

**The Sheep and the Soldier:  
Theological Conceptions of Martyrdom in Sixteenth Century Anabaptism**

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### **Abstract**

Minority groups throughout history have often used their experiences with persecution to define their own identities. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were just such a group. Targeted by both Catholic and Protestant authorities, thousands of Anabaptists made the ultimate sacrifice by becoming martyrs for their faith. The manner in which the Anabaptists responded to this martyrdom provides a crucial insight into their deepest beliefs. While Anabaptist theologies of martyrdom came in a host of different forms, they universally reflected the unique belief of radical discipleship. The presence of this notion of radical discipleship in Anabaptist theologies provides a link which shows a much more unified group theologically than previously thought.\*

### **Introduction**

On May 20, 1527, the former Benedictine monk Michael Sattler was sentenced to death near what is today Tübingen, Germany.<sup>1</sup> His execution was carried out in a brutal fashion. It began when Sattler's executioners followed the biblical example for dealing with heretics by cutting out his tongue with a sword.<sup>2</sup> Following this gruesome experience, Sattler was tied to a wagon and his flesh was torn out by heated tongs. His torturers repeated this act seven times until Sattler was on the brink of death from the pain. The ultimate execution was accomplished by tying Sattler to the stake and burning him alive. Before he was fully consumed by the flames, he made a sign with his hands, indicating to his coreligionists that he

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<sup>1</sup> A full contemporary account of Michael Sattler's martyrdom can be found in Michael Sattler, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. J.H. Yoder (Herald Press, 1973), 66-85.

<sup>2</sup> "The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out" (Proverbs 10:31 KJB).

remained faithful even at the height of his pain.<sup>3</sup> Sattler's sole offense was subscribing to a form of Christianity known as Anabaptism.

Michael Sattler was part of a long tradition of Christian martyrs. Beginning with Christ's own martyrdom on the cross, Christian identity has been closely tied to the concept of martyrdom. Derived from the Greek word *mártys*, which means "witness," martyrdom generally meant to die at the hands of others for one's faith. The early Church Fathers, especially Paul, emphasized martyrdom as one of the main vehicles through which the believer could experience Christ. Paul wrote in Second Timothy 8-9 that the Christian must "share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling." The "holy calling" that Paul urged Christians to practice soon had to be redefined as Christianity grew into the dominant social force in late Antiquity.

Without anyone to persecute them, Christians turned to other forms of self-induced suffering to bring them closer to Christ. Monasticism, in its many different forms, began to be seen as a form of spiritual martyrdom. The phrase "white martyrdom" came to describe those monks who martyred themselves not through death, but by abandoning the secular world for a life devoted to God.<sup>4</sup> Monasticism became hugely popular as thousands of men and women devoted their lives to God and the Church during the Middle Ages. With the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the sectarian violence that accompanied it, new outlets for martyrdom presented themselves. As thousands of believers were put to death for their beliefs by rival Christians, martyrs again began to identify their own suffering and death with the suffering and death of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Sattler, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> The term "white martyrdom" is often first attributed to St. Gregory the Great. For more on the development of white martyrdom, see Alfred C. Rush, "Spiritual Martyrdom in St. Gregory the Great," *Theological Studies* 23, no. 4 (1962): 569-589.

The groups of believers most targeted by violence during the Reformation were the Anabaptists, a minority Christian group that arose in the first half of the sixteenth century in opposition to both the Catholic Church and the new Protestant sects. While known for their practice of adult re-baptism, the Anabaptists created an entirely new set of beliefs and practices beyond just the issue of rebaptism. Their practice of adult baptism, along with their assertion that they alone were the true inheritors of the apostolic church, led local authorities to target Anabaptists.<sup>5</sup> In total, thousands of Anabaptists would find themselves martyred for their beliefs. Historian Paul Schowalter provides the conservative estimate of 4,000, but there were likely many more than that.<sup>6</sup> Martyrdom came to typify the Anabaptist experience as virtually every Anabaptist community experienced some level of persecution. However, rather than allowing themselves to be defined by those who were persecuting them, the Anabaptists employed their experience with martyrdom in a process of self-definition through theology.

In general, the Anabaptist response to their martyrdom was part of a broad historical trend of minority groups working through the process of self-definition. Minority groups typically lack the cultural and social power with which to define themselves. Normal modes of image making, such as media and civic participation, are denied to those who do not fit in with the majority of society. Instead, minority groups must use other outlets as tools of self-definition. Theology serves this process well: it appeals to an authority higher than civic and cultural leaders, and provides a set of firmly entrenched beliefs around which the group can rally. Theological understandings of persecution are particularly empowering in that they co-

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<sup>5</sup> Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Schowalter, "Martyrs," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, ed. Harold S. Bender (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 1953), 253.

opt the experience being forced upon the minority group in a way that redefines the very nature of that experience into one that serves the needs of the group. It is in this vein of image-making that the Anabaptist theological response to martyrdom must be considered. The question that this paper therefore tries to address is, “What image did the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century create for themselves through their theologies of martyrdom?”

This paper argues that the image which the Anabaptists attempted to create for themselves was an image of radical discipleship, which expressed the conviction that those who became true believers in Christ were transformed at a fundamental level. The transformation took place in virtually every aspect of the believer’s life. According to Conrad Grebel, one of the founders of the Anabaptist Swiss Brethren, the true Christian “puts on Christ and becomes a new creature born again by the divine spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The Anabaptists saw their transformation through discipleship as all-encompassing because it changed how the disciple related to the rest of the world. This fundamental belief in the transformative power of faith lay at the heart of all Anabaptist theology.

This broad theological construct played a fundamental role in the Anabaptist theologies of martyrdom, which came in a host of forms. Similar to Christian thinkers in the past, Anabaptists presented the martyr’s death as either a passive or active event. Even within the broad headings of passive and active martyrdom, Anabaptists were able to develop a number of theological metaphors and images which they used to explain the process of suffering. To some, the diversity of Anabaptist approaches to martyrdom would suggest that Anabaptists lacked a unifying theology. However, these vastly different constructions of martyrdom still relied on the basic premise of radical discipleship as their theological base.

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<sup>7</sup> Conrad Grebel, “Letter to Vadian: December 29, 1522,” in *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, ed. Leland Harder (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1985), 195.

Suffering, a universal human phenomenon, became interpreted through the lens of Anabaptist theology in a way that uniquely identifies the group. The martyr was the transformed follower of Christ, experiencing martyrdom only after experiencing the transformative power of faith. The Anabaptist theology of martyrdom reflected their fundamental belief in radical discipleship. In this way, the Anabaptists co-opted their persecution and suffering, using their experience with martyrdom to define themselves in a way untainted by the broader society.

### **The Historical Understanding of Anabaptism**

Despite the critical role that martyrdom played in the early Anabaptist movement, historians have largely ignored how the Anabaptists understood their own persecution. In general, this stems from a fundamental disagreement about who exactly the Anabaptists were. Historians universally agree that the Anabaptists were part of the larger movement identified in 1941 by historian Roland Bainton as the “Radical Reformation.”<sup>8</sup> This distinction tells us little, however, because the Radical Reformation also included thinkers as diverse as ascetic spiritualists and Erasmus-influenced humanists. In order to better understand the Anabaptist faith, historians have therefore attempted to create more finite definitions with which to analyze the movement. This has proved tremendously difficult because the Anabaptists lacked a single source of doctrine, such as a corporate church or single theologian. This makes them fundamentally more difficult to define when compared to the Lutheran or Catholic Churches. As a result, historians have taken several different approaches in their analysis of the Anabaptists.

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<sup>8</sup> Roland H. Bainton, "The Left Wing of the Reformation," *The Journal of Religion* 21, no. 2 (1941): 124-134.

The earliest histories of the Anabaptists were written by Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, and their fellow reformers. These depictions of the Anabaptists tended to be highly biased in that they attempted to paint the Anabaptists solely as populist radicals out to destroy Christendom. For example, in the conclusion to his polemical *Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists*, John Calvin wrote,

But it is good that I should warn all the true faithful of their malice. For the Anabaptists cannot make their cause appear good except by muddling everything to the extent that their entire teaching is a confused mess. [...] Interweaving different points, they cite only fragments of Scripture. And they are so pleased with this that they make themselves believe that there is far more majesty in speaking this grossly than there is in developing their case in an orderly manner.<sup>9</sup>

Here Calvin, like Luther and Zwingli before him, tries to depict the Anabaptists as simpletons who played to the ignorance of the common man to lead him into rebellion. These depictions would continue in the following centuries as the reforms begun by Luther and Calvin became popular modes of Christian thought. Historians who followed the teachings of these theologians often focused on the radicals in the city of Münster and the Peasants Revolt leader Thomas Müntzer as the prime examples of Anabaptism.

In the nineteenth century, the theological descendants of the Anabaptists, especially the Mennonites, began to redefine the history of the Radical Reformation. These schools of thought can largely be defined as “reactionary,” because they were framed as responses to earlier historical trends.<sup>10</sup> While most prevalent in the first-half of the twentieth-centuries,

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Calvin, “Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists,” in *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1982), 156.

<sup>10</sup> The use of the term “reactionary” here is meant in the most literal sense, neutered of all political meaning. While some would argue that this school of thought is a form of “confessional history”, the term would be misleading in this context. This school of thought did not represent a single church attempting to redefine their history, but rather included authors across several denominations trying to redefine the history of Anabaptism. While these authors do not inherently hold the same confessional beliefs, they did all attempt to react to the previous overtly hostile views of Anabaptists, hence the term “reactionary”.

vestiges of these groups can still be found in many Mennonite and other religious circles today. According to J. Denny Weaver, there have been four main schools of thought in this reactionary vein: the proto-fundamentalists, the normative school, the modern rights theorists, and the counterculture school.<sup>11</sup> The first pair of schools largely identified Anabaptists by the beliefs they espoused. The school of thought led by John Horsch, for example, identified the Anabaptists as proto-fundamentalists who attempted to rely solely on the New Testament in forming their new faith. Horsch wrote in his book *Menno Simons, His Life, Labors, and Teachings* that the Anabaptists believed that “[i]f the sacraments and the ordination of the Church of Rome were unacceptable, a mere reformation of that church along lines approved by the civil authorities was insufficient; a regeneration or renewing of the church along New Testament lines was in order.”<sup>12</sup>

While this school of thought was popular at the turn of the twentieth century, many Mennonite historians wished to take this line of analysis a step further and identify Anabaptists as the culmination of the Reformation in general. The normative school led by Harold Bender became the most dominant school in Anabaptist historiography by arguing just this. Bender, in his 1941 piece, *The Anabaptist Vision*, argued that the “vision” which modern historians have of Anabaptists should be “one which holds that Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus make[ing] it a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.”<sup>13</sup> This group is

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<sup>11</sup> J. Denny Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4, no. 4 (1986): 162-163.

