

**I Wait Upon My God:
The Contribution of Michael
Sattler to Our Baptist Heritage**

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“I Wait Upon My God”: The Contribution of Michael Sattler to Our Baptist Heritage

Sattler’s Early Years

Around 1490, future Swiss Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler was born in the town of Staufen in the Breisgau region of Germany. Not much is known about his early life except that he began his religious career as Benedictine monk at St. Peter’s monastery of the Black Forest at a young age.¹ Though the nature and extent of Sattler’s education is unclear, he does demonstrate proficiency in Latin and offers to discuss the Scriptures “in whatever language they might be” during his trial later in life.² These sources have led biographers to categorize Sattler as a “learned” man familiar with humanist modes of thought and capable of exegeting the Scriptures in their original languages.³ While it is clear that Sattler was literate and had some form of elevated education, the source of this training still eludes historians. Some posit that Sattler was able to attend lectures at the University of Freiburg near his hometown. Here he would have gained exposure to a broad range of subjects and languages, including perhaps “Lutheran and Zwinglian ideas.”⁴ Though this scenario is plausible, the source of Sattler’s educational training remains uncertain.⁵

¹See the comments of Jacob Ottelin about Sattler in one of his letters to Martin Bucer: “Especially prominent in this movement is that Michael who was formerly a monk at St. Peter’s.” “Ottelin to Bucer,” in John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 19. The exact date of Sattler’s birth and entry into the monastery are not known. See Gustav Bossert, “Sattler, Michael,” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia [ME]*, ed. Harold Bender and C. Henry Smith (Scottsdale: The Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 427; William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963), 37; and C. Arnold Snyder *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), 24.

²Klaus von Graveneck, “The Trial and Martyrdom of Michael Sattler” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 73. Graveneck did not understand Latin but recognized that Sattler was able to converse with the *Stadtschreiber* of Ensisheim in the language, 74. Sattler also seems to have been familiar with the legal procedures of the court (See Yoder’s comment in *Legacy*, 83 n. 32).

³See for instance Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, vol. 4, 427: “The Hutterite chronicle relates that he was a learned man. All of his writings show that this was a fact.” Cf. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 37.

⁴Yoder, *Legacy*, 10. Most of the traditional biographers of Sattler’s life agree with this interpretation. Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, 4: 427; Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 37.

⁵C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), 23-25. Citing (among other things) the absence of Sattler’s name on university matriculation lists and in scholarly correspondence of the day, Snyder questions the conclusions of Yoder, Bossert, and Estep regarding the nature and extent of Sattler’s formal education.

Wherever Sattler received his formal education, his stay at St. Peter’s monastery plays an important role in the interpretation of Sattler’s pre-Anabaptist life. While at St. Peter’s, Sattler rose to the elevated position of prior.⁶ According to earlier biographers, Reformation teachings swept through the Breisgau region where St. Peter’s was located. As evangelical preachers spread Reformation doctrine around the countryside, Sattler began closely studying and meditating on the Pauline epistles.⁷ As a result of this examination, Sattler came to realize the hypocrisy of his fellow monks and the inability of the monastic life to produce the personal righteousness that God desires. The intensity of Sattler’s convictions continued to grow until he experienced a “crisis,” which could only be resolved by his renunciation of Roman Catholicism and his departure from the ways of monasticism.⁸ Thus, Sattler’s primary reason for leaving the monastery and eventually joining the Anabaptists was theological.

Another line of interpretation emphasizes the social and economic factors surrounding Sattler’s departure from St. Peter’s and his eventual conversion to Anabaptism.⁹ According to this approach, the Reformation in Freiburg and surrounding areas was “an event that failed to arrive.”¹⁰ Contrary to the more lenient atmospheres of Zurich and Strasbourg, the authorities in Freiburg and in the Breisgau were hostile to Reformation teaching and quickly shut down any attempts to preach or spread reformed thinking.¹¹ In this context, St. Peter’s would have probably reflected a similar policy toward Reformation ideas. The effect of this suppression of theological dialogue was that the Reformation spread in the Breisgau primarily in the rural areas among the peasantry. This development intersected with St. Peter’s on May 12, 1525, when the Black Forest peasant troop overtook the monastery as they prepared to lay siege to the nearby city of Freiburg during the Peasant’s War. This event is seen as the probable catalyst in Sattler’s departure from the monastery. In the Black Forest peasant troop were volunteers from Waldshut and Hallau, two towns that were heavily influenced by Anabaptism as a result of the preaching of Wilhelm Reublin and Hans Brotli.¹² Therefore, Sattler likely became

⁶Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, 4: 427. Sattler would later say of his position in the monastery, “According to the flesh I would be a lord but it is better as it is.” Gravenek, “Trial and Martyrdom,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 73.

