled by the state.³

This was the institutional story, in a nutshell. This vision of a reformed church was grounded in a hermeneutics that found God's unified voice in both Old and New Testaments. Bullinger built his hermeneutical case beginning at Genesis 17, and the «eternal covenant» made with Abraham and his descendants.⁴ Although some Jewish ceremonies and figures were ended by the New Testament, the «eternal covenant» established in the Old did not come to an end.⁵ The Old Testament remained revelatory for the way church and society should function, namely as one covenant community.⁶ Baptism was thus «analogous» to circumcision («ein änligkeit habe»), and was the seal of the eternal covenant for children who, as in the Old Testament, would receive the outward sign of membership in the community first, and be instructed in the faith within that community.⁷

Bullinger also argued that when governed by Christ's law of love, the Old Testament remained normative for Christian ethics.⁸ Discipline for moral infractions should be carried out by the godly state, not the church, as had been the case

³ The essence of Reformed Orthodoxy was that «there must be one unitary religious structure within the state that served for the social disciplining of subjects through its restrictive prescriptions. [...] there was no longer a clear distinction between the ecclesiastical and political community. [...] the church increasingly became dependent on the state.» *Campi*, Reformation, 121.

⁴ Heinrich Bullinger, *Von dem unverschampten Fräfel, ergerlichem Verwyrren unnd unwarhaftem Leeren der selbgesandten Widertöuffern [...]* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1531), Lv, r. See also Bullinger's publication three years later: *Von dem einigen unnd ewigen Testament oder Pundt Gottes*. [Concerning the One, eternal Testament or Covenant of God] (Zürich: Froschauer, 1534), which forcefully argued the «unitary» reading of the «one covenant» found in the Old and New Testaments. See www.e-rara.ch/zuz/content/titleinfo/217311, accessed November 24, 2016.

⁵ Bullinger, Fräfel, Lv, v. Bullinger's conviction was that the «people of God» of the Old Testament were one body with the members of the New Testament church. Here Bullinger built on a concept first articulated by Zwingli, but elaborated it further and made it «the core of his theology.» Cf. Heinold Fast, *Heinrich Bullinger und die Täufer*, Weierhof 1959), 132f.

⁶ Bullinger was very clear on the importance of establishing the authority of the Old Testament in debates with Anabaptists. See H. Fast and J. H. Yoder, *How to Deal with Anabaptists: An Unpublished Letter of Heinrich Bullinger*, in *MQR* 33 (1959), 83–95.

⁷ Bullinger, Fräfel, Lx, r.-v. For a thorough summary and nuanced discussion, see Fast, Bullinger, 132–139.

⁸ Civil oaths, for example, must be distinguished from swearing and cursing. In this he was following Zwingli's lead. See Hans Rudolf Lavater, *Die Berner Täufer in ihrem schweizerischen Umfeld II*, in Rudolf Dellsperger und Hans Rudolf Lavater, eds., *Die Wahrheit ist untödlich: Berner Täufer in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bern 2007, 53. Oaths were seen as part of the eternal covenanted order begun in the Old Testament. In a discussion of the topic, Bullinger pointed to Psalms 63, 24 and 15, and the honorable swearing that appears in those texts, concluding that «the prophet [David] truly points the way to heaven, but it is just one way, and one covenant, and one people.» Bullinger, Fräfel, Cxx, r.

in the Old Testament.⁹ For Bullinger, the visible church necessarily incorporated all citizens of the godly state, saints and sinners, saved and damned alike, overseen by the political authorities. In the end, God would sort out who was worthy of salvation.

The civil authorities played a large role in Bullinger's covenantal reading. Appealing to Exodus 18, Bullinger argued that long before Christ's birth the people of God had been provided with a governing order that encouraged good and punished evil, and to which obedience was owed.¹⁰ This order was not destroyed by Christ's words and example. Bullinger could write in 1560 that «truly the lords are no longer secular («worldly»=«wältlich») but rather are spiritual. Therefore the integration of civil authorities into the church order is [...] a beautiful and good Christian order which the Lord himself has brought into being.»¹¹ Bullinger's vision of a biblically reformed church did not set out to secularize the church, but rather to divinize and incorporate the magistracy and citizenry into an integrated covenant community, erasing all but functional distinctions between church and magistracy. For Bullinger there was one Scripture, one covenant, and one people.

As is well known, from the start the Anabaptists in Switzerland refused, on biblical grounds, to participate in the state-sponsored Reformed church. Early Swiss Anabaptists were convinced by the normative and final authority of the «commands» of Jesus in the New Testament. A church reformed by Jesus' commands, they believed, would be a voluntarily-covenanted community, following the «proper order» of baptism outlined by Jesus in Mark 16 and Matthew 28: *first* teach, *then* baptize those who believe and are ready to live a reformed life. The church of baptized adults would be governed by fraternal admonition, outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18; no believers would bear the sword or would swear oaths, by virtue of Jesus' words in Matthew 5; Christians would share their goods with their needy brothers and sisters, by virtue of the apostolic example in Acts 2 and 4; no Christians could be magistrates since magistrates must use the sword, and Jesus (besides counselling love for enemies) set the example of refusing to be named a king and refusing to judge, choosing to suffer rather than rule over others.