<sup>12</sup> John Horsch, *Menno Simons, His Life, Labors, and Teachings*, reprint (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13, no. 1 (1944): 9.



defined as “normative” because, like the school led by Horsch, it unfailingly identifies the Anabaptists in a positive light by denying that radical groups like the Münsterites were even Anabaptists at all.

While the first two schools in the broader reactionary historiography stresses the importance of Anabaptist religious thought, the second two emphasize the Anabaptists’ connections to secular modernity. For example, the school led by C. Henry Smith drew the connection between Anabaptist thought and the modern understanding of rights. Smith wrote in his book *The Mennonites in America* that a central aspect of sixteenth century Anabaptism was “the withdrawal of the magistrates from all interference in matters of religion—in other words, a separation of church and state.”<sup>14</sup> Smith and his students sometimes overstepped in applying modern terminology to thinkers who were little concerned with the idea of rights. Similarly, John H. Yoder started a school of Anabaptist interpretation which identified sixteenth century Anabaptism as a counter culture movement similar to the “hippies” of the 1960s. For example, Yoder identified the theological concept of *regel Christi* (the rule of Christ), in terms that were often applied to counter-culture movements across history: “A process of human interchange combining the mode of reconciling dialogue, the substance of moral discernment, and the authority of divine empowerment deserves to be considered one of the sacramental works of the community.”<sup>15</sup> Modern concepts such as “cultural dialogue” and “empowerment” are ascribed to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century as primogenitors of modern counter-culture movements. Like the reactionary schools of Horsch and Bender,

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<sup>14</sup> C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites of America* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1909), 18.

<sup>15</sup> John H. Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” *Theology Today* 48, no. 1 (1991): 35.

the reactionary schools of Smith and Yoder cast Anabaptists in a generally positive light by ignoring the more radical expressions of Anabaptism.

The reactionary school also placed the beginning of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland, around the city of Zurich. Recently, a new wave of historians has begun to challenge this assertion by identifying widespread geographical sources for Anabaptism. This school thrives on drawing connections between Anabaptist ideas and their historical settings. James R. Coggins has labeled this new school of thought as the “syncretistic school.”<sup>16</sup> This new wave of historians is more open to exploring different geographical locations and intellectual inspirations for Anabaptism. For example, C. Arnold Snyder began his recent essay on the Anabaptist martyr Michael Sattler by claiming, “Anabaptism as a movement had different roots in different locales.”<sup>17</sup> This more diverse understanding of Anabaptism, devoid of the “normative” tendencies of the reactionary school, has opened a host of new ways to understand sixteenth century Anabaptism.

What the syncretistic school has failed to accomplish so far, though, is a unified definition of Anabaptist theology. The focus for both the reactionary and syncretistic schools has been on the sources, both geographic and intellectual, for the expression of Anabaptist thought. Some have pointed to Zurich and the Swiss Brethren as the sole source, while others include the radical spiritual movements of the Netherlands and southern Germany as sources of inspiration. Figures as diverse as Peter Waldo and Thomas Müntzer have been identified as the theological fathers of the movement. Ultimately, these questions over the sources of Anabaptism are irrelevant. The Anabaptists themselves cared little about such matters and

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<sup>16</sup> James R. Coggins, "Toward a Definition of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: Twentieth-Century Historiography of the Radical Reformation," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4, no. 4 (1986): 183-207.

<sup>17</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, "Revolution and the Swiss Brethren: The Case of Michael Sattler," *Church History* 50, no. 3 (1981): 276.

they generally relied on principles of theology and practice to identify their fellow coreligionists. For example, the Anabaptist Hans Denck, in his *Recantation*, wrote, “Whenever I find hearts who honor this goodness of God through Christ and follow his footsteps I rejoice and love them according to my knowledge of them. [...] But so far as God wills I do not desire to have any fellowship with error or unrighteousness.”<sup>18</sup> Anabaptists like Denck used “error” in belief as the delineation between the in-group and out-group. Therefore, theology should be the primary deciding factor in attempting to identify the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.

It is here that the idea of radical discipleship comes to the fore. It is unique enough to distinguish Anabaptists from main-line Protestants.<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther denied that believers could ever truly be changed, claiming, “Now can we say that [the believer] is perfectly righteous? No; but he is at the same time both a sinner and righteous, a sinner in fact but righteous by virtue of the reckoning and the certain promise of God.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Calvin believed in the predestination of God’s elect from the beginning of time, meaning that the believer cannot be changed by his or her belief. In addition to its uniqueness, the concept of radical discipleship was also pliable enough to be applicable to a host of different beliefs, including martyrdom. The fact that virtually every Anabaptist had to confront martyrdom in some manner, unlike other theological concepts, makes it a common aspect in which one can

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<sup>18</sup> Hans Denck, “Recantation,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 305.

<sup>19</sup> The discussion of the unique nature of radical discipleship undertaken here is in no way exhaustive. While the notion which this paper identifies as “radical discipleship” is similar to several other concepts employed by Protestant and Catholic thinkers throughout history, it is fundamentally unique in its implications for soteriology, ecclesiology, and issues of theodicy. These differences from other modes of Christian thought require an entirely separate treatment from the perspective of systematic theology. This paper foregoes this comparative approach and instead tries to show that radical discipleship is the theological image that the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century attempted to create for themselves.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, “Sin and Justification,” in *Readings in Christian Thought*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 140.

find the influence of radical discipleship. Therefore, the theological belief in radical discipleship, especially as it pertained to martyrdom, provides the key to identifying Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

### **The Historiography of Christian Martyrdom**

While the Anabaptists employed their unique conception of radical discipleship in creating their theologies of martyrdom, they still were part of a Christian tradition of theological approaches to the act. Whereas historians rarely agree on the history of Anabaptism, they are largely in harmony on the history of martyrdom. Theologian R.M. Davis has argued that the idea of martyrdom is inherently connected to the term “witness” (μάρτυς in Greek). He claims that a martyr is “a person who testifies of that which is within his personal knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> A martyr was therefore someone who remained faithful to his or her beliefs to the point of sacrificing themselves as a form of testament. These martyrs had an impact beyond their own sacrifice largely through the stories that were written about them after their death. In the Catholic tradition these stories took the form of hagiographies, while in Protestant faiths they took the form of martyrologies.<sup>22</sup> Both were meant to instruct the faithful by providing examples for the true believer to emulate. Martyrdom has therefore traditionally served a spiritual purpose of witness and a secular purpose of inspiring others.

Generally, Christian martyrs were theologically portrayed in two ways: actively and passively. While historian Keith Small has argued that the difference between the two is related to whether or not the martyr aims to commit a violent act against others, the difference

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<sup>21</sup> R.M. Davis, "Martyr, or Witness?: Any Liar Can Be a Faithful Martyr" (November 2009), [http://www.newmatthewbible.org/martyr.html#\\_edn5](http://www.newmatthewbible.org/martyr.html#_edn5).

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Protestant martyrologies, see Donald R. Kelley, "Martyrs, Myths, and the Massacre: The Background of St. Bartholomew," *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 5 (1972): 13-26.

can more fundamentally be identified in the agency of the martyr in his or her own death.<sup>23</sup>

Active martyrdom is a form of sacrifice in which the martyr plays a part in his death by seeking out his fate. Passive martyrdom is when the martyr simply accepts his fate, turning completely to God and away from the world.<sup>24</sup> Martyrdom is thrust upon the passive martyr while it is created by the active martyr. While both largely have the same goal, it is the manner in which this goal is achieved that distinguishes the two.

Passive martyrdom has by far been the most common form that martyrdom has historically been understood. Those martyrs who experienced passive martyrdom were portrayed as imitating the example of Christ, who refused to use violence to prevent his own death.<sup>25</sup> Often this choice of non-violence was thought to be rewarded by God. Margaret Cormack, in her introduction to the book *Sacrificing the Self*, writes that, “Christians believed that a humiliating death by torture, which imitated the death of Christ, would be rewarded in the next life. Christian martyrs embraced torments imposed by others rather than preempting them.”<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Cormack emphasizes that martyrdom is “imposed by others” on the passive martyr. Critical to the passive form of martyrdom was a dominant power willing to take the martyr’s life.<sup>27</sup> Passive martyrs were thus both physically and

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Small, “Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam” (lecture, Westminster University, 2008), <http://www.spotlights.org/images/Martyrdom.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the application of passive and active martyrdom in the context of this paper refers to how theologians viewed the martyr, and not the physical act of martyrdom itself. Arguably, most physical acts of martyrdom in the sixteenth century were active in that the martyr had a chance to recant his beliefs before being put to death. Theologians, on the other hand, did not take this decision into account when explaining martyrdom through the lens of theology.

<sup>25</sup> “Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53 KJB)

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Cormack, *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xii-xiii.

<sup>27</sup> A.J. Droge and J.D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 3.

spiritually removed from their deaths, accepting the pain that God and secular authorities thrust upon them.

While less common, Christians have also historically identified martyrdom as an active event. In a way similar to modern radical Islam, Christians of the past sometimes sought out death through combat. They often identified this combat in millennial terms, as doing God's work on earth in preparation for the Second Coming. The clearest example of this was the Crusades, where those who died while fighting the "Mohammedans" were often identified as martyrs. Historian Caroline Smith has noted this phenomenon in her essay "Martyrdom and Crusading in the Thirteenth Century," where she writes, "Churchmen eager to maintain enthusiasm for the crusading cause were willing to reinforce a belief that martyrdom could be achieved even in a combat situation."<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that active martyrdom does not inherently have to be violent. Some martyrs placed the violence in the spiritual realm in which martyrs are somehow fighting the enemies of God through their deaths. Others eschewed violence entirely, but still maintained that the martyr was actively involved with his or her own death in other aspects. In sum, Christian martyrdom has historically been portrayed through the dual lenses of active and passive martyrdom.

Despite the central importance that martyrdom has played to the history of Christianity, and to the Anabaptists in particular, very few historians have attempted to categorize how the Anabaptists approached martyrdom theologically. The most thorough early attempt at a systematic understanding of the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom came from Ethelbert Stauffer, who wrote in 1945 that Anabaptist martyrdom was viewed as "the

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<sup>28</sup> Caroline Smith, "Martyrdom and Crusading in the Thirteenth Century: Remembering the Dead of Louis IX's Crusades," *Al-Masaq* 15, no. 2 (2003): 189-90.

suffering of the innocent for the sin of the world and its hostility to God.”<sup>29</sup> According to Stauffer, the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom was nothing more than a soteriology for the whole world, Isaiah’s suffering servant writ large.<sup>30</sup> In making this assertion, Stauffer denies a plurality of Anabaptist approaches to martyrdom, even in the “most different circles and times.”<sup>31</sup> Other historians have since taken a similar stance. For example, A.O.