⁷Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, 4: 427.

⁸Cf. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 37: “Sattler’s new-found evangelical faith finally precipitated a crisis which was only resolved with a severance of all ties with the monastery and the Church of Rome.” Cf. Yoder, *Legacy*, 10; Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, 4: 427.

⁹C. Arnold Snyder, “Revolution and the Swiss Brethren: The Case of Michael Sattler,” *Church History* 50.3 (September 1981): 276-87. Snyder argues that the Sattler story “cannot be told adequately outside of the framework of the sixteenth-century peasant unrest and its demise,” 278.

¹⁰Snyder, “Revolution and the Swiss Brethren,” 279.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²James M. Stayer, “Reublin and Brotli: The Revolutionary Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism,” in *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism*, ed. Marc Lienhard (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 83-104.

exposed to Reformation ideas through the lens of the revolutionary peasants rather than through the ideas of Luther or Zwingli.¹³

While this rendering of the events is compelling and avoids glossing over Sattler’s time at St. Peter’s, the connections and associations made are still circumstantial and rely on reconstructive history just as much as the earlier biographies.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this interpretation allows for a more nuanced view of the beginning of Sattler’s journey toward Anabaptism. However small a role it played, the revolutionary unrest of the common people during this period had some impact on his life. Sattler’s time at St. Peter’s was thus a period of significant social and theological reform that laid the groundwork for his later life and ministry.

Sattler’s Anabaptist Ministry

Sometime after leaving the monastery, Sattler met and married a former nun named Margaretha.¹⁵ Together, they traveled South as Sattler began interacting with Anabaptists around the area of Zurich in Switzerland. Though he was found in the company of many Anabaptist leaders during this time period, Sattler was not completely convinced of the Anabaptist position. He had not yet reached the point of conviction that would mark his later phase of ministry.¹⁶ The first direct evidence of Sattler’s presence in Zurich is found in official prison records in November of 1525. These indicate that after the third Disputation in Zurich, Sattler was imprisoned and only released after he abjured of any Anabaptist teaching and swore never to return to Zurich. After his expulsion from the region, Sattler traveled north and engaged in missionary activity north of Zurich,

¹³Ibid., 282-83. Snyder asserts, “The evidence indicates that the Protestantism available to Sattler at Saint Peter’s must have been the egalitarian gospel according to the common people. This, it seems to me, is a key factor in explaining how Sattler came to be an Anabaptist rather than a mainline Reformer” (283).

¹⁴Cf. Dennis Martin, “Monks, Mendicants and Anabaptists: Michael Sattler and the Benedictines Reconsidered,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* [MQR] 60.2 (April 1986): 139-64. Martin attempts “to interject a note of caution into the discussion” by arguing that “the impact of traditional, contemplative monastic spirituality on Anabaptism was minimal and that such linkages between Anabaptists and monasticism as did exist involved primarily the mendicant orders,” 139. He posits further that “to speak of Benedictine roots for Sattler and Schleithem is misleading,” 139-140.

¹⁵For evidence of Sattler’s wife’s name, see footnote 56.

¹⁶The main documents used to demonstrate that Sattler was convinced of Anabaptism early in 1525 are two references to a “brother Michael” in a “white coat” found in the Zurich archival material. However, both of these references record that this person was “ready to desist from re-baptism,” confess that he had done wrong, and finally to “recant his doctrine, which he preached concerning baptism” (translated in Yoder, *Legacy*, 15-16 n. 1). There is considerable debate as to whether these refer to Michael Sattler at all. Snyder’s assertion regarding this evidence is instructive: “Thus although Sattler is demonstrably in Anabaptist company in November 1525, his actions do not demonstrate strong Anabaptist convictions, in marked contrast to his later heroism in the face of incredible torture.” C. Arnold Snyder, “The Life of Michael Sattler Reconsidered,” *MQR* 52.4 (October 1978): 331.

gaining and baptizing new Anabaptist converts.¹⁷ Perhaps due to persecution from archduke Ferdinand, Austrian ruler of the Breisgau, Sattler continued his journey north to the town of Strasbourg, where the political situation was more tolerant of reformation ideas.