⁹ In any case, church discipline could deal only with external matters, and left the sins of the heart untouched. The true church is known only to God, said Bullinger. What the Anabaptists called the «communion of saints», Bullinger described as hypocritical and «monkish» («Möncherei»). See *Fast*, Bullinger, 142–148.

¹⁰ *Bullinger*, Fräfel, xCix, v ff.

¹¹ «Es ist aber kein mischlung / diewyl doch die fürsten nit mer wältlich / sonder als geistlich sind. Darumb ist es ja kein mischlung / sonder ein schöne gute Christenliche ordnung / welche der Herr selbs in gang gebracht hat.» Heinrich *Bullinger*, *Der Wider-töufferen Ursprung*, Zürich 1560, 162, r. And Bullinger could go further: «in truth [the magistrates must be understood as] [...] governing everything in the church of Christ according to the will and word of Christ, such that Christ himself lives and rules in the midst of his church.» («[...] doch yetz dan nit als wältliche Oberen / nach der wält die kirch zu regieren / sonder als Christenliche Oberen / ales in der kirchen Christi nach dem willen und wort Christi zu verwalten / also / daß Christus selb läbe unnd regiere in mitten siner kirchen.») *Bullinger*, *Ursprung*, 162, r.

The shorthand description of early Swiss Brethren hermeneutics is that it represents a Christocentric, New Testament literalism, little concerned with the Old Testament.¹² Although this is an exaggeration, it is true that Christocentric literalism and ethical rigor led the Swiss Brethren in a perfectionist and separatist direction as a church.

When we turn to the «Simple Confession» and «Concerning Separation» we find immediately a new and distinctive hermeneutic that was not known in Swiss Brethren circles. We read that the Old Testament is figurative and preliminary. Its function is to point to the coming Christ. As such, the Old Testament contains literal and impermanent «earthly figures» of what would become «spiritual realities» when Christ came to fulfill Old Testament promises and prophecies.

This progressive, spiritualist way of relating the Old Testament to the New originated with Caspar Schwenckfeld in the 1530s and was adopted by Pilgram Marpeck and his co-workers almost immediately.¹³ The emergence of this same hermeneutic in the 1580s in Swiss Anabaptist circles demonstrates its continuing relevance to those baptizers, and a continuing influence in Switzerland of Schwenckfeld and Marpeck's hermeneutical structure.¹⁴

Clearly following the Schwenckfeld/Marpeck pattern of interpretation, the «Preface» to the «Simple Confession» points to Old Testament «figures» and draws

¹² This characterization is an overstatement, even for the early Swiss. A biblical concordance circulating in the 1540s references more Old Testament texts than ones from the New Testament. See Gilbert *Fast* and Galen *Peters*, trans., *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren*, 1540, Kitchener, ON 2001.

¹³ Left undeveloped in my earlier writing is Schwenckfeld's role in articulating the progressive, spiritualist hermeneutic that Marpeck would henceforth use and pass on. Schwenckfeld's «Difference between the Old and New Testaments, the Symbol and the Truth» (ca. 1531), which circulated in manuscript, is found in CS IV, document 125, 414–443. Schwenckfeld treated the same topic more extensively in a book «Vom Christlichen Sabbath», published January 1, 1532. A section of that book, «Vom underschaid deß Alten und Newen Testaments» was also published separately. See *ibid.*, 417. For the printed version of this latter text, see CS IV, document 126, 470–479. Marpeck's «Confession» to the Strasbourg Council echoes Schwenckfeld's schema and language, and would remain a mark of Marpeck and Covenanter thought. See Pilgram Marpeck, «Confession» (January, 1532) in William *Klassen* and Walter *Klaassen*, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, Scottdale, Pa. 1978, 107–158; for a clear parallel, 119. The conclusion that Marpeck learned this hermeneutic from Schwenckfeld is presented most clearly in Neal *Blough*, *Christ in our Midst. Incarnation, Church and Discipleship in the Theology of Pilgram Marpeck*, Kitchener, ON 2007. See especially the section on «The Humanity of Christ: Marpeck and Schwenckfeld», 52–57. Also Neal *Blough*, *Pilgram Marpeck et les Frères Suisses vers 1540*, in: 'Lebenn nach der Ler Jhesu...' 'Das sind aber Wir!' *Berner Täufer und Prädikanten im Gespräch*, Bern 1989), 147–164, esp. 151f. Werner *Packull* agrees with Blough that with regard to the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, Marpeck was «the learner and Schwenckfeld the tutor.» Werner *Packull*, *Hutterite Beginnings*, Baltimore 1995, 146.