Swartzenruber emphasized the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom. He claimed that the Anabaptist understanding of martyrdom “can be synthesized in a statement: the Christian must suffer the cross just as Christ suffered the cross.”<sup>32</sup> Like Stauffer, Swartzenruber identifies the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom as a soteriology, but adds the dimension of imitating Christ. In denying multiple theological approaches to martyrdom, however, Stauffer and Swartzenruber have denied that several key Anabaptists expressed a theology of martyrdom.

While both Stauffer and Swartzenruber view the Anabaptist conception of martyrdom as serving a higher spiritual purpose, others claim that Anabaptist martyrdom was simply a political rather than a spiritual reality. For example, Brad Gregory has recently claimed that, “Anabaptists’ willingness to die met authorities’ willingness to kill; the result was Anabaptist martyrdom.”<sup>33</sup> Such a statement is typical of the new syncretic school and is too general to be of any use to historians. Virtually all martyrdom is the combination of the martyr’s willingness to die and someone else willingness to kill them. It is here that the importance of

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<sup>29</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19, no. 3 (1945): 198.

<sup>30</sup> “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4 KJB).

<sup>31</sup> Stauffer, "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom," 187.

<sup>32</sup> A.O. Swartzenruber, "The Piety and Theology of the Anabaptist Martyrs in Van Braght's 'Martyrs' Mirror'," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 28 (1954): 130.

<sup>33</sup> Brad S. Gregory, "Anabaptist Martyrdom: Imperatives, Experience, and Memorialization," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. J.D. Roth and J.M. Stayer (Boston: Brill, 2007), 469.

radical discipleship to the Anabaptist understanding of martyrdom comes to the fore. It is broad enough to be seen in all theological approaches to Anabaptist martyrdom, including those left out by Stauffer and Swartzenruber's categorizations. However, radical discipleship is unique enough to distinguish the Anabaptist conception of martyrdom from other theologies. Therefore, radical discipleship serves as the critical solution to the problem of understanding Anabaptist martyrdom. Radical discipleship served as the foundation for all Anabaptist conceptions of martyrdom in the sixteenth century.

### **Examples of Anabaptist Martyrdom**

Before it is possible to analyze how the Anabaptists understood their martyrdom theologically, it is first necessary to understand the forms of martyrdom that Anabaptists experienced. Luckily for the student of Anabaptism, the physical examples of martyrdom experienced by the Anabaptists have been well documented. In general, the physical experience of martyrdom took one of three forms for Anabaptists. The first was martyrdom by governments, the second was martyrdom by fellow Christians, and the third was martyrdom in battle. While each had its unique characteristics, each category still provided a universal experience with death through suffering which Anabaptists had to respond to theologically.

By far the most common type of martyrdom which Anabaptists experienced was death at the hands of local governments. With the process of confessionalization that was gripping Europe in the sixteenth century, governments began to be the enforcers of religious practice within their domains.<sup>34</sup> While governments would be highly protective of their own faith,

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<sup>34</sup> "Confessionalization" is a term recently employed by historians to describe the relationship between religious and political coalition building in early modern Germany specifically. For a discussion of this process, see Joel



they universally condemned Anabaptists. In a way, the universal persecution of Anabaptists was actually a unifying factor in a divided Germany of the sixteenth century. The Diet of Spires in 1529 is one such instance where hatred of Anabaptists served to unify otherwise divided political factions.<sup>35</sup> The conference was called to settle tensions between Protestant and Catholic rulers in the wake of Charles V's military conquest of Italy. Those present disagreed on virtually every proposed measure. The only exception was a decree which commanded "every Anabaptist and re-baptized person of either sex should be put to death by fire, sword, or some other way."<sup>36</sup> Through decrees such as this, the powers and resources of governments throughout Europe were used to bring about the martyrdom of Anabaptists. This meant that with few exceptions, notably the nobles of Moravia, the governments of the Germanic territories were united in their persecution of Anabaptists.<sup>37</sup>

While martyrdom committed by governments was often done in the name of religion, it was still ultimately committed by the state. In several instances, however, Anabaptists were persecuted and killed by religious authorities such as bishops and priests directly. The seventeenth century work of Mennonite priest Thielmann J. van Braght, *The Martyr's Mirror*, which aimed to collect the martyr stories of every re-baptized Christian martyr through 1640, provides the example of Leonhard Keyser:

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F, Harrington and Helmut Walser Smith, "Confessionalization, Community, and State Building in Germany, 1555-1870," *The Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 1 (1997): 432.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Newton Flew, *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," 5.

<sup>37</sup> Nobles such as Lord Leonard of Lichtenstein often provided a haven for Anabaptists fleeing into Moravia, proving an exception to the general rule of persecution. For more on these nobles see Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 31-33.

In the second year of his ministry [1527], Leonhard Keyser was apprehended at Scharding, in Bavaria, and condemned by the Bishop of Passau and other priests and capitulars [i.e. lay church officials], to be burned on Friday before St. Lawrence day, in August of the same year.<sup>38</sup>

The Bishop of Passau actively condemned Leonhard Keyser to death and was supported by the entire hierarchy of the Church, even down to the lay officials. Leonhard Keyser was therefore put to death by the Church itself. Lest anyone believe that Keyser's martyrdom was somehow less gruesome because it came at the hands of religious men, the *Mirror* states that "the executioners cut him alive into pieces, which they cast into the fire."<sup>39</sup> The religious opponents of the Anabaptists therefore often went beyond the powers of the state in their persecutions. The churches used religious thought and goals to justify and carry out the persecutions of the Anabaptists. The Catholic Church was not, however, the only source of such religious-minded persecution: Lutheran and Reformed religious leaders also used their power to torture and kill Anabaptists.<sup>40</sup>

Not all Anabaptist martyrdom was initiated by religious and secular authorities, however. Many Anabaptists were martyred after seeking death through battle. The prime examples of this were the Anabaptists of Münster, who took over the city in 1534 and subsequently waged a war to bring about the Second Coming. The *Martyr's Mirror* relates their story, "Without loss of time they opposed the power of the bishop. They erected fortifications, seeking not only to defend themselves, but also to exterminate their opponents [... an Anabaptist priest named Bernhard Rothmann] despairing of his life, ran to the enemies

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<sup>38</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyr's Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 421.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>40</sup> For an extended discussion of the Lutheran response to Anabaptism, see John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001), 114-139.

to be killed by them; so that he might not, like Jan van Leyden, be taken alive.”<sup>41</sup> Two important elements emerge from this narrative. First, the Anabaptists of Münster did not practice solely out of self-defense, but they also wished to “exterminate” those who were unwilling to accept their doctrine. Also critical was the willingness with which Anabaptist soldiers met their fate, sacrificing themselves for what they viewed as a higher purpose. Death in battle therefore served as the final category of martyrdom experienced by Anabaptists during the sixteenth century. While far less prevalent than martyrdom by governmental or religious authorities, death in battle was still an undeniable part of the Anabaptist experience in the sixteenth century.

The variety of forms which martyrdom took for Anabaptists in the sixteenth century only underscores the central importance of radical discipleship to the manner in which Anabaptists responded to their persecution. With such a wide range of martyrdom experiences, one would expect the Anabaptist theological responses to vary just as widely. While it is true that much of the language and metaphors used by the Anabaptists reflected their particular experiences with martyrdom, the core concept of radical discipleship remained the same. It is with these diverse martyrdom experiences in mind that we can turn to analyzing the different forms that Anabaptist reflections on martyrdom took.

### **God’s Sheep: The Radical Disciple as Passive Martyr**

The dominant form of Anabaptist martyr theology was the framework of passive martyrdom. Passive martyrdom in the Anabaptist context was inextricably linked to one’s status as a transformed disciple. True martyrdom was only thrust on the believer after he had undergone the process of discipleship. For some Anabaptists, martyrdom and persecution

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<sup>41</sup> *Martyr’s Mirror*, 17.

were the inevitable result of one's choice to follow the true path of Jesus. For others, the radical disciple was expected to abide by God's will, including when it led the believer down the path of suffering. Some Anabaptist theologians took this a step further: the martyr was not the object of God's will, but the tool through which God affected his will. Many connected the act of martyrdom to the act of salvation, arguing that it was through martyrdom that the radical disciple became saved. Similarly, some Anabaptists claimed that martyrdom was the way that God marked his radical disciples for the rest of the world. Finally, some theologians highlighted martyrdom as the mode through which God's grace worked within the radical disciple. While each of these constructions marked a clear and distinct strain in Anabaptist theology, they are in no way mutually exclusive. Indeed, some worked to reinforce others by emphasizing the same benefits and processes contained within martyrdom. All of the above depictions of Anabaptists martyrdom share two major points of emphasis: the importance of radical discipleship to the martyrdom process and the fact that martyrdom was enacted upon the martyr without their own initiative.

Nowhere was the emphasis on the role of radical discipleship in the martyrdom process more strongly emphasized than in those theologies that viewed martyrdom as the inevitable result of said discipleship. In these theologies, after the believer decided to take up the cross of discipleship, they were immediately beset by suffering and persecution by the world. These conceptions of martyrdom emphasized the dualism of the spiritual reality of the radical disciple and the worldly reality of his tormentors. The earliest Anabaptists, especially the Swiss Brethren who arose in Zürich in the mid-1520s, often emphasized the inevitability of martyrdom. Conrad Grebel, the one-time ally of Zwingli, who performed the first adult

baptism in Zürich on Georg Blaurock, was one such theologian.<sup>42</sup> Grebel used the metaphor of sheep beset by wolves to explain the relationship between the radical disciple and the rest of the world in a letter he wrote to the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer in 1524:<sup>43</sup>

True Christian believers are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter; they must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death; they must be tried with fire, and must reach the fatherland of eternal rest, not by killing their bodily, but by mortifying their spiritual, enemies.<sup>44</sup>

A few important elements are clear in this depiction of violence against Anabaptists. First, the “persecution, suffering and death” happened to the “True Christian believer,” the disciple who had truly accepted Christ. Second, Grebel uses the imperative to emphasize that the disciple “*must* be baptized in anguish” and “*must* be tried with fire [emphasis added].” He clearly sees violence as a natural consequence of becoming a true Christian believer. The final element present in Grebel’s letter is the dichotomy between the violence of the world and the larger spiritual significance of suffering. While the disciple’s worldly enemies might employ violence to achieve their ends, the disciple’s true battle lies on the spiritual plane. Grebel therefore saw martyrdom as the inevitable physical outcome of becoming one of God’s spiritual “sheep.”