During this year, Sattler’s Anabaptist convictions began to solidify as he continued to rise in prominence among the Swiss and German Anabaptists. In Strasbourg, Sattler came into contact with mainline reformers like Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito and also Anabaptist leaders such as Hans Denck and Ludwig Hatzer. At this point, Sattler was closer to the Reformers’ position than Denck, but further than Hatzer. Thus, Sattler was able to stay in Strasbourg when Denck was forced to flee the city, but later decided to leave while Hatzer was able to remain.¹⁸ While in Strasbourg, Sattler dialogued seriously with these Reformers and Anabaptist leaders and explored the nature of the connection between Anabaptism and the broader Reformation movement.¹⁹

Late in 1526, Sattler decided to leave the company of Bucer and Capito out of conscience, realizing that his position was irreconcilable with the mainline Reformers. After Sattler left Strasbourg, he spent some time in the town of Lahr, making his presence felt as a prominent Anabaptist leader.²⁰ He then traveled to the Wurttemberg along with Wilhelm Reublin and began spreading the teaching that he had come to accept in the previous year. Reublin concentrated his missionary efforts in the South, and Sattler focused on the North, where he began pastoring an Anabaptist congregation at Horb.²¹ In this atmosphere, Sattler became one of the most important leaders of the South-German and Swiss Brethren. Thus, when the Anabaptists of the region decided to hold a conference at Schleithem on February 24, 1527, Sattler was the natural figure to take the lead.

At this conference, a group of Anabaptists drafted and produced the *Schleithem Confession*, which outlined the Anabaptist position on several key issues. Because of the

¹⁷There is evidence of Sattler’s missionary activity north of Zurich in the summer of 1526. Snyder notes in this regard that “Hanns Meyger, who was baptized in late June 1526, identifies Michael Sattler as having been one of his teachers.” C. Arnold Snyder, “Rottenburg Revisited: New Evidence Concerning the Trial of Michael Sattler,” *MQR* 54.3 (1980): 210 n. 10.

¹⁸Yoder makes this connection in *Legacy*, 18-19. Further, in Sattler’s letter to Bucer and Capito, it appears that Sattler’s departure was due to his conscience rather than his jeopardized security. He calls them his “beloved brothers in God.” Michael Sattler, “Letter to Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 21.

¹⁹Hans-Werner Musing, “The Anabaptist Movement in Strasbourg from Early 1526 to July 1527,” *MQR* 51.2 (April 1977): 91-126. As can be seen in his farewell letter, the content of Sattler’s debates with Bucer and Capito centered on disagreements regarding “baptism, the Lord’s Supper, force or the sword, the oath, the ban, and all the commandments of God.” Sattler, “Letter to Bucer and Capito,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 22.

²⁰See Jacob Ottelin’s comment that Sattler was “especially prominent” among the Anabaptist at Lahr in “Ottelin to Bucer,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 19. Ottelin’s letter paints a mostly negative portrait of Sattler, though it is the only “clearly negative statement on record concerning Sattler’s character.”

²¹Bossert, “Sattler,” *ME*, vol. 4, 429. Sattler’s letter to Horb seems to indicate that he was well acquainted with the congregation that he writes to from prison.

volatile nature of the movement and the tense political situation, the confession dealt with practical issues pertaining to the existence of the church rather than formal theological categories. The *Confession* dealt with issues brought on by attacks from without and also from false teaching within the movement.²² It set forth Anabaptist distinctives and clarified various issues related to baptism, the ban, the breaking of bread, separation from the world, pastors, the sword, and the oath.²³ The *Confession* was readily accepted as truth by most Anabaptists and heavily criticized by most mainline Reformers. Zwingli attests to this widespread influence of the *Confession*, when he writes, “There is almost no one among you who does not have a copy of your so well founded commandments.”²⁴ Risking the very real danger of being discovered, Sattler and the members of this convention produced an influential document that solidified Anabaptist teaching at a pivotal time in the movement.