¹⁴ The initial detailed argument for Marpeckian continuity and influence on the later Swiss Anabaptists can be found in two articles: C. Arnold *Snyder*, *The (Not-So) 'Simple Confession': Part I* in *MQR* 73 (October, 1999) 677–722; *Part II* in *MQR* 74 (January, 2000), 87–122.

conclusions about the church of Christ. For example, the temple of the Last Days is not a physical temple on earth built by human hands, as in the Old Testament, but is a spiritual temple in heaven, built by God. The Preface concludes: «Since we in these last days have another temple and another high priest, therefore we also have another law»¹⁵ namely, the law according to Christ.¹⁶ The New Testament is thus set above the Old, as before, but this conclusion is based on a comprehensive, spiritualist hermeneutic, not a literal following of New Testament «commands.»¹⁷

The first two chapters of the «Simple Confession» were devoted to countering the familiar Reformed hermeneutic of one Scripture, one covenant, and one people of God.¹⁸ At Frankenthal the Reformed dismissed a progressive reading of the Testaments, arguing that this would indicate that God's will had changed over time – which they said was an impossible conclusion. In reply, the authors of the *Simple Confession* maintained that it was not the Holy Spirit – or God's will – that had changed, but rather, the times have changed. The Old Testament was in the morning, but in our time it is afternoon [...] [the Holy Spirit] is like the father who treated his child in different ways in youth and adulthood, but nevertheless remained the same father.¹⁹ The ancients in the time of the

¹⁵ C.A. Snyder, ed., *Later Writings of the Swiss Anabaptists, 1529–1592*, Kitchener, ON 2017, 251–254; citation 254.

¹⁶ This «law» is «the Law and the Word of the Lord which proceeded from Jerusalem and Zion through Christ himself, the heavenly King and High Priest, which teaches peace to the people [...] leading to a holy life upon which one may stand steadfastly and fearlessly on Judgment Day before the face of God and the holy angels.» Snyder, *Later Writings*, 254.

¹⁷ See Neal Blough's conclusion to his comparison of Swiss Brethren argumentation at the Zofingen Disputation (1532) and Pilgram Marpeck's approach. «La différence entre Marpeck et les bernois ne se trouve pas dans le contenu, mais dans le raisonnement théologique. La théologie de Marpeck est plutôt un approfondissement de l'intuition biblique des frères suisses. Cette différence vient encore probablement de l'influence de Schwenckfeld sur Marpeck.» Blough, *Marpeck*, 159.

¹⁸ The first chapter examined the question «Whether the writings of the Old Testament are as valid for Christians as those of the New.» Snyder, *Later Writings*, 255–270. It is not surprising that the progressive, spiritualist hermeneutic was particularly well suited to the task of opposing the Reformed position. From the start Schwenckfeld used it to argue against the unitary Reformed reading of Old and New Testaments being articulated by Bucer in Strasbourg and Bullinger in Zurich in the 1530s. See, for example, CS IV, doc. 127: «Letter to the Brotherhood of Strassburg» February 13, 1532, 520–556. In the introduction to this letter Schwenckfeld states that he is writing to oppose those who mistakenly claim that grace, the forgiveness of sins, peace, life and salvation were proclaimed and preached before the time of Christ «as truly as in the New Testament.» His correspondence with Leo Jud in 1533 inserted him, for a time, directly into the conversation in Zurich. See Urs B. Leu / Christian Scheidegger, eds, *Die Zürcher Täufer, 1525–1700*, Zürich 2007), 75–82; also Klaus Deppermann, *Schwenckfeld and Leo Jud on the Advantages and Disadvantages of the State Church*, in Peter C. Erb, ed., *Schwenckfeld and Early Schwenckfeldianism*, Pennsburg, PA 1986, 211–236. Emmet McLaughlin says of Schwenckfeld's four letters to Jud that «They remain his most remarkable works and are without equal during the Reformation» in their vision of church-state relations and religious toleration. R. Emmet McLaughlin, *Caspar Schwenckfeld. Reluctant Radical*, New Haven 1986, 142.

¹⁹ Snyder, *Later Writings*, 259. The theme of historical change, and the «childishness» of Old Testament physical practices (such as circumcision) was made repeatedly by Marpeck, in *Klassen* and *Klaassen*, *Writings*, 234f.

Old Testament experienced the measure of the Spirit available to them in their time; they simply could not experience the fullness of the Spirit; only Jesus' coming could make this available.²⁰

The authors of the «Simple Confession» spent some time pointing to what they called «examples of the disparity» between the Testaments, a tactic also used by the brethren at Frankenthal.²¹ Notable in the 1590 list of «disparities», particularly because they were not characteristically used by Swiss Brethren, are oppositions linked to the polarity «Old Testament/physical» as against «New Testament/spiritual», characteristic of the hermeneutic common to Schwenckfeld and Marpeck. To cite only one example:

«The Old has an outer, human mediator, namely, Moses; it had an outer priesthood, outer unction, an outer kingdom, an outer sword, law, and judgment. The New has an inner, spiritual mediator, namely, the person of Jesus Christ. It has an inner kingdom and priesthood, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ which he establishes in the newly reborn person, in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, Romans 14[:17].»²²

Likewise the Old Testament established a physical authority with a physical sword; in the New a spiritual authority is given, namely Jesus Christ, who wields a spiritual sword.²³

Here we read the same progressive, spiritualist arguments that Caspar Schwenckfeld used in 1533 in his attempt to convince Leo Jud to turn against Bullinger's unitary hermeneutic. They reappear, almost verbatim, forty years later in a document copied and circulated by Swiss Brethren, to all appearances mediated to them by unknown Covenanters following Marpeck's lead.