Just as Grebel saw martyrdom as the unavoidable outcome of becoming a true follower of Christ, his fellow Swiss Brethren Balthasar Hübmaier saw suffering as the natural path of discipleship. Hübmaier was one of the theological heavyweights of the Swiss

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<sup>42</sup> For the classic biography of Grebel, see Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998). For a more recent biography of Grebel based on newly discovered letters, see John Landis Ruth, *Conrad Grebel, Son of Zurich* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Some have used the content of this letter, including Grebel’s conception of passive martyrdom it contains, to argue against a Müntzerian genesis of Anabaptism. For exemplars of each side of the debate, see James M. Stayer, *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Werner O. Packull (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 1980) and Harold S. Bender, “The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27(1953): 3-16.

<sup>44</sup> Conrad Grebel, “Letter to Müntzer: September 5, 1524,” in *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, ed. Leland Harder (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1985), 289.

Brethren.<sup>45</sup> A former Catholic priest and professor, Hübmaier used his mastery of theology to argue forcefully that the Anabaptist position against Zwingli in the Second Disputation of Zürich in 1523, and later in a series of pamphlets on baptism in 1525.<sup>46</sup> Hübmaier went a step beyond Grebel in describing martyrdom as inevitable by arguing that those who persecuted Anabaptists did so out of a natural hate. In “On the Christian Baptism of Believers,” published in June of 1525, Hübmaier wrote, “Now there follow trials, temptations, persecutions, the cross and all sorts of tribulation on account of the name and faith of Jesus Christ. For this world hates the light and loves the darkness.”<sup>47</sup> Like Grebel, Hübmaier connected “the cross” (i.e. martyrdom) with “faith of Jesus Christ” (i.e. discipleship). Unlike Grebel, Hübmaier provides a reason for “this world” (the wolves of Grebel’s metaphor) to hate the Anabaptist “sheep”: the world hated the spiritual light of discipleship.<sup>48</sup> Discipleship therefore produced spiteful violence from the world by its very nature. Again we can see an emphasis was placed on the dichotomy between the spiritual reality of the disciple and the dark reality of the world. Therefore, for both Grebel and Hübmaier, accepting the mantle of discipleship guaranteed that one would face a life of suffering, persecution, and ultimately, martyrdom.

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<sup>45</sup> For the most thorough biography on Hübmaier see Torsten Bergsten, *Balthasar Hübmaier: Anabaptist Theologian and Martyr*, ed. William Rosceo Estep (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978). Hübmaier’s understanding of martyrdom, especially the relationship between the martyr and the act of salvation, is based on a broader theology of faith, a discussion of which can be found in Eddie Louis Mabry, *Balthasar Hubmaier’s Understanding of Faith* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 57-74.

<sup>46</sup> Kurt J. Thompson, “The Proper Candidate: An Examination of the 1525 Debate Between Ulrich Zwingli and Balthasar Hubmaier Concerning Baptism” (masters thesis, Liberty University, 2009), 1-3.

<sup>47</sup> Balthasar Hübmaier, “On the Christian Baptism of Believers,” in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 70.

<sup>48</sup> The dichotomy between “light” and “dark” is part of a long tradition of mystical thought stretching all the way back to the ancient Greeks (Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, reprint ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 217). Hübmaier’s use of this metaphor in the context of martyrdom demonstrates the mystical approach he took to the act.

Not all Anabaptists, however, accepted the inevitability of martyrdom for the transformed disciple. Others simply maintained that if an Anabaptist faced certain martyrdom, they should accept their fate as God's will. For these Anabaptists, the true disciple was incapable of not accepting God's will, and therefore was prepared to accept martyrdom should it befall them. The Anabaptist Hans Schlaffer, a former Catholic priest who was martyred in Innsbruck in 1528, clearly viewed martyrdom as an expression of God's will.<sup>49</sup> In his "Discipline of the Believers," which is recorded in the *Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, Schlaffer wrote, "[A]ll the brethren and sisters after they have committed themselves, shall accept and bear patience all that He sends us, to be ready for cross and suffering."<sup>50</sup> Schlaffer draws a direct connection between committing oneself to discipleship and "patience" in the face of violence. More importantly, Schlaffer claims that this violence comes from God, "*He* sends" the "cross and suffering [emphasis added]." Where Hübmaier had depicted persecution as stemming from the world due to its natural hatred for true discipleship, Schlaffer argues that violence is sent by God as part of his will. Schlaffer thereby uses the examples of suffering and martyrdom to highlight the importance of patience to discipleship.

The depiction of martyrdom which emphasized its role as God's will was used by Anabaptists particularly when they were dealing with local authorities. By linking their potential persecution to God's will, Anabaptists made it clear to authorities that they had no intention of recanting their beliefs. For example, after the Anabaptists of Moravia were warned of their possible deportation, they informed the local nobles that their persecution was

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Friedmann, "Leonhard Schiemier and Hans Schlaffer: Two Tyrolean Anabaptist Martyr-Apostles of 1528," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33 (1959): 30.

<sup>50</sup> Hans Schlaffer, "Discipline of the Believers: How a Christian Is to Live," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William Latane Lumpkin (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 35.

God's will, and that they would therefore not be moved.<sup>51</sup> They reflected this sentiment in "A Protest from the Anabaptists of Moravia Against Deportation," that, "By him [God] we were brought hither, and peradventure he would have us dwell here and not elsewhere, to try our faith and our constancy by persecution and adversity. [...] We cannot and dare not withstand his holy will."<sup>52</sup> The Anabaptists of Moravia viewed their persecution as God's will, and as true disciples, they were unable to oppose it. In the "Protest," the Anabaptists of Moravia clearly intended their depiction of persecution as God's will to demonstrate to the noble's their unwillingness to emigrate.

This steadfastness in the face of persecution was continued by many Anabaptists even up to the point of martyrdom. For example, the *Martyr's Mirror* tells the story of Weynken, a Dutch Sacramentarian who was martyred on November 20, 1527.<sup>53</sup> The *Mirror* records her final words, spoken to a monk, while lying on the execution pyre, "*Monk*: 'Now you will have to go into the fire; do recant.' *Weynken*: 'I am well content; the Lord's will must be done.'"<sup>54</sup> Again, a direct connection was made between violent persecution and God's will in order to demonstrate the steadfastness of the martyred disciple in the face of said persecution. Weynken refuses to recant, even when its meant a certain and tortuous death. Several Anabaptists, therefore, depicted martyrdom as an act of God's will, which was something to be patiently endured by the transformed disciple.

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<sup>51</sup> For a history of the tumultuous relationship between the Anabaptists and the nobles of Moravia, which informs the urgency and desperation of this particular depiction of martyrdom, see Martin Rothkegel, "Anabaptism in Moravia and Silesia," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. J.D. Roth and J.M. Stayer (Boston: Brill, 2007), 163-216.

<sup>52</sup> "A Protest from the Anabaptists of Moravia against Deportation," in *Great Voices of the Reformation: An Anthology*, ed. H.E. Fosdick (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 306.

<sup>53</sup> The line between Sacramentarianism and Anabaptism amongst the Dutch before 1530 is a blurry one. The similarities in theology between the two groups, however, warrant Weynken's inclusion here. A brief discussion of the distinctions and similarities can be found in Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 247.

<sup>54</sup> *Martyr's Mirror*, 423.



In contrast to those who depicted the act of martyrdom as God's will, some Anabaptists theologically described the martyr themselves as a tool of God's will. The distinction was an important one theologically. In the former theology, the act of martyrdom was God's will being acted upon on the martyr. In the latter theology, the martyr acted God's will on the world through martyrdom. This theology was still passive in that the disciple was depicted as an object to be manipulated to bring about God's will, rather than their own will. The martyr still merely experienced a martyrdom placed upon them by another (God) rather than actively seeking out suffering. The Hutterian Brethren, an Anabaptist sect in Southern Germany which practiced absolute egalitarianism and pacifism, held just such a theology.<sup>55</sup> In their *Geschicht-Buch*, or *History-Book*, the Hutterian Brethren addressed God by writing, "Let them be heartily commended by thee, give them patience and victory in every need, and carry out thy own purpose through them to the end [...] Praise thy holy name through them, and lead them into truth, steadfast to the very end."<sup>56</sup> Like Schlaffer and others who emphasized martyrdom itself as God's will, the Hutterian Brethren claimed that the disciple was to remain "steadfast to the very end." However, where the "end" of martyrdom was God's will for Schlaffer, praising God's holy name was God's will for the Hutterian Brethren. In a way then, martyrdom for the Hutterian Brethren was a form of extreme evangelicalism, the martyr was God's way of demonstrating his Word to the world. In this context, the martyr simply becomes God's tool, through which he can "carry out" his "own purpose through

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<sup>55</sup> For the history of the Hutterian Brethren through the modern era, see John Horsch, *The Hutterian Brethren, 1528-1931: A Story of Martyrdom and Loyalty* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1931). For a full understanding of the Hutterite practice of communal goods, which helps to explain in part their ability to serve another (God) to the point of death, see John W. Bennett, *Hutterian Brethren: The Agricultural Economy and Social Organization of a Communal People* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 161-198.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 45.

them.” The Hutterian Brethren therefore saw the martyred disciple as God’s tool for bringing about his will.

God’s will was not the only purpose that Anabaptist’s identified with the act of martyrdom. Others viewed martyrdom as the way in which salvation was achieved for the transformed disciple. While Schalffer and Grebel described martyrdom as a neutral event which was to simply be endured by the radical disciple, other Anabaptists viewed martyrdom as an explicitly joyous event which promised the salvation of the martyr. This was the view taken by Hübmaier in his pamphlet, “A Christian Instruction,” published in 1527, “*Leon*: What is the nearest way by which one can go to eternal life? *Hans*: Through anguish, distress, suffering, persecution and death, for the sake of the name Christ Jesus [...] We should wait for the little cross, and when it comes receive it willingly.”<sup>57</sup> The “little cross”<sup>58</sup> of martyrdom was “the nearest way by which one can go to eternal life” for Hübmaier. Like all Anabaptist theologies of martyrdom, the emphasis for Hübmaier was placed on “for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ,” which was a reference to discipleship. It was only the transformed disciple who could joyously enter the saving flames of martyrdom. When taken in light of Hübmaier’s previously noted view of martyrdom, this claim holds an even deeper meaning: since the transformed disciple is guaranteed persecution and martyrdom, and martyrdom is an act of salvation, the transformed disciple is inherently saved.