Sattler’s Trial and Martyrdom

While Sattler was away at Schleithem, the authorities of Rottenburg became aware of Anabaptist activity around Horb. Accordingly, not long after Sattler and his wife returned to Horb they were arrested along with some other Anabaptists by Count Joachim von Zollern, regent of Ferdinand of Austria who was “militantly Catholic.”²⁵ A trial date was quickly set for April 12, but had to be delayed because of the strong Anabaptist presence in Horb and because finding judges willing to preside over a case that was a sure death sentence proved difficult.²⁶ The authorities therefore transferred the heavily guarded prisoners to the tower of the distant town of Binsdorf and set a new trial date for May in Rottenburg further up the Neckar River.²⁷

Going into his trial, Sattler was not in a favorable position. Ferdinand thought Sattler did not even merit the semblance of a trial but should be immediately drowned in

²²The cover letter of the *Confession* states that “a very great offense has been introduced by some false brothers among us, whereby several have turned away from the faith” (Yoder, *Legacy*, 35). For a discussion of the possible identity of these “false brothers,” see H.W. Meihuizen, “Who Were the False Brethren mentioned in the Schleithem Articles?” *MQR* 41.3 (July 1967): 200-22.

²³See *The Schleithem Confession*, in *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533)* ed. William Estep, (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1976), 100-105.

²⁴See Yoder, *Legacy*, 33. Yoder observes that “the strategic significance of the achievement of Schleithem is well demonstrated by the rapid and wide circulation of our text,” 32.

²⁵Snyder, “Rottenburg Revisited,” 210.

²⁶For details concerning this process, see Yoder, *Legacy*, 66-67. Yoder states that “the chief difficulty was in finding judges for such an *ad hoc* proceeding in which it was taken for granted that the result would be a death penalty,” 66.

²⁷Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 39. Bossert notes that the prisoners were escorted by “the foremost officials, with fourteen horses.” *ME*, 4: 429.

the Neckar, thus effecting the cruel irony of a “third baptism.”²⁸ Because Sattler was formerly a monk, Ferdinand deemed that “it was less fitting for him to have dared the rebaptism than for a simple lay person.”²⁹ However, the authorities in Rottenburg wanted to go through the motions of a trial in order to preserve the appearance of justice.³⁰ On May 17, 1525, after being interrogated in a preliminary hearing, Sattler’s trial began.³¹ Representing his fellow Anabaptists who were on trial with him, Sattler declined the offer of a defense attorney. Addressing the judges as “servants of God” and appealing to God’s Word, Sattler questioned the validity of the court by arguing that the present trial did not have jurisdiction in matters of faith.³² He and his comrades would defend themselves armed only with the Scriptures.

The charges against the accused Anabaptists were then read. The first seven of these charges applied to everyone present, and the last two were directed specifically against Sattler. The Anabaptists were charged with 1) acting against imperial mandate, 2) teaching against transubstantiation, 3) teaching against infant baptism, 4) rejecting the sacrament of unction, 5) despising Mary and the saints, 6) rejecting oaths to the government, and 7) initiating a corrupt version of the Lord’s Supper.³³ In addition to these, Sattler was charged with forsaking the monastic order by taking a wife and saying that the Ottoman Turks should not be resisted if they were to come into the land.³⁴ This last accusation was particularly explosive due to the widespread fear of Turkish invasion.³⁵ After briefly consulting with his “brothers and sisters,” Sattler responded “fearlessly” to each of these charges by appealing to the logic of Scripture.³⁶ The Anabaptists did not act contrary to imperial mandate, because they had only adhered to God’s Word. Christ is not in the Supper, because he has ascended into heaven. Infant baptism is invalid, because salvation comes through faith. The sacrament of unction is

²⁸See “C. F. Sattler’s Account of the Rottenburg Trial,” translated in Snyder, “Rottenburg Revisited,” 215: “in the meantime the monk from Staufen in the Breisgau, found among the presumed culprits, should be drowned by the head executioner without delay and without degradation or legal process . . . it was less fitting for him to have dared the rebaptism than for a simple lay person.”

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 40. C. F. Sattler indicates in his trial record that Ferdinand’s letter containing his intentions came after the trial had taken place. Sattler, “Sattler’s Account of the Rottenburg Trial,” 216.

³¹“The Hearing of Michael Sattler,” in Snyder, “Rottenburg Revisited,” 211-13. Snyder argues that this hearing occurs before the trial.

³²Cf. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 41.

³³Graveneck, “Trial and Martyrdom,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 70.

³⁴Ibid., 70-71.

³⁵See Estep’s comment in *The Anabaptist Story*, 42: “No other power on earth struck fear in the hearts of Austrians like that of the Turks. . . . the authorities intended to use this as a final blow to condemn [Sattler] before the world.”