On the central issue of ethics, the Reformed at Frankenthal had argued that the ethical commands of the Old and New Testaments were equivalent, noting

²⁰ «We know very well that the ancients also had the Spirit of God in their measure [...] But that they had the Spirit in the same manner, possession, power, and ability as the apostles received it, and to the same extent that the servants of the New Testament were to receive and be filled with the Spirit, is not possible, based on the words of the Lord cited above and also in the writings of the prophets [...]» See «Concerning Separation» in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 517. The text points to Isaiah 32, 44, 49; Ezekiel 11[:19]; 36:26; 39[:29]; Isaiah 61[:1]; Joel 2[:28]; Zechariah 12[:10] as Old Testament prophecies pointing to the coming Spirit. That the writers of «Concerning Separation» were Covenanters is clear when they cite the same texts here, in the same order, as are found in the Covenanter biblical concordance, the *Testamentserlauterung*, chapter 26 «Hailigen geist gottes». Cf. pp. 68 recto–70 recto; 75 verso–76 verso.

²¹ The list of «disparities» in the «Simple Confession» runs on for some pages. *Snyder, Later Writings*, 261–267.

²² *Snyder, Later Writings*, 263.

²³ Both examples in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 263. Readers of the «Testamentserleutterung» recognize the repeated use of this argument, if not the literal words themselves, in the exegetical work of Marpeck and the Covenanters. On the authorship and printing of this Covenanter concordance, see Werner O. *Packull*, Preliminary Report on Pilgram Marpeck's Sponsorship of Anabaptist *Flugschriften*, MQR 75 (Oct. 2001), 75–88.

that Moses also commanded the love of enemies in Exodus 23. The authors of the «Simple Confession» answered that, in fact, Moses' words referred only to love of Israelite enemies, and did not apply to non-Israelite enemies. The authors concluded that the «Mosaic love of enemy» is therefore «contrary to the teaching of Christ [...] which speaks [equally] to the Jews and Gentiles and to all peoples on earth.»²⁴ The authors concluded that no one who «allows the Holy Scripture to remain in its clear meaning» could say that Matthew 5 and Exodus 23 «are the same teaching.»²⁵

In conclusion to this article, the authors emphasized that it had been demonstrated clearly enough that they were being slandered unfairly by the «lying pens of the learned scribes» when the theologians falsely claimed that the brethren discarded the Old Testament and denied it any validity. It was primarily a matter of *who* read the Old Testament and *in what manner* it was read. The authors of the «Simple Confession» concluded:

«For although the two testaments are not the same through the ages..., the Spirit of God as the figure and the truth certainly knows how to make them both equal following the time and revelation of the eternal, unchangeable will of God in Christ Jesus.»²⁶

In other words, the spiritual intention of God, leading from Moses to Christ, runs unchanged throughout Scripture, even though its reception by God's people has necessarily changed over time, dependent upon whether God's people lived before or after the revelation that is Christ.

The progressive hermeneutic argued in the «Simple Confession» had a necessary corollary: participants in the new spiritual covenant are those who have been spiritually conceived and brought to spiritual birth by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. We can highlight a sentence cited previously:

«The New [Testament] has an inner, spiritual mediator, namely, the person of Jesus Christ. It has an inner kingdom and priesthood, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ *which he establishes in the newly reborn person, in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,* Romans 14[:17].»²⁷

The people of the old covenant were identified by their physical birth into a particular tribe, physically marked by circumcision and ruled by a literal law; the people of the new covenant must be spiritually conceived and born as children of God, of no particular earthly tribe, spiritually reborn (inwardly circumcised)

²⁴ Snyder, *Later Writings*, 265.

²⁵ Snyder, *Later Writings*, 264f.

²⁶ «Only the Spirit of God, and a spiritual person taught by God, knows how to seek out the Old Testament witness concerning Christ and His Kingdom and, utilizing a spiritual judgment, how to draw the truth from the figurative symbols, and apply this to Christ.» Snyder, *Later Writings*, 270.

²⁷ Snyder, *Later Writings*, 263. Italics mine.

to become new persons and members of the Body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ.

This doctrine of spiritual rebirth appears consistently in the «Simple Confession» and throughout the separately-copied «Concerning Separation»: Moses could only communicate the consequences of sin; Christ makes it possible for spiritually reborn believers «to avoid and eliminate [...] fleshly cravings, carnal desires, and passions of the heart, 2 Timothy 2[:20–26].»²⁸ The truly «reformed» church is thus a community of «re-made persons», who demonstrate their spiritual rebirth by their actions in the world.²⁹ They are significantly new beings, no longer simply children of Adam. In terms of ethics and way of life, the visible and so-called «outward» matters of faith must be «empowered, driven and ruled from the inner to the outer through faith, love, and the Holy Spirit.»³⁰ The progressive, spiritualist hermeneutic thus had regenerationist requirements with ethical and ecclesiological consequences.