For many Anabaptists who emphasized the saving nature of martyrdom, the promise that persecution held for eternal life stands in direct contrast to the suffering and death one experienced to obtain it. This dichotomy was emphasized to comfort those who suffered

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<sup>57</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, “A Christian Instruction,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 87-88.

<sup>58</sup> The “little cross” of martyrdom is in relation to Jesus’ “big cross” of suffering for mankind.

persecution: just when it appeared all was lost in this world, he or she became assured of your salvation in the next. This was certainly the case for Menno Simons, the former Catholic priest whose disciples became known as the Mennonites.<sup>59</sup> Menno wrote in his *Meditation on the Twenty-Fifth Psalm*, which was written in 1537 to defend his newly found faith,

O Lord of hosts, this is the final reward for those who know Thee. Their souls shall inherit that which is good in the paradise of their God upon Mount Zion [...] And although they must endure in their flesh, for a time, much misery, suffering, and trouble, yet they know well that the way of the cross is the way that leads to life.<sup>60</sup>

Like Hübmaier, Menno recognized martyrdom as a saving act enacted upon “those who know God” (i.e. true disciples). What was unique in Menno’s theology of martyrdom was the contrast he drew between “the way of the cross” and the promise of Mt. Zion. The way of the cross is full of “misery, suffering, and trouble” while Mt. Zion is a “paradise.” Similarly, while it was their flesh which must enjoy hardships, it was the disciple’s soul which experienced the joy of paradise. The disciple is expected to find solace in their martyrdom through the expectation of the coming reward. Therefore, Menno Simon’s theology of martyrdom was clearly shaped to bring comfort to those facing persecution.

It was partially due to this message of comfort that theologies of martyrdom, which emphasized its promise of salvation, became the most popular ones among the common Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. While the tracts cited above were probably read by the average person, they were unlikely to be their daily source of religious experience.<sup>61</sup> Instead,

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<sup>59</sup> Harold S. Bender, "A Brief Biography of Menno Simons," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons: 1496-1561*, ed. John C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1966), 3. For the most widely cited biography of Menno, recently made available online, see John C. Horsch, *Menno Simons, His Life, Labors, and Teachings* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1916), <http://books.google.com/books?id=OFNGAAAAYAAJ>.

<sup>60</sup> Menno Simons, "Meditation on the Twenty-Fifth Psalm," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons: C.1496-1561*, ed. J.C. Wenger and H.S. Bender (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1966), 74-75.

<sup>61</sup> While there is no work that deals specifically with the relationship between Anabaptist peasants and religious polemics, there is one that deals with the comparable context of the Lutheran reform. Louise W. Holborn,

communal worship was the link that the peasants, who predominantly made-up Anabaptist groups, had to their faith.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, expressions of martyrdom in places like hymns provide a look into the popular religious thought held in sixteenth century Anabaptist circles. These hymns were contained in such hymnbooks as the *Ausbund*, which was begun by Passau Anabaptists in 1527,<sup>63</sup> and reflected in large part a view of martyrdom which stressed salvation. An example of this can be found in a hymn entitled "When Christ Came with His True Teachings," written by the martyr Michael Sattler, "And when for my sake and the Word / They persecute, revile, and kill, / Rejoice! for your reward is great / Before God's throne on Zion's hill."<sup>64</sup> Again, we see the same themes from Hübmaier and Simon's theology repeated: the true disciple rejoiced in the midst of martyrdom because their salvation had been assured. Hübmaier wrote a hymn himself, "God's Word Stand Sure Forever," which expresses his theology in a popular form:

O Jesus Christ, thou Son of God,  
 Let us not lack thy favor,  
 For what shall be our just reward  
 If the salt shall lose its savour?  
 With angry flame to efface thy name  
 In vain shall men endeavor;  
 Not for a day, the same for aye,  
 God's word stands sure forever.<sup>65</sup>

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"Printing and the Growth of a Protestant Movement in Germany from 1517 to 1524," *Church History* 11, no. 2 (1942): 123-137.

<sup>62</sup> Peasants dominated the largest Anabaptists groups, especially the Hutterites and other South German groups (Werner O. Packull, "The Beginning of Anabaptism in Southern Tyrol," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 4 (1991): 717).

<sup>63</sup> While the *Ausbund* was begun by a group of Anabaptist prisoners in Passau in 1527, it wasn't fully completed until 1571 (C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites of America* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1909), 432).

<sup>64</sup> Michael Sattler, "When Christ with His True Teaching Came," in *Anabaptism in Outline : Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 89.

<sup>65</sup> Balthasar Hübmaier, "God's Word Stand Sure Forever," in *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533) : A Source Book*, ed. William Roscoe Estep (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. de Graaf, 1976), 172.

The martyred disciple in Hübmaier's hymn had Jesus' "favor" and received the "just reward" of salvation. Instead of employing esoteric metaphors like he did in his more polemic works cited above, Hübmaier's hymn used metaphors relatable to the common man. The savoring of salt and the angry flame were much more populist images than the light of the spiritual reality he employs in other places. Even in this popular form, however, the role of radical discipleship is still emphasized. Sattler claimed that the martyr was killed and received salvation because he knew "the Word," which one can assume means he was a transformed disciple. Similarly, Hübmaier also emphasizes "God's word," and even claims that the flames of martyrdom were meant to erase the name of God from the disciple, thereby removing his discipleship. It is no surprise, therefore, that these more popular expressions of martyrdom relied on the uplifting message of salvation more than the passive acceptance of God's will.

All of the forms of passive martyrdom discussed so far share the unifying feature that they were internally focused: the disciple underwent an inward transformation that in one way or another resulted in martyrdom. Martyrdom in these contexts was thus a personal experience; it was a process that took place only within the understanding of the individual martyr. The rest of society does not see the connection between discipleship and martyrdom, martyrdom as God's will, or martyrdom as salvation. Some Anabaptists, however, viewed martyrdom as a largely external experience which God used to outwardly mark the true disciple for the rest of the world. This construction is reflected in the work of Jacob Hutter, the early Anabaptist convert from the Tyrol, whose followers became known as the Hutterites.<sup>66</sup> In one of the few extant pieces we have from Hutter, a letter written to a group

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<sup>66</sup> We know very little about Jacob Hutter because his only surviving works are a series of eight letters. What we do know about him comes from his earliest followers in the *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, NY: Plough Pub. House, 1987).

of Anabaptist migrants being held in the Hohenwart prison in 1534, he writes, “That is the true sign and seal of all the pious children of God, the sign of Christ or the Son of Man and all his members which must appear at the last time according to the word of the Lord. Yes, cross and tribulation truly adorns all the children of God.”<sup>67</sup> Hutter claims that the disciples of Christ, his “pious children,” were marked by “cross and tribulation.” Like Grebel and Hübmaier, Hutter drew a direct connection between discipleship and suffering. However, where Grebel’s metaphor of the sheep and the wolves emphasized the unseen spiritual battle inherent in martyrdom, suffering for Hutter was a badge which “adorns all the children of God.”

Grebel also claimed, in other pieces besides his letter to Müntzer, that the inherent connection between discipleship and suffering meant that the martyr was marked for the world to see as a disciple of Christ. He made this argument particularly forcefully when addressing those he wished to convert to the Anabaptist cause. This was especially the case when he wrote his brother in law, Joachim Vadian, the reformed priest of St. Gallen.<sup>68</sup> For example, in a letter from May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1525, Grebel wrote, “Beware, beware of innocent blood, for it is innocent. Whether you know it or do not know it, whether you wish it or do not wish it, it is innocent. Their suffering and the end of their lives and the great day of the Lord will prove it.”<sup>69</sup> For Grebel, God’s true disciples were sheep among wolves by the very nature of their discipleship. He therefore concludes that the truth of the Anabaptist way of radical discipleship was proven by the suffering of its converts.

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<sup>67</sup> Jacob Hutter, “Letter to the Prisoners at the Hohenwart,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 92.

<sup>68</sup> The only notable work on Vadian in the English language is a sizable chapter by Kurt Stadtward in his broader work on early German humanism (Kurt Stadtward, “Joachim Vadian,” in *Roman Popes and German Patriots: Antipapalism in the Politics of the German Humanist Movement from Gregor Heimburg to Martin Luther* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1996), 153-178).

<sup>69</sup> Grebel, “Letter to Vadian: May 30, 1525,” 379.

At first glance, it would appear that the wide range of Anabaptist conceptions of passive martyrdom presented at best a disjointed movement, at worst completely different groups of theologians. However, there remains a single unifying theme to Anabaptist passive martyrdom theologies: radical discipleship. It was the process of radical discipleship that innately created suffering for the Anabaptist martyr in the theologies of Grebel and Hübmaier. Similarly, the radical disciple was expected to patiently abide God's will in the theologies of Schlaffer and the Hutterian Brethren. Furthermore, it was the radical disciple of Christ who experienced salvation through martyrdom in the theologies of Simons and Sattler. Finally, martyrdom served as the external mark of the true disciple in the theology of Jacob Hutter. The Anabaptist theology of passive martyrdom was therefore fundamentally based on the notion of radical discipleship.

### **God's Soldier: The Radical Disciple as Active Martyr**

The importance that radical discipleship held for the Anabaptist understanding of martyrdom is only further demonstrated by its use in the context of active martyrdom. As previously stated, the concepts of active and passive martyrdom could not be more different. In the rare instance where some theologians offered both theologies, this was due to a duality only possible in spiritualism.<sup>70</sup> Active and spiritual martyrdom remained two separate events, but took place simultaneously for such theologians. Generally, where martyrdom was something that happened to the passive martyr, it was something sought out and created by the active martyr. The active martyr *chose* to be martyred, and either spiritually or physically

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<sup>70</sup> Spiritualism offered the ability to unify the physical and spiritual realities of an enlightened believer into a single reality (F. Samuel Brainard, *Reality and Mystical Experience* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 263-65). This allowed spiritual Anabaptists to postulate two conceptions of martyrdom without them being mutually exclusive. It was possible for the martyr to experience a spiritual and physical instance of martyrdom simultaneously.

worked toward this goal. The role of human agency in martyrdom had fundamental theological implications that it made it critically different from passive martyrdom. Nonetheless, Anabaptist theologies which depicted an active martyrdom were still centered on the notion of radical discipleship. For some, the radical disciple chose to accept suffering as part of their emulation of Jesus. Furthermore, just as the radical disciple willfully went through baptism in water to signify his transformed state, he was expected to purposefully go through a baptism in blood. In contrast, some described martyrdom as the means through which the Christian could most fully express Christian love. Others believed that martyrdom was the only vehicle through which the radical disciple participated in the Trinity. Most controversial were the Anabaptist theologies of martyrdom that placed it in a millennial, or apocalyptic, context. Such theologians viewed death in battle as the weapon by which the world would be transformed in preparation for the Second Coming. Some moved the violence of battle-driven martyrdom into the spiritual realm, but still viewed it as the weapon by which the world would be transformed. Regardless of the specific construction of active martyrdom, Anabaptist theologians universally employed the concept of radical discipleship.

