

Module 306: Schleithem Confession

The Schleithem Confession of the Swiss Brethren (1527). Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“Everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from.”

Module Introduction

This statement of faith came from a meeting of Anabaptist leaders in Schleithem, Switzerland, in 1527. This was a bare two years after the start of the Anabaptist movement, and most religious movements take a lot longer than that to get round to statements of faith. (Luther's *Augsburg Confession* by comparison came 13 years after he nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door.)

The reason for the haste was that Anabaptism was getting out of hand. Some of its dispersed and uneducated followers were turning to wild immorality; others talked of taking arms against unbelievers. On top of this, persecution meant that the leaders who had a firm grasp of Anabaptist beliefs were fast dying out. The *Confession* set out, not to present the whole Gospel, but rather to clarify those crucial points where they differed from either the state churches of Luther and Zwingli or their own fringe groups.

The *Confession* was largely from the hand of Michael Sattler, a former prior. It covers six points: baptism, “the ban” (excluding the sinful from church); the breaking of bread; separation from the world; pastors; the sword, and taking oaths. It is the first expression of the fundamental Anabaptist idea: that the true church is not a Christian society but a company of believers separated from society.

Notice how, in typical Anabaptist fashion, the *Confession* is not much concerned with abstract theological questions, but focuses on practical issue of church life instead.

The Schleithem Confession

Adopted by a Swiss Brethren Conference, February 24,
1527 Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God
concerning Seven Articles

The articles which we discussed and on which we were of
one mind are these:

I. Observe concerning baptism:

Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned
repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly
that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those
who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be
buried with him in death, so that they may be resurrected
with him and to all those who with this significance request
it (baptism) of us and demand it for themselves. This
excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief
abomination of the Pope. In this you have the foundation
and testimony of the apostles. Matthew 28, Mark 16, Acts 2,
8, 16, 19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with
assurance.

II. We are agreed as follows on the ban:

The ban shall be employed with all those who have given
themselves to the Lord, to walk in his commandments, and
with all those who are baptized into the one body of Christ
and who are called brethren or sisters, and yet who slip
sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently
overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret
and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to
the command of Christ. Matthew 18. But this shall be done
according to the regulation of the Spirit (Matthew 5) before
the breaking of bread, so that we may break and eat one
bread, with one mind and in one love, and may drink of one
cup.

III. In the breaking of bread we are of one mind and

are agreed (as follows):

All those who wish to break one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ, and all who wish to drink of one drink as a remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, shall be united beforehand by baptism in one body of Christ which is the church of God and whose Head is Christ. For as Paul points out, we cannot at the same time drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the devil. That is, all those who have fellowship with the dead works of darkness have no part in the light. Therefore all who follow the devil and the world have no part with those who are called unto God out of the world. All who lie in evil have no part in the good.

Therefore it is and must be (thus): Whoever has not been called by one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one Spirit, to one body, with all the children of God's church, cannot be made (into) one bread with them, as indeed must be done if one is truly to break bread according to the command of Christ.

IV. We are agreed (as follows) on separation:

A separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; in this manner, simply that we shall not have fellowship with them (the wicked) and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. This is the way it is: Since all who do not walk in the obedience of faith, and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do his will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who (have come) out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other.

To us then the command of the Lord is clear when he calls upon us to be separate from the evil and thus he will be our God and we shall be his sons and daughters.

He further admonishes us to withdraw from Babylon and earthly Egypt that we may not be partakers of the pain and suffering which the Lord will bring upon them.

From this we should learn that everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from. By this is meant all Catholic and Protestant works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the oaths sworn in unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God, in accordance with all the unrighteousness which is in the world. From all these things we shall be separated and have no part with them for they are nothing but an abomination, and they are the cause of our being hated before our Christ Jesus, who has set us free from the slavery of the flesh and fitted us for the service of God through the Spirit whom he has given us.

Therefore there will also unquestionably fall from us the unchristian, devilish weapons of force - such as sword, armor and the like, and all their use (either) for friends or against one's enemies - by virtue of the Word of Christ. "Resist not (him that is) evil."

V. We are agreed as follows on pastors in the church of God:

The pastor in the church of God shall, as Paul has prescribed, be one who out-and-out has a good report of those who are outside the faith. This office shall be to read, to admonish and teach, to warn, to discipline, to ban in the church, to lead out in prayer for the advancement of all the brethren and sisters, to lift up the bread when it is to be broken, and in all things to see to the care of the body of Christ, in order that it may be built up and developed, and the mouth of the slanderer be stopped.

This one moreover shall be supported of the church which has chosen him, wherein he may be in need, so that he who serves the Gospel may live of the Gospel as the Lord has ordained. But if a pastor should do something requiring discipline, he shall not be dealt with except (on the testimony of) two or three witnesses. And when they sin they shall be disciplined before all in order that the others may fear.

But should it happen that through the cross this pastor should be banished or led to the Lord (through martyrdom) another shall be ordained in his place in the same hour so that God's little flock and people may not be destroyed.

VI. We are agreed as follows concerning the sword:

The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same (sword) is (now) ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates.

In the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without putting the flesh to death - simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

Now it will be asked by many who do not recognize the will of Christ for us, whether a Christian may or should employ the sword against the wicked for the defense and protection of the good, or for the sake of love.