³⁶Graveneck, “Trial and Martyrdom,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 71.

wrong, because the Pope’s oil cannot make anything good. The Anabaptists *do* honor Mary and the saints but deny that they are advocates and redeemers. Swearing allegiance to government is misguided, because Jesus forbids swearing in the Sermon on the Mount.³⁷

In defense of leaving the monastery and marrying, Sattler recounts how he had come to despise the “pomp, pride, usury, and great fornication of the monks and priests” after reading the letters of Paul and hearing God’s call to “testify to His Word.”³⁸ Contending that he “took a wife according to the command of God,” Sattler views marriage as one of the things “God has created” to be “enjoyed with thanksgiving.”³⁹ Sattler further maintains that “if the Turk comes, he should not be resisted,” but rather the people “should implore God that He might be our defense and our resistance.”⁴⁰ Sattler would rather “take the field” against those who claim to be Christians but who “persecute, take captive, and kill true Christians,” because the Turk is “a Turk according to the flesh” but the Christians who “persecute the faithful witnesses of Christ . . . are Turks according to the Spirit.”⁴¹ Sattler concludes his defense by admonishing his accusers to consider what they were doing, because the Anabaptists had “done nothing counter to God and the gospel” nor had they “acted against any government in words or deeds.”⁴²

Just in case the judges had not “heard or read the Word of God,” Sattler offered to discuss the issues under consideration in light of the Scriptures. If someone could demonstrate that the Anabaptist position was in error *from the Scripture*, then Sattler and his comrades would “gladly retract and recant” and “gladly suffer condemnation and the punishment for [their] offense.” Sattler’s “hope to God” was that the judges would “repent” and “let [themselves] be taught.”⁴³ Sattler’s hope was not to be realized in this courtroom, for as soon as Sattler uttered these last words, most of the “judges laughed and shook their heads” as the *Stadtschreiber* of Ensisheim began to taunt and ridicule Sattler verbally. Calling him a “disreputable, desperate, and mischievous monk,” the *Stadtschreiber* told Sattler that the hangman would be the one to debate him. Sattler responded by assuring him that “what God wills, that will come to pass.”⁴⁴ The heated exchange continued as the *Stadtschreiber* maintained that if he himself hanged this “evil doer and arch heretic,” then he would be “serving God thereby.”⁴⁵ Sattler’s response to

³⁷Ibid., 71-72.

³⁸Ibid., 72.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 72-73.

⁴²Ibid., 73.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

this particular barb typifies his mentality throughout the trial. He responded boldly, “God will judge rightly.”⁴⁶

After the *Stadtschreiber* rested his case, Sattler responded by saying that he had “not been sent to defend the Word of God in court,” but rather to “testify thereto.”⁴⁷ Sattler then reiterated that the Anabaptists would suffer for their faith in Christ Jesus “as long as we have in us a breath of life, unless we should be convinced otherwise with Scripture.”⁴⁸ By rejecting any legal process and demonstrating that his appeal was to Scripture alone, Sattler rested his case.⁴⁹ While the judges left the courtroom to deliberate over their decision, Sattler was again mocked and verbally attacked.⁵⁰ Over an hour later, the judges returned to the courtroom, and Sattler’s grim verdict was read:

Michael Sattler shall be committed to the executioner. The latter shall take him to the square and there first cut out his tongue, and then forge him fast to a wagon and there with glowing iron tongs twice tear pieces from his body, then on the way to the site of execution five times more as above and then burn his body to powder as an arch-heretic.⁵¹

Before being led back to prison, Sattler told the head judge that he and his fellow judges had “condemned [him] contrary to justice and without proof,” which for Sattler meant that they needed to “look out and repent” or else they would face eternal condemnation before “the judgment of God to eternal fire.”⁵² Not far from his own fiery death, Sattler remained concerned about the souls of his enemies.

Two days later, on May 20, 1525, Sattler was brought into the marketplace where the judgment he had received at the hands of his enemies was carried out to the letter. His tongue was cut out, and he was bound by chains to a cart where two pieces of his flesh were torn from his body with red-hot tongs. He was then driven to the place of execution by the gate where five more times the glowing iron tongs were applied to his body. Eyewitnesses recount that during these procedures, Sattler continually prayed for those persecuting him and urged others to do the same. Just before he was plunged into the fire, Sattler echoed the testimony of martyrs throughout Christian history as he cried out, “Almighty eternal God, Thou who art the way and the truth, since I have not been taught

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹After the *Stadtschreiber* said “The hangman will prove it to you, he can debate with you, arch heretic,” Sattler replied, “I appeal to Scripture.”