Before it is possible to understand why the radical disciple chose martyrdom in the Anabaptist context, it is first critical to understand the manner in which they believed they had the power to choose. The Anabaptists were generally not “Pelagians;” they did not believe man could willfully do good works alone.<sup>71</sup> Instead, man needed God’s grace to willfully do good works. The issue remained, therefore, for the Anabaptist theologian: how could one choose to be martyred, an act universally recognized as good by the Anabaptists? The answer came from the titan of Anabaptist theology, Balthasar Hübmaier. Hübmaier claimed that the

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<sup>71</sup> Stuart Murray Williams, “Pelagians, Donatists, Monks, Anabaptists and Other Perfectionists” (presentation presented to The Anabaptist Network Theology Forum, Leamington Spa, England, June 9, 2005).



true disciple was one who had accepted God's grace, and was therefore now free to choose to do good works. Furthermore, the disciple is expected to use his freedom to freely do good works. He makes this argument in his tract, *On Free Will*:

So now, the soul, after restoration, is whole, through the sent Word, and is truly made free. Now it can choose and do good, as much as is required of it, since it can command the flesh, tame it, dominate it, to such an extent that it must make it go against its own nature even into the fire with the spirit and the soul, for the sake of the name of Christ.<sup>72</sup>

Here Hübmaier employs a Pauline conception of free will and spirituality to make it clear that the radical disciple was given complete control of his body through God's Word.<sup>73</sup> He used martyrdom to highlight the extent to which the radical disciple had control over his sinful body. The radical disciple was free to force the sinful body to "go against its own nature even into the fire." Even with this libertarian free will, it is still a will granted by the grace of God through his word. Therefore, for Hübmaier and others who depicted an active conception of martyrdom, the radical disciple was free to choose martyrdom only thanks to God's grace.

With this notion of free will in mind, it is now possible to understand Anabaptist theologies which depicted Anabaptist martyrdom as following Jesus' example. Many Anabaptists took the notion of discipleship literally: they viewed themselves as latter-day disciples following the footsteps of Jesus just as his Twelve Apostles did.<sup>74</sup> This belief was perhaps most important for Bernhard Rothmann, the theologian and preacher who helped bring about the overthrow of the government of Münster in 1534,<sup>75</sup> and subsequently died

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<sup>72</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, "On Free Will," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 126.

<sup>73</sup> Paul posited a fundamentally different nature of the body in comparison to the soul, with the inherent sinfulness of the former trapping the goodness of the latter (John Arthur Thomas Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 44). Hübmaier, as Doctor of Theology, would have been aware of this type of thought while shaping his theology of martyrdom. We can therefore assume he included the dichotomy deliberately.

<sup>74</sup> Gregory, "Anabaptist Martyrdom," 485.

<sup>75</sup> While Melchior Hoffman's role in the rebellion has clouded our understanding of Rothmann's involvement theologically, it is the general consensus in the latest research that he was at least critically important politically.

defending the city from Catholic forces in 1535.<sup>76</sup> Rothmann attempted to live his life by the model of Christ, writing in “The Hiddenness of Scripture,” that “to know Christ truly means to keep his commandments and follow his footsteps.”<sup>77</sup> Many Anabaptists believed with Rothmann that they must follow in the footsteps of Christ, and took this to its logical conclusion: just as Jesus was persecuted and martyred, so too would the disciple follow him down this path towards death. Several Anabaptists who put forward such a theology followed through on their beliefs and became martyrs. One example was Jörg Wagner, who was martyred in 1527 in the Falkenturm Tower of Munich.<sup>78</sup> Before he died he wrote a hymn “Wer Chritso Jetzt Will Folgen Nach,”<sup>79</sup> which was eventually included in the *Ausbund*. The hymn reads in part, “Christ’s servants follow him to death, / And give their body life and breath / On cross and rack and pyre. / As gold is tried and purified / They stand the test of fire.”<sup>80</sup> For Wagner, following the path of Christ meant following him to the end through death by martyrdom. Wagner connected the tool through which Jesus was martyred, the cross, with the contemporary tools of martyrdom, rack and pyre. He even went so far as to say that the test of the martyr’s fire is the ultimate test of discipleship. This test can only be passed with the active participation of the martyr. Instead of martyrdom being forced on the true disciple, the martyr “g[a]ve their body life and breath [emphasis added].” Theologies of

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(William John De Bakker, James M. Stayer, and Michael Dennis Driedger, *Bernhard Rothmann and the Reformation in Münster, 1530-35* (Kitchner, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2009), 3).

<sup>76</sup> His martyrdom is relayed in a selection from the *Martyr’s Mirror* recounted in the above section, “Examples of Anabaptist Martyrdom.”

<sup>77</sup> Bernhard Rothmann, “The Hiddenness of Scripture,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 92.

<sup>78</sup> Johann Loserth and Harold S. Bender, “Wagner, Georg (d. 1527),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1959), <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/W198.html>. While Wagner was technically not an Anabaptist (in that he was not rebaptized himself), his close ties to Sattler and Denck, along with his inclusion in the *Ausbund*, arguably make him part of the larger Anabaptist theological tradition.

<sup>79</sup> “Wer Chritso Jetzt Will Folgen Nach” roughly translates to, “Who Will Now Follow After Christ,” in other words, who will follow Christ after understanding that it is a path of suffering.

<sup>80</sup> Jörg Wagner, “Wer Christo Jetzt Will Folgen Noch,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen, (Kitchener, Ont. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 88.

martyrdom like Wagner's therefore emphasized the choice of the disciple to follow in the footsteps of Christ, including the decision to become a martyr.

Some Anabaptists took this theology of following Christ into martyrdom a step further by making it an imperative. For these theologians, true discipleship in Christ was impossible without the experience of martyrdom. While Wagner stated that the true disciple *would* follow Jesus into death, these theologians held that the true disciple *must* follow Christ into death. While the choice was still left to the free willed believer, choosing a path other than martyrdom meant choosing a path other than discipleship. This was the case in the theology of Hans Denck, the Austrian who applied a unique Anabaptist lens to a synthesis to the divergent Erasmian and Müntzerite spiritualist theologies.<sup>81</sup> In one of his many works on free will, "The Contention that Scripture Says," Denck wrote in 1527,

Whoever does not know [Christ] does not have him and without him he cannot come to the Father. But whoever knows him and does not witness to him by his life will be judged by him.... Woe to him who looks elsewhere than to this goal. For whoever thinks he belongs to Christ must walk the way that Christ did.<sup>82</sup>

For Denck, justification or salvation to God was accomplished through discipleship, by knowing Jesus. Furthermore, like Wagner, Denck believed that following Christ included willfully choosing martyrdom. It is interesting to note that the well-educated Denck used the original Greek understanding of *martyrs* by using the word "witness" in his writing; the true

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<sup>81</sup> While Denck's spiritual source for his theology, rather than the scriptural source identified by the Swiss Brethren, made historians like Bender deny him as a true Anabaptist, historians have recently begun to broadly recognize the spiritualist influence on Anabaptism (Coggins, "Toward a Definition," 190). For an analysis of how this unique spiritualism fit into Denck's conception of free will, a critical component of his understanding of active martyrdom, see Hans Juergen Rath, "Hans Denck and the Debate of the Freedom of the Will" (bachelors thesis, McMaster University, 1966).

<sup>82</sup> Hans Denck, "The Contention That Scripture Says," in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 87.

disciple is a “witness to [Christ] by his life.”<sup>83</sup> Unlike Wagner, however, Denck explicitly states that the true disciple *must* follow the path of martyrdom. While he recognized that the path of martyrdom was a difficult one, he concluded that attempts to find other paths of discipleship would be fruitless: “Woe to him who looks elsewhere than to this goal [of martyrdom].”<sup>84</sup> Therefore, Denck conceived of an active martyrdom that must be chosen by the true disciple.

If one is to accept, like Denck, that following in the footsteps of Jesus through martyrdom is an unappealing path, one has to wonder why Anabaptists who viewed martyrdom as a choice chose this path at all. The answer once again lies in the relationship between martyrdom and salvation. Unlike Hübmaier and Menno, who viewed the moment that one lost their life as the point of salvation in martyrdom, Anabaptists who viewed martyrdom as a choice tended to emphasize the *process* of martyrdom as bringing about salvation. This was certainly the case for the South German Anabaptist Leonhard Scheimer, who held a similar view of spiritualism to Hut and Denck,<sup>85</sup> and was martyred in 1528 shortly after being rebaptized.<sup>86</sup> Scheimer directly connected salvation through the process of suffering in martyrdom in a letter he wrote to the church at Rattenberg in 1527, “Paul says that you are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if you suffer with him in order that you

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<sup>83</sup> Denck was educated at Ingolstadt University and Heidelberg University, graduating in 1517 and 1523 respectively (Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1991), 7-8.

<sup>84</sup> Denck, “The Contemplation the Scripture Saves,” 87.

<sup>85</sup> Scheimer was a cohort of Hut and other spiritualists in South Germany. Scheimer’s common spiritualism with Hut meant he was more likely to understand scripture, like his explanation of Paul, through the lens of mysticism (Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Scriptural Interpretation among Radical Reformers,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 588-596, especially 589).

<sup>86</sup> *Martyr’s Mirror*, 424. Scheimer’s name is falsely given as Leonhard Schöner in the *Mirror*, a fact discovered by Robert Friedmann (Robert Friedmann, *Hutterite Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (MacGregor, Canada: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2010), 264).

may be exalted with him in glory.”<sup>87</sup> Like Hübmaier and Menno, Scheimer claimed that the disciple of Christ who experienced martyrdom with him would be “exalted with him in glory.” Scheimer, however, added a spiritual dimension to the suffering that was not found in Menno or Hübmaier’s theology. Like most spiritualists, Scheimer believed that by following Christ one could form an unmediated union with him (i.e. become a “joint heir”).<sup>88</sup> By suffering with Christ, the disciple increased his spiritual bond with him, allowing the believer to share in the spiritual rewards of God. Therefore, those Anabaptists who believed that martyrdom represented a choice to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, generally believed it would lead to salvation through suffering with Christ.