Our reply is unanimously as follows: Christ teaches and commands us to learn of him, for He is meek and lowly in heart and so shall we find rest to our souls. Also Christ says to the heathen woman who was taken in adultery, not that one should stone her according to the Law of his Father (and yet he says, "As the Father has commanded me, thus I do"),

but in mercy and forgiveness and warning, to sin no more. Such (an attitude) we also ought to take completely according to the rule of the ban.

Secondly, it will be asked concerning the sword, whether a Christian shall pass sentence in worldly disputes and strife such as unbelievers have with one another. This is our united answer. Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother in the case of the inheritance, but refused to do so. Therefore we should do likewise.

Thirdly, it will be asked concerning the sword, shall one be a magistrate if one should be chosen as such? The answer is as follows: They wished to make Christ king, but he fled and did not view it as the arrangement of his Father. Thus shall we do as he did, and follow him, and so shall we not walk in darkness. For he himself says, "He who wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Also, he himself forbids the (employment of) the force of the sword saying, The worldly princes lord it over them, etc., but not so shall it be with you. Further, Paul says, "Whom God did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son," etc. Also Peter says, "Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow his steps."

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth,

righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as in the mind of God toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed. For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed. Now since Christ is as it is written of him, his members must also be the same, that his body may remain complete and united to its own advancement and upbuilding.

VII. We are agreed as follows concerning the oath:

The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God's Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing by his (followers), whether true or false - neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by our head - and that for the reason he shortly thereafter gives, For you are not able to make one hair white or black. So you see it is for this reason that all swearing is forbidden: we cannot fulfill that which we promise when we swear, for we cannot change (even) the very least thing on us.

Now there are some who do not give credence to the simple command of God, but object with this question: Well now, did not God swear to Abraham by himself (since he was God) when he promised him that he would be with him and that he would be his God if he would keep his commandments, - why then should I not also swear when I promise to someone? Answer: Hear what the Scripture says: God, since he wished more abundantly to show unto the heirs the immutability of his counsel, inserted an oath, that by two immutable things (in which it is impossible for God to lie) we might have a strong consolation. Observe the meaning of this Scripture: What God forbids you to do, he has power to do, for everything is possible for him. God swore an oath to Abraham, says the Scripture, so that he might show that his counsel is immutable. That is, no one

can withstand nor thwart his will; therefore he can keep his oath. But we can do nothing, as is said above by Christ, to keep or perform (our oaths): therefore we shall not swear at all.

Then others further say as follows: It is not forbidden of God to swear in the New Testament, when it is actually commanded in the Old, but it is forbidden only to swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem and our head. Answer: Hear the Scripture, "He who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by him who sits thereon." Observe: it is forbidden to swear by heaven, which is only the throne of God: how much more is it forbidden (to swear) by God himself! "Ye fools and blind, which is greater, the throne or him that sits thereon?"

Further some say, "Because evil is now (in the world, and) because man needs God for (the establishment of) the truth, so did the apostles Peter and Paul also swear." Answer: Peter and Paul only testify of that which God promised to Abraham with the oath. They themselves promise nothing, as the example indicates clearly. Testifying and swearing are two different things. For when a person swears he is in the first place promising future things, as Christ was promised to Abraham. Whom we a long time afterwards received. But when a person bears testimony he is testifying about the present, whether it is good or evil, as Simeon spoke to Mary about Christ and testified, "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be spoken against."

Christ also taught us along the same line when he said, "Let your communication be 'Yes, yes; No, no'; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." He says, "Your speech or word shall be yes and no. However when one does not wish to understand, he remains closed to the meaning. Christ is simply "Yes and No," and all those who seek him simply will understand his Word. Amen.

Discussion Starters:

How does the *Confession's* understanding of baptism differ from that of Luther and Zwingli? How do the Anabaptists defend it?

"Infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the Pope." What do you think, from the Anabaptist point of view, is so terrible about infant baptism? Is this a bit of an over-reaction, or is it quite reasonable?

Why is "the ban" important to Anabaptist churches? How does the practice differ from the state churches?

What position does the *Confession* take on the Zwingli/Luther debate about whether the communion is a memorial or a miracle? Once this is briskly dealt with, what question does Clause III spend its time on? What is the importance of this question, and do you think the Anabaptists are right in their approach?

Do you feel that Clause IV is unduly pessimistic about God's creation? Or is it rightly on guard against the sinfulness of the fallen world? Do you think that the list of things to withdraw from is a valid one, or is it over the top?

"For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad." Is this true? Is the Schleithem view of humanity over-simplistic or is this an important truth?

What qualifications for the pastors are mentioned? For what reasons? Are there some that you would expect to see that are not mentioned?

The section on "the sword" teaches complete pacifism. What reasons does it give? Do you think they are sound reasons?

The same clause (VI) says that Christians must not take part in secular government. What reasons does it give? Do you think they are sound reasons?

Lastly, Anabaptists are forbidden from swearing oaths. What arguments are considered against this? How does the *Confession* counter them?

Bible Verses

Matthew 5:33-48

1 Peter 3:13-22

Romans 6:2-5

Matthew 18:15-20