It is true that ethical actions that are impelled «from within» by the living Spirit of God will be in accord with the words and actions of Jesus seen in New Testament. Outer actions will make visible the loving Spirit of Christ now living in the hearts of reborn believers. Nevertheless, the «rightness» of an action is not premised on a literal obedience to «commands of the letter» in the New Testament. Proclaiming an outward «letter» or law cannot change a person's heart or inward being. Rather, truly «right» actions are undertaken because a spiritual transformation has led to a free and willing obedience. Obedience is thus confirmed first inwardly by the spirit, and then secondarily by outward obedience to the letter.

The distinction may seem to be a subtle and insignificant one, but the changed emphasis leads to a significantly altered understanding of how a reformed Anabaptist church is conceived. The way in which this spiritual orientation marks the church or congregation is spelled out in the tract «Concerning Separation», where the spiritualist rationale runs through the portions added in 1590 to the original document.

²⁸ Snyder, *Later Writings*, 263. In «Concerning Separation» we read, for example, «Therefore the children of God and believers of the New Testament must be filled and enabled with this new and gracious Spirit of Christ, of which the prophets prophesied and Christ himself promised to all who believed in him.» Snyder, *Later Writings*, 518. In a writing from 1547, Pilgram Marpeck expressed the same idea: «We are not taught by the human voice, by the literal, external teaching of Christ and the apostolic preaching of the gospel. We are taught, not by man, but by God, the Holy Spirit Himself. The Spirit takes the treasures and good things of the Father and the Son, and has poured into our hearts the love which is the mind of Christ and the true and only understanding.» Pilgram Marpeck, «Concerning the Lowliness of Christ (1547)» in *Klaassen and Klassen, Writings*, 451.

²⁹ «[...] the body of Christ brings forth the fruit of the Spirit and of love; these are good fruits. The body of the world brings forth the fruit of the flesh; these are evil fruits.» Cf. «Concerning Separation» in Snyder, *Later Writings*, 502.

³⁰ «Concerning Separation», in Snyder, *Later Writings*, 484.

When these later Swiss Anabaptist writers contrasted their church with the Reformed, they noted that in the Reformed church only the pastor was allowed to speak, in contravention of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14 where Paul spoke about the exercise of the various gifts «for the improvement of the members.»³¹ The congregation, the writers say, is «the temple of the Holy Spirit, where the gifts or inner workings of the Spirit in each one [...] serve the common good.»³² In a «spiritual congregation» all members give evidence of «God dwelling and working among them» as they speak, prophesy, and share spiritual gifts.³³ The point, it should be noted, is that this Anabaptist church is foremost a spiritual assembly made visible «from the inside out», where all members alike are enabled by the same Spirit.

The Reformed argued that only trained and ordained preachers should preach and interpret Scripture. These later Anabaptists countered with a spiritualist argument:

«[...] a humble, simple person, who loves and fears God from a pure heart, who humbles himself in order to find grace in God's eyes, and who is enlightened by the heavenly beams, stands far above any clever or learned ones who know many languages [...].»³⁴

The measure of ministry is an «anointing and sending from above», not education, ordination, or appointment by political authorities.³⁵

This spiritualist emphasis may harken back to Caspar Schwenckfeld, but it also recalls Martin Luther and the beginnings of Reformation, and the fundamental understanding that faith is free, born in the hearts of believers only through the action and grace of God. In his earliest writings, Luther insisted that faith is granted by God in a spiritual, interior, and private way. Since this was so, he argued in 1523, any outward coercion in spiritual matters was completely

³¹ The section of «Concerning Separation» outlining this argument is found in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 454–468. The writers also point to earlier writings by Luther, Zwingli and Melancthon that interpret 1 Corinthians 14 in agreement with the Anabaptist understanding argued here. See *Snyder, Later Writings*, 462–465.

³² «Concerning Separation» in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 455. This was not a new argument. Marpeck's colleague, Leopold Scharnschlager, in his «Congregational Order» (ca. 1540) also refers to 1 Corinthians 14 and the exercise of various gifts «for the improvement of the members.» See John D. Rempel (ed.), Jörg Maler's *Kunstabuch*, Kitchener, ON 2010, 406f. See also the anonymous publication, but since identified with the Marpeck network, «A New Dialogue» trans. Werner Packull, in *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and his Circle*, 49–65; reference to 1 Corinthians 14 on 56f, given as a reason for not attending Protestant churches.

³³ *Snyder, Later Writings*, 456.

³⁴ «Concerning Separation» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 461.

³⁵ Emphasis mine. The writers conclude: «What do you Scripture experts say to this? Is it a matter of the languages and expert interpretation and glosses, or of the new birth, humility, and anointing from above? I trust you will not be able to avoid this, and Christ and Paul will not yield to you here.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 462.

unwarranted.³⁶ Lutheran and Reformed theologians soon abandoned this latter conclusion in practice – if not in theory – but Anabaptists writing in the coercive Swiss atmosphere of the 1580s and 90s continued to remind their readers of this Protestant legacy.³⁷ Both the «Simple Confession» and «Concerning Separation» happily cite verbatim from early writings of Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon, Capito and Bucer in which those reformers renounced coercion in matters of faith, because faith comes into being only by the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