The choice of following the path of Jesus was not the only type of choice made in Anabaptist theologies of active martyrdom. The true disciple was free to make other choices that would result in martyrdom as well. One such choice was the decision to be baptized in blood. This process mirrored one of the most distinct practices of the Anabaptists, the practice of adult baptism. The Anabaptists’ decision to only baptize adults reflected their view of the significance of the act.<sup>89</sup> Baptism had to be willfully undertaken by those who wished to enter into radical discipleship, or as Conrad Grebel put it, those who “desire to walk in newness of life.”<sup>90</sup> Just as the baptism in water was only supposed to be undertaken by

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<sup>87</sup> Leonhard Scheimer, “A Letter to the Church at Rattenberg,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 90.

<sup>88</sup> Scheimer’s depiction of unmediated (i.e. personal) union is part of a broader Christian mystical tradition, an analysis of which can be found in Louis Dupré, “The Christian Experience of Mystical Union,” *The Journal of Religion* 69, no. 1 (1989), 1-13.

<sup>89</sup> The choice of the word “act” in lieu of “sacrament” is deliberate. The Anabaptists rejected the Catholic position that baptism was a sacrament that was necessary for salvation. (William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, revised 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 203). By rebaptizing adults, Anabaptists essentially destroyed the saving nature of the sacrament from the Catholic perspective, reaping persecution as a result (N.M. Haring, “One Baptism: An Historical Study of the Non-Repetition of Certain Sacraments,” *Mediaeval Studies* 10(1948): 217-19).

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Harold Bender, “The Theology of Conrad Grebel,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 12 (1938): 47.

willing disciples, the theological conception of martyrdom as baptism in blood also relied on the choice of the transformed disciple. One can find the metaphor of baptism in blood being employed most forcefully by Hübmaier in his defense of the faith, "A Short Justification," written in 1526. Hübmaier describes a "third or last baptism in which one is to be anointed with the oil of the holy and comforting gospel by which we are made pliable and ready for suffering."<sup>91</sup> Here Hübmaier paralleled the physical oil which anointed the believer during baptism in water with the spiritual oil of God's Word which anointed the true disciple during the baptism in blood through suffering. Hübmaier later makes it clear that this third baptism<sup>92</sup> was one based in suffering and blood: "Whoever will cry to God with Christ [...] must also be baptized with Christ in water and suffer with him in blood."<sup>93</sup> By placing the baptism in blood as the third step in the transformation of the radical disciple, Hübmaier positioned it as a synthesis between the inward first baptism of the soul and the outward second baptism of the body in water.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, for Hübmaier, the choice to undergo baptism in blood was the choice to fully complete one's discipleship.

Not all Anabaptist conceptions of active martyrdom, however, were situated in the bloody suffering of the disciple. Some Anabaptist theologians held that choosing martyrdom, especially when it came in lieu of violent resistance, was the ultimate expression of Christian love.<sup>95</sup> Most of the theologians who emphasized this form of active martyrdom were

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<sup>91</sup> Hubmaier, "A Short Justification," in *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533) : A Source Book*, ed. William Roscoe Estep (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. de Graaf, 1976), 167.

<sup>92</sup> The first two baptisms for Hübmaier are the internal renewal of the transformed disciple and the outward baptism of water (Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Central European Synthesis of Radical and Magisterial Reform: The Sacramental Theology of Balthasar Hubmaier* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 92-98).

<sup>93</sup> Hubmaier, "Justification," 167.

<sup>94</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, revised student ed. (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 160.

<sup>95</sup> The issue of the extent of early Anabaptist pacifist views is the most hotly debated topic in modern Anabaptist historiography. The confusion is understandable given the apparent contradictory position on violence taken in

spiritualists who believed the radical disciple was above the use of worldly violence. One such Anabaptist was Hans Denck, who claimed that choosing death over violence marked the height of the disciple's experience of love. In his exegesis of Exodus 2:11-12,<sup>96</sup> Denck wrote,

The zeal of Moses in killing the Egyptian who had harmed an Israelite was in some sense good in that he was zealous for the right against the wrong. But if Moses had known perfect Love or indeed possessed her, he would have allowed himself to be killed in place of the Israelite, his brother, rather than strangle the Egyptian, his brother's enemy.<sup>97</sup>

In this passage, Denck metaphorically argues that the true disciple of Christ accepted martyrdom when he could prevent violence being carried out against his brother. Denck achieved this by employing the standard spiritualist dichotomy of the worldly reality of violence and the spiritual reality of the disciple. "Perfect Love" belonged to the spiritual reality which is "possessed" by the true disciple.<sup>98</sup> The violence of the overseer, on the other hand, was possessed by the "enemy" of the true disciple, and was therefore of the world. The perfect disciple would consequently right the wrong of violence with the perfect love of martyrdom. In highlighting this dichotomy, Denck was highlighting the spiritual power of discipleship in overcoming the fear of worldly violence.<sup>99</sup> This would have had clear real-

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several Anabaptist confessions of faith. (Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Anabaptist Separation and Arguments against the Sword in the Schleithem Brotherly Union," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 3 (2000): 381-402).

<sup>96</sup> "And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand" (Exodus 2:11-12 KJB).

<sup>97</sup> Hans Denck, *Selected Writings of Hans Denck*, ed. Edward J. Furcha (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), 105-106.

<sup>98</sup> Denck would have recognized "perfect Love" as one of the three emanations of God (as in elements of God's perfect being) which Christian mystics have historically identified (Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, revised ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1930), 101-02).

<sup>99</sup> Providing a haven from the threat of violence is the most common mystical treatment of force (Peter Hartocollis, "Aggression and Mysticism," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 12(1976), <http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=cps.012.0214a>).

world implications for his co-religionists, especially after the Münster rebellion of 1534.<sup>100</sup>

With tensions between local authorities and Anabaptists continuing to rise, Denck urged peace and self-sacrifice as the only true ways to combat the worldly violence of the tormentors. Denck therefore presented a theology of active martyrdom which emphasized the choice of non-violent, sacrificial martyrdom over the worldly pursuit of violence by the radical disciple.

In spite of the assertions by Bender and others, Denck's pacifism was not a universal feature of sixteenth century Anabaptism. Even in the context of martyrdom, some Anabaptist theologians argued that the true disciple could, and even in some cases should, use violence that carried the risk of martyrdom. This violence was almost always thought of in the context of millennialism and the Second Coming. Before the Parousia, or Christ's return to earth, apocalyptic Anabaptists believed the world needed to be renewed out of sin.<sup>101</sup> For many Anabaptists who accepted the imminent apocalypse, the true disciple of Christ was expected to take up arms against the enemies of God. This, of course, reached its most infamous and bloody conclusion in the rebellion of Münster in 1534.<sup>102</sup> Bernhard Rothmann, the main theologian of the rebellion, proclaimed the following in a sermon delivered in 1534,

The Throne of David must be reestablished, the Kingdom prepared and armed, and all the enemies of Christ humbled by David [...] Therefore, dear brothers, arm for

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<sup>100</sup> Many authorities used the excuse of Münster to persecute local Anabaptist populations following 1534. A discussion of several such responses can be found in Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of "Savage Wolves": Anabaptist Münster and the German Reformation During the 1530s*, ill. ed. (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000), 40, 73, and 93-4.

<sup>101</sup> The form of millennialism held by each Anabaptist fundamentally shaped their view of martyrdom. Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization*, ill. reprint ed. (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave, 2001), 85-96. Hans Hut and other South German spiritualists were influenced by the millennialism of Thomas Müntzer. Abraham Friesen, "Thomas Muntzer and the Anabaptists," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4(1986). Some Anabaptists, especially the Swiss Brethren, were influenced by the less violent "quiet millennialism" of the Hussites and the optimistic eschatology of Erasmus.

<sup>102</sup> For the only English translation of the contemporary narrative of this revolution, see Hermann von Kerssenbroch, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Münster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*, ed. Christopher S. Mackay (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007).



battle, not only with the Apostles' humble weapon of suffering, but also with vengeance, the magnificent armor of David, to stamp out the entire Babylonian power and the entire godless establishment with the power and the help of God.<sup>103</sup>

Rothmann created an eschatological necessity for the armed disciple: “stamp out the entire Babylonian power and the entire godless establishment” in preparation for “the Throne of David.” This was accomplished with the armor of “vengeance” in tandem with “the Apostles’ humble weapon of suffering,” martyrdom. For Rothmann and other Anabaptists who viewed their world through a millennial lens, the true disciple’s martyrdom became part of a broader struggle against the enemies of Christ. The disciple chose to risk his life in pursuit of the Kingdom, with his death in the course of this pursuit viewed as further damaging their enemies through the Apostle’s weapon of suffering. Therefore, Rothmann’s theology of active martyrdom painted the radical disciple as choosing to physically destroy God’s enemies, in part with the weapon of martyrdom.

Simply holding millennial views, however, did not inherently lead to the conclusion that the radical disciple must use physical violence against the enemies of God. Many Anabaptist millennialists posited that martyrdom represented a spiritual weapon, which the radical disciple could use to destroy his enemies. While God’s chosen were still fighting to cleanse the world before the Second Coming, the violence of the battle was moved from the physical to the spiritual realm. One can find this theology most prevalently in the work of Menno Simons, who was converted to Anabaptism by the millennialist Melchior Hoffman.<sup>104</sup> In his longest tract on martyrdom, *The Cross of the Saints*, which he composed in 1554, Simons wrote, “Therefore, O ye people of God, gird yourselves and make ready for battle; not

<sup>103</sup> Cited in James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KA: Coronado Press, 1976), 250-52.

<sup>104</sup> Ralf Klötzer, “The Melchoirites and Münster,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. J.D. Roth and J.M. Stayer (Boston: Brill, 2007), 256. The Münsterites derived their millennialism from Hoffman as well, albeit to a much more radical extent.

with external weapon and armor as the bloody, mad world is wont to do, but only with a firm confidence, a quite patience, and a fervent prayer.”<sup>105</sup> Again we can see the spiritualist distinction between the “bloody, mad world” and the “people of God.” The people of God, or his transformed disciples, do not use the weapons of violence employed by their enemies. Instead, God’s disciples use the spiritual weapons of “a firm confidence, a quite patience, and a fervent prayer.”

This does not mean, however, that there was no physical violence contained in Simons' theology of martyrdom contained in *The Cross of the Saints*. He continues to clarify the role of violence by describing the millennial battle as one based in martyrdom, “It can and may not be otherwise—this battle of the cross will have to be fought, this winepress of sorrow trod [...] Contend valiantly and you will receive the crown promised.”<sup>106</sup> The millennial battle was won by achieving martyrdom by patient and confident prayer, by absorbing the violence of the world. Simons is fundamentally forwarding a doctrine of nonresistance, in which the disciple who has realized the higher spiritual reality of Christ meets force with patient suffering. Menno Simons, therefore, used the spiritualist lens to express martyrdom as a weapon of nonresistance.