It is obvious, say the authors of «Concerning Separation», that contemporary evangelical preachers have abandoned the earlier teaching.³⁹ The authors conclude that confusing Moses and Christ flows from the natural or fleshly understanding of this word LOVE, and not from a proper, spiritual understanding.⁴⁰ Natural love wishes to preserve property, temporal goods and such things; only supernatural love, born of the Holy Spirit, can lead to turning away from the world, the love of enemies, not resisting evil doers, blessing blasphemers and praying for persecutors. Supernatural love can only be known and put into practice by those empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Reformed had argued that their civil mandates simply legislated «outward» matters of the church and did not touch inward faith, but the Anabaptist writers refused to grant the point. Their spiritualist foundation provided the counter-argument: there are no «purely outward» matters in the church; all

³⁶ Especially Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), found in *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955ff.), 81–129. See the discussion in C. Arnold Snyder, *Faith and Toleration: A Reformation Debate Revisited*, Winnipeg, MN 2018, chapter 1, «Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, Toleration Doubtful» 21–44. See also the discussion of Marpeck and Scharnschlager's use of this earliest Reformation literature, in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 186–190.

³⁷ In the «Simple Confession» for example: «Heresy is a spiritual thing that one cannot chop out with steel, cannot burn with fire, cannot drown with water. It is only God's Word that can remove it, as Saint Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10[3-5]: our weapons are not fleshly, but mighty in God, to destroy all opposition [...]» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 469.

³⁸ See examples of this in the «Simple Confession» and «Concerning Separation» in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 285–298 and 446–531, respectively.

³⁹ «[...] they have now fallen away again into this public and evident error, to the point that they now suppress and transgress (this teaching) under the appearance of the Gospel [...]» «Concerning Separation» in *Snyder, Later Writings*, 475. The later evangelicals «use the external, worldly sword of steel to compel magistrates, cities and lands in faith and matters of faith [...]» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 477. Citing the example of Bern, the authors note that it was decided «that the civil authorities are to maintain the outer teaching and life of the Gospel among their subjects, almost in the manner of Moses.» Furthermore, they suspend Christian love and patience against enemies, thus «mixing together Mosaic lordship and protection and Christ's name.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 478.

⁴⁰ «For love according to the flesh and pure spiritual love must be distinguished from one another; truly they are as far separated as heaven is from earth, the natural from the supernatural, and spirit from flesh [...]» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 480f. The language here echoes descriptions of the Old and New Testaments as being as different as heaven is from earth.

«outward» church matters speak to spiritual realities.⁴¹ In this view, no separation of «inner» from «outer» can be claimed for the true, biblical church. A church ruled by external civil legislation and legal punishments for non-compliance cannot be the true body of Christ.

Once the basic template was cast, of the biblical church being the «temple of the Holy Spirit», it was not difficult for the authors of «Concerning Separation» to marshal examples distinguishing their church from the Reformed. The persecution urged on the authorities by the Reformed clergy demonstrated that «they lack the Holy Spirit, so they also lack the love of God which is poured out by God's Spirit.»⁴² The lack of the Spirit was also said to be evident in a long list of vices purportedly embodied by the Reformed clergy, ranging from arrogance to drunkenness and gluttony.⁴³ Likewise, since the Reformed clergy lacked the Spirit, they were unable to use the «sword of the Spirit», the ban, to maintain discipline in their churches, and so had to resort to the physical sword of the magistrates.⁴⁴ The Reformed lack spiritual rebirth, say the authors, therefore the Reformed Supper cannot be a celebration of a true Lord's Supper.⁴⁵ Since the Reformed don't understand the central role played by spiritual rebirth, they

⁴¹ «Is it not the case that this teaching life of the Gospel that you call «outward», should actually be empowered, driven and ruled from the inner to the outer through faith, love and the Holy Spirit? It is the same with all of the physical good works of Christians: teaching, speaking, words, baptism, disciplining for inclusion and exclusion, breaking of bread, all of which should please God, all freely done, with no domineering, coercion, and pressure, as would fittingly follow from your proclaimed first teaching.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 484.

⁴² *Snyder, Later Writings*, 494.

⁴³ «Therefore we see with open eyes that they have sunk over their ears in arrogance, pride, avarice, seeking honors, drunkenness, gluttony, and other vices in lasciviousness of the flesh. In view of all this, who would recognize them and their preachers as a Christian, spiritual congregation, attend their preaching, and have fellowship in their faith?» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 495.

⁴⁴ «[...] they lack the Holy Spirit, and such discipline is commended and possible only for those who have the Holy Spirit [...]» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 496. «[...] they establish the worldly sword (it is said) in the churches, to administer spiritual matters. With this they release the spiritual authority, sword and power, and abandon it.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 498.

⁴⁵ The Lord's Supper can be celebrated only by Christ's disciples, who have been reborn by Christ's Spirit. Christ's disciples are those «[...] who love each other as he loved us, yes those who, Colossians 2[:11], are circumcised with the circumcision without hands through putting off of the sinful body of the flesh. They alone are the body of Christ, his people and community.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 499. Christ's disciples observe the Lord's Supper «with the unleavened bread of sincerity, love, and truth, wear the wedding garment of love and of the Spirit.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 499. These arguments connect with the figurative hermeneutic: «Without the Spirit of God it is not the Lord's Supper.» It is, rather, «[...] an abomination before God, even as it was also in the carnal, figurative Israel, and forbidden of God, and as it was an abomination to God when one who was uncircumcised in the foreskin of the flesh ate the Passover lamb. How much more so today in the real, spiritual Israel must the partakers of the Lord's Supper be circumcised with the above-mentioned circumcision without hands, which is to be newly born, spiritual people who live in the obedience of faith, yes, in the Spirit and new life...» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 499. The authors note later, after extensive references, that «In like manner God required a separation already under the law, as stated in Malachi 3[:18]... So also Leviticus 10[:10]... And also Ezekiel 22[:26]... etc.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 503.

also baptize indiscriminately, before teaching.⁴⁶ Not only do they not teach or experience the cross, they prevent others from entering into the way of Christ.⁴⁷

Claiming such moral high ground opened these Anabaptists to charges of arrogance and perfectionism, charges they clearly had heard before. To this they answered:

«We confess that our nature is definitely not better than that of all natural persons descended from Adam. Insofar as we are better than all godless children of the world, that comes not from us – certainly not from us – but rather is Christ in us. [Galatians 2:20] It is a matter of salvation that we be converted in our hearts, and that we abandon and deny the ungodly nature.»⁴⁸

Living a truly moral life can give no cause for boasting, since no «natural person» can manage it. Insofar as a worthy life is lived, it is owed only to God and the enabling power of God's grace and Spirit.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is the living of a visibly new life that gives tangible evidence of the presence of God's Spirit. This is precisely what spiritually reborn children of God and disciples of Christ are called to do.

Conclusion

How might we evaluate this late Swiss Anabaptist vision of church reform? First, it continues the early Swiss Brethren rejection of the state-church model that carried the day in Protestant Swiss states. In its place all Anabaptists proposed a church made up of adult persons who had responded to a call from God. We may wish to take issue with the Christocentric literalism of the early Swiss Brethren, or with the heightened pneumatism and spiritual and moral optimism of the later Swiss Anabaptist writers. But I doubt that any among us would argue that magistrates should be in the business of governing churches and mandating obedience to specific confessions of faith. In this sense, the Anabaptist vision of church reform was a more prescient and relevant model for church reform than was the church/state model of the Reformed.

In the current climate of biblical scholarship, neither Bullinger's or Schwenckfeld's heremeneutics are convincing models for ways of understanding and reading the Testaments. Nevertheless, all Christian readings of Scripture are to some degree «progressive» in that they point to Jesus as the Christ and Messiah, the incarnate Word of God, and so necessarily supersede the Old Testament in fundamental ways. I doubt that any Reformed today would agree with Bullinger, for example, that Abraham should be considered a «Christian before Christ» because of his faith. What Schwenckfeld and Marpeck intuited, following Luther's

⁴⁶ *Snyder, Later Writings*, 504f.

⁴⁷ *Snyder, Later Writings*, 505–507.

⁴⁸ *Snyder, Later Writings*, 508f.

⁴⁹ «This obedience to God's word, which is a spiritual thing, they regard or judge to be our carnal disdain. Yet we do not boast [...] we glory not in ourselves or in our flesh, but in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his cross.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 509.

lead, was that the coming of Christ initiated and empowered a new spiritual reality for those who believe in Christ and who make up the Body of Christ on earth.

The reintroduction of an emphasis on spiritual rebirth points to what could have been a new avenue of renewal for Swiss baptizers. Focussing on the work of the Spirit and freedom in Christ opened the way to a more tolerant and «patient» view of those who appear to be transgressing literal commandments. As Pilgram Marpeck pointed out earlier to the quick-banning Swiss Brethren, believers treat others gently, and so mirror the patient love with which God has treated them.⁵⁰ In the end, only God knows what lies in each person's heart.⁵¹

Four decades later, building on the same spiritualist hermeneutic and logic found in Marpeck, the authors of the «Simple Confession» went even further in an irenic and ecumenical direction, making the assertion – startling for their time – that even the Pope has something of the divine light within.⁵² The problem comes when human beings go too far, claim to be the Light itself, and conclude that they therefore may coerce others in matters of faith. And let it be noted, the critique of coercion applied just as well to legalistic Anabaptists as it did to the Reformed.

In the «Simple Confession» the authors tested irenic territory well beyond Schleithem's brittle division between those inside the «perfection of Christ» and those outside. The «Simple Confession» proposed that there were degrees of being Christian, some of which fall short of perfect observance.⁵³ The «Simple Confession» does not deny the status of Christian believers to others who claim

⁵⁰ «No one may judge except he who has first judged and sentenced his own life through the grace and mercy of God, whereby he has pulled the beam out of his eye. Then, very properly, in patience, humility, meekness, and love, he may with the greatest care pull the sliver out of his brother's eye without hurting or irritating the eye. That is, after all, how he has been treated by God.» *Klassen and Klaassen, Writings*, 326.