In the theologies of active martyrdom put forward by both Rothmann and Simons, the radical disciple employed martyrdom as a weapon against his enemies only with the help of God. There was still a clear distinction that was made in these theologies between the agency of God and the agency of the disciple in the process of martyrdom; God aided the martyr, but did not undergo martyrdom himself. Some Anabaptists who had an active view of martyrdom abolished this divide, and claimed that the radical disciple was able to participate fully in the

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<sup>105</sup> Simons, “Cross of the Saints,” 621.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Godhead through martyrdom. This idea was most prevalent in the theology of Hans Hut, an Anabaptist apostle largely credited with the spread of the Anabaptist movement across the South-Germanic regions of Moravia, Silesia, and Thuringia.<sup>107</sup> Hut was a disciple of Thomas Muntzer who actively participated in the Peasants War before being baptized by Hans Denck on May 25, 1526.<sup>108</sup> In his 1527 book designed to edify those he converted, entitled “A Christian Instruction,” Hut wrote, “In [Christ] we must be incorporated to participate in the unity of the Trinity. This is revealed to us in the deepest suffering. [...] That can happen only through pain, poverty, and distress inside and out.”<sup>109</sup> Like his student, Leonard Scheimer, Hans Hut saw suffering as the manner in which the disciple formed a union, or became “incorporated,” in Christ. Unlike Scheimer, however, Hut believed this suffering had to take place both “inside and out,” in other words, on both the spiritual and physical levels. Furthermore, the spiritual connection that the true disciple had to Jesus, in Hut’s theology, allowed him to act in unity with God. In many ways, then, Hut’s theology of martyrdom was the most “active” of all in that it allowed the radical disciple to act within the power of the Trinity, directly through the process of suffering and martyrdom.

It is abundantly clear that any understanding of Anabaptist approaches to martyrdom in the sixteenth century must include active martyrdom. While those Mennonite historians

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<sup>107</sup> Gottfried Seebass, “Hans Hut,” in *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Muntzer to Paracelsus*, ed. Walter Klaassen Hans-Jurgen Goertz (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 54.

<sup>108</sup> Hut fully accepted Muntzer’s mysticism during the Peasants Rebellion, which would play a fundamental role in his understanding of martyrdom. The included selection is an example of Hans Denck virtually parroting Muntzer’s understanding of the believers’ incorporation into the Godhead (Roland H. Bainton, “Thomas Muntzer Revolutionary Firebrand of the Reformation,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 13, no. 2 (1982): 5-6). While the role of Denck in baptizing Hut has only been tenuously established, most historians accept it as fact because it helps to explain the general spiritual nature of Hut’s Anabaptism. See for example, Werner Packull, “Denck’s Alleged Baptism by Hubmaier: Its Significance for the Origin of South German-Austrian Anabaptism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 47(1973): 327-338.

<sup>109</sup> Hans Hut, “A Christian Instruction,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 89-90.

who wish to maintain the façade of Anabaptist pacifism would deny the weaponized martyrdom of Rothmann, it clearly relied on the same centrality of the radical disciple as soldier understood by Menno Simon's. . . Similarly, those who see Anabaptism as "the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli" would disregard the view of salvation implied in the theologies of martyrdom which emphasized the disciple's decision to be saved by following in the footsteps of Christ.<sup>110</sup> However, the emphasis again on the radical disciple made these theologies clear Anabaptist expressions of faith. Even the vast number of spiritualists who employed an active understanding of martyrdom relied on the concept of radical discipleship. Therefore, it was the radical disciple in Anabaptist thought who underwent the process of active martyrdom.

## Conclusion

On the surface, the historical picture of the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom appears to be disjointed. The Anabaptists conceived of their martyrdom as either a passive or active event, with some theologians even using the constructions interchangeably.<sup>111</sup> These theologians also used a host of motifs and metaphors while depicting martyrdom. Some of this imagery, including the metaphors of "the sheep of God" and "the soldiers of God," were mutually exclusive. The only clear connection between these disparate theologies is the notion of radical discipleship. For every Anabaptist theologian, martyrdom was experienced

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<sup>110</sup> Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," 9. The Reformations of both Luther and Zwingli were centered around a soteriology of *justus sola fide*, which denied that man could bring about his own salvation (Berndt Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety*, ill. ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 153-78).

<sup>111</sup> There is technically a third type of martyrdom employed by Anabaptists in the sixteenth century: spiritual martyrdom. In this conception, it was the sinful body which was daily martyred on the spiritual level by the radical disciple. The process was continuous, and the term martyrdom was used more as a metaphor for overcoming sin. The reason why spiritual martyrdom is not included in this paper is that it was not framed as a direct response to persecution.

by the radical disciple who had already undergone the transformative power of being a believer in Christ. Furthermore, radical discipleship helped to explain in part the process of martyrdom itself, including why the disciple was martyred and the way they in turn related to that martyrdom. Therefore, the Anabaptist conception of martyrdom in the sixteenth century was clearly centered around the notion of radical discipleship.

This conclusion, that radical discipleship lay at the heart of how Anabaptists understood martyrdom, holds a host of implications. The clearest implications are for the theological descendants of the Anabaptists today, especially the Mennonites. There has been a recent resurgence in the Mennonite movement which has emphasized the historical connection between their heritage and martyrdom. An example of this emphasis is the “Mirror of the Martyrs” museum exhibit, which recently toured through important Mennonite and Amish location across America and Canada.<sup>112</sup> This exhibit, curated by the Anabaptist historian Robert Krieder, centered around a collection of copper prints created by the artist Jan Luyken for the second edition of the *Martyr’s Mirror* in 1685. A simultaneous development has been the publication of a number of books, aimed at children and young adults in the Mennonite community, which tell the stories of Anabaptist martyrs in a more accessible manner to the laity.<sup>113</sup> Like the historiography of Anabaptist martyrdom, however, these recent developments within the broader Mennonite community have focused almost exclusively on the literal stories of the Anabaptist martyrs. By being concerned more with the details surrounding each act of martyrdom, the Mennonite community is missing an opportunity to understand the unique theology which developed in light of these acts. An

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<sup>112</sup> “Mirror of the Martyrs,” accessed March 26, 2012. <http://www.bethelks.edu/kauffman/martyrs/>.

<sup>113</sup> See for example Dave Jackson and Neta Jackson, *On Fire for Christ: Stories of Anabaptist Martyrs* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989).

understanding of the role that radical discipleship played in the sixteenth century Anabaptist conception of martyrdom could therefore serve to bolster and shape the Mennonite faith today.

The understanding of martyrdom held by the Anabaptists does not hold meaning for the Mennonite community alone however. At its heart, the Anabaptist response to martyrdom was a challenge to the overwhelming forces of oppression and violence they faced in society. These forces are still being rallied against Christians today. Raymond Ibrahim, a scholar of radical elements within Islam, has noted the general persecution faced by Christians in the Middle East. In February 2012 alone, this has included: an attack on a church holding hundreds of Copts in Egypt, the creation of a five-year jail sentence for being a Christian pastor in Iran, and the beheading of a 26 year-old Christian apostate in Somalia.<sup>114</sup> Even when Christians don't face overt violence, they still may face overwhelming persecution from governments. China, for one, sets limits on "normal religious activity" and arrests Christians who practice without registering with the government.<sup>115</sup> Even in America many Christians controversially see themselves as the target of religious persecution over their views on such issues as contraception.<sup>116</sup> With the overwhelming sense of persecution felt by many Christians today, it is only logical that they should turn to history to find the answer for how to respond. The answer from sixteenth century Anabaptism is clear: the Christian can find

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<sup>114</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, "Muslim Persecution of Christians: February, 2012," Stonegate Institute, published May 16, 2012, <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/11373/muslim-persecution-of-christians-february-2012>.

<sup>115</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, March 2012), 136.

<sup>116</sup> Tim Townshend, "Religious freedom' Battle Cry Echoes in Capitol," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 31, 2012, accessed April 2, 2012, [http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/religious-freedom-battle-cry-echoes-in-capitol/article\\_083affd3-2175-5aa1-9ff1-e1369ccf33d0.html](http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/religious-freedom-battle-cry-echoes-in-capitol/article_083affd3-2175-5aa1-9ff1-e1369ccf33d0.html).

empowerment and meaning in the experience of violent persecution through the notion of radical discipleship.

Even when moving beyond a religious context, however, a better understanding of the Anabaptist reaction to martyrdom can clarify our view of history in general. The often used cliché, “history is written by the victors,” certainly applies in the case of the Anabaptists. For over three centuries, the dominant view of the Anabaptists came from their opponents in the Reformation. It is only when historians turned to the works of the Anabaptists themselves that a more holistic picture of the Anabaptist movement emerged. Specifically it was Anabaptist theology, created outside the control of the rest of society, which provided the clearest insight into the Anabaptist experience. It reflected their most deeply held beliefs, beliefs that they were willing to die for. It furthermore reflected a conscious identity based on an authority above worldly power in their view, namely God. This paradigm can be applied to the history of other minority groups as well. A full understanding of minority groups is incomplete without the thoughts and beliefs of minority groups in their own words. Theology, in particular, offers the most fruitful grounds for such an examination. It includes the core beliefs of the group, created in a context untainted by the persecuting majority. A better understanding of the Anabaptist view of martyrdom therefore serves as an example for how one should approach the history of other minority groups.

Finally, the conclusion that Anabaptist martyrdom was based around a notion of radical discipleship suggests a number of areas in which the historiography of the Reformation can be expanded. First, historians should turn to other aspects of Anabaptist theology to examine if they reflect the basic belief in radical discipleship displayed in their theologies of martyrdom. If so, it might solidify the syncretistic view of Anabaptist origins

around a stronger singular issue of theology, in addition to geography or social connections. A further area of research suggested by this thesis is the theological reaction to Anabaptist persecution by mainline Protestants and Catholics. Martyrdom fundamentally requires two agents: the persecuted and the persecutor. The Anabaptists certainly viewed their deaths at the hands of others as martyrdom, but it remains to be seen how Lutherans and others theologically understood the need to suppress the more radical elements of the Reformation. Finally, this thesis suggests that research on Anabaptism in the sixteenth century need not be the sole purview of the Mennonites and like-minded Christians. The Anabaptists responded to the universal human condition of suffering in a unique and informative way which should be of interest to all. Their experience also helps to explain larger trends within the Reformation, including many of the political decisions Luther made in order to try to control the direction of the movement. The history of the Anabaptists should therefore have broader historical appeal beyond the small community of the Mennonites. While our understanding of sixteenth century Anabaptism is incomplete, the conclusion that their view of martyrdom was centered around the notion of radical discipleship is a tentative first step towards a more deeper understanding of the movement.



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