⁵¹ «We have no sure knowledge of who are the righteous, whose light shines warmly because of the light of faith; the lying dissembler acts in the same way until God takes away the power of the enemy. [...] the elect can only examine and accept wherever the good appears and no evil fruit appears, and leave the choice of election to God, who alone knows the hearts.» *Klassen and Klaassen, Writings*, 352.

⁵² «To be sure, it is true that every human being, including the Pope himself, has something of the Light within. [...] But there is no person who is the Light itself. Where we do not acknowledge this fact, we will not only fail to reconcile the present divisions, we will produce even more difficult and damaging consequences in the future.» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 255.

⁵³ «Thus the disciples of the Lord were Christians when they still held on to their own possessions, lived with father and mother, wife and children, in their own homes, and carried on with their crafts and businesses. They were, however, much better Christians when they forsook all for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, following the Lord in the time of affliction [...]» *Snyder, Later Writings*, 272. See the discussion in *Snyder, Confession, Part II*, 101–107.

it – even including magistrates.⁵⁴ Insofar as one’s conscience is ruled by the Holy Spirit, such a person – even a magistrate – will be ruled by divine love. This view was a significant step beyond legalistic «us versus them» thinking, moving in an ecumenical direction. It was made possible by a less literalistic hermeneutic and more regenerative understanding of discipleship.⁵⁵

Pondering the relationship between spiritual renewal and outer manifestation seems a fruitful point of departure for heirs of the Anabaptist movement today. The Swiss Anabaptist writings we have surveyed suggest that when church renewal is framed primarily in terms of an ethics of literal obedience – or we might say today, fidelity to a «politics of Jesus» – it misses an important point. Church renewal cannot depend simply on clarifying Jesus’ rules and emphasizing obedience to those rules – the insight continues to be true: the law cannot change the heart – but rather church renewal depends on a spiritual encounter that empowers and enables meaningful discipleship as its fruit.

It has been the case historically that Anabaptist-descended churches in need of renewal have often relied on imported revival movements, in which the language of being «born again» typically spoke to forensic justification and salvation. More in keeping with Anabaptist soteriology and its theology of discipleship, the late Swiss Anabaptist model of spiritual renewal calls for continuous engagement with the living Spirit of God as the basis for a life of following in the footsteps of Christ.

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Abstract

Lengthy writings circulating in Swiss Anabaptist circles in the 1580s and 90s give evidence of a progressive, spiritualist hermeneutic, relating the Old Testament to the New. This hermeneutic, originating with Caspar Schwenckfeld in the 1530s and continued by Pilgram Marpeck and the Covenanters, provided a unique biblical platform from which these later Anabaptists critiqued Reformed

⁵⁴ «When a magistrate possesses the characteristics that a born-again Christian should have [...] then we do in fact believe that a magistrate can be a Christian, and a Christian a magistrate. That is, if he truly lives and acts in accordance with the Gospel, as undoubtedly those Christians of the New Testament did who held such offices, such as the Centurion, Cornelius, Paul, Sergius, Erastus, the warden, all of whom were officials of the emperor – and also others. Where that happens, the Spirit, who is the ruler of consciences, will teach [magistrates] how to act, how to be guided much more by love than by anything contrary to it.» Snyder, *Later Writings*, 299.

⁵⁵ Of course, it may be that «renewal» was no one’s intention in 1590. Perhaps Schwenckfeld and Marpeck’s hermeneutics, structured in direct opposition to the unitary hermeneutics being developed by Bullinger in the 1530s, was simply useful for Swiss Anabaptist apologists at the end of the sixteenth century, as the baptizers struggled against a growing Reformed hegemony in the Swiss Protestant states.

hermeneutics and theocratic polity. At the same time, it pointed the way to an Anabaptist vision of church reform based not on literal obedience to biblical commands, but rather pointing to spiritual renewal as the essential foundation for true obedience.

Keywords

Swiss Anabaptism; Swiss Brethren; Relationship of Old Testament to New Testament; Caspar Schwenckfeld; Pilgram Marpeck; Covenanters; Spiritual Renewal.

List of abbreviations and frequently quoted literature

Blough, Marpeck

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Bullinger, Fräfel

Heinrich *Bullinger*, Von dem unverschampten Fräfel, ergerlichem Verwyrren unnd unwarhaffttem Leeren der selbgesandten Widertöuffern: vier Gespräch Bücher, zuo verwarnenn den Einfalten / Ein guoter Bericht vonn Zinsen; Ouch ein schöne Underwysung von Zähenden. [...] Zürich: Froschauer, 1531.

Bullinger, Ursprung

Heinrich *Bullinger*, Der Widertöufferen Ursprung, Fürgang, Secten, Wäsen, fürnemme und gemeine jrer Leer Artickel, ouch jre Gründ und warumm sy sich absünderind unnd ein eigne Kirchen anrichtind, mit Widerlegung und Antwort uff alle und yede jre Gründ und Artickel, sampt christenlichem Bericht und Vermanen dass sy jres Irrthumbs und Absünderens abstandind und sich mit der Kirchen Christi vereinigind / abgeteilt in VI Bücher und beschriben durch Heinrichen Bullingern, Dienern der Kirchen zuo Zürych, Zürich: Froschauer 1560.

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