⁵⁰Graveneck comments that Sattler “bore like the apostles all the mockery of his person.” Yoder, *Legacy*, 83 n. 37.

⁵¹Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 37. Cf. Gustav Bossert, “Michael Sattler's Trial and Martyrdom in 1527,” *MQR* 25.3 (1951): 201-18.

⁵²Graveneck, “Trial and Martyrdom,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 75

otherwise by anyone, so by Thy help I will testify this day to the truth and seal it with my blood.”⁵³ After he was thrown into the fire with a small sack of gunpowder tied around his neck and “one despaired of his still being alive,” Sattler would cry out “with a clear voice often and constantly to God in heaven.”⁵⁴ When the ropes that bound Sattler’s arms were burned up, he lifted them both with the first two fingers on each hand outstretched. This dramatic gesture was the symbol that he and his brothers had prearranged so that Sattler could signal to them that he was faithful even unto death.⁵⁵

In these gruesome actions, one can see the tragic irony of Sattler’s martyrdom. They cut out his tongue, but they could not stop Sattler’s voice from crying out to God on behalf of his executioners. They seared his flesh with a red-hot iron, but they could not deface the brand of Sattler’s baptism that marked him as a member of Christ’s true church. They forged his body to a wagon, but they could not stop his hands from reaching toward heaven with the signal to his Anabaptist companions that the grace of God was sufficient even for the fires of martyrdom.

Eight days after Sattler’s grisly execution, his wife Margaretha was put to death by drowning, experiencing her “third baptism” in the Neckar river.⁵⁶ This former Beguine nun followed her husband’s lead and refused to recant her faith. When she was offered her freedom by the wife of the imperial regent, Margaretha “persisted in saying that the crown she wanted was the one her Lord Jesus would give” and that “she would rather have gone into the fire with her husband.”⁵⁷ Wilhelm Reublin recounts that she “accepted and suffered death” with “great joy and strong faith.”⁵⁸ Thus, Michael and Margaretha Sattler remained faithful to each other and to their God until death parted them, first through fire and then through water.

Sattler’s Theological Convictions

After Sattler’s death, the *Schleitheim Confession* circulated along with an account of his dramatic martyrdom. Because this was the first Anabaptist confession and due to the dramatic nature of Sattler’s death, these writings were quickly dispersed and widely read. The legacy of Michael Sattler is wrapped up in these two documents. One cannot think of Sattler’s confession without thinking of the death by which he sealed it, and one

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Wilhelm Reublin, “Report of Sattler’s Trial and Death” in Yoder *Legacy*, 78. Yoder explains that the “sack of gunpowder was intended by its exploding to hasten mercifully the death of the martyr.” *Legacy*, 84 n. 48.

⁵⁵Yoder provides this explanation in *Legacy*, 83 n. 42.

⁵⁶Margaretha is named as Sattler’s wife in the “Charges Read Against the Rottenburg Defendants” translated in Snyder, “Rottenburg Revisited,” 213 n. 34: “and Margaretha, wife of Michael Sattler, of Staufen” Snyder notes, “this is the only known reference to Sattler’s wife by name.”

⁵⁷Valerius Anshelm, “Report on Michael Sattler’s Death,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 80.

⁵⁸Reublin, “Report of Sattler’s Trial and Death,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 77.

cannot think of Sattler’s martyrdom without demanding to know what theological convictions enabled him to endure such dreadful persecution.

The epistle that Sattler penned to his congregation at Horb from his cell in the tower of Binsdorf as he awaited his trial provides insight into the specific theological truths that sustained him during his ministry and martyrdom. The nature and tone of this letter gives a glimpse of what Sattler’s ministry was like and why he became so influential in the Anabaptist movement.⁵⁹ It also demonstrates the conviction that would enable him to remain faithful until his life was taken from him. The content of this correspondence echoes some of the themes from the *Schleitheim Confession* he helped draft and also anticipates the statements he would utter during his trial and execution. In this letter, Sattler exhorts his congregation to love their enemies and to persevere under persecution. These admonitions are rooted in theology and eschatology.

Sattler begins his letter to his “beloved companions in the Lord” by praying that they would receive mercy “from God the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the power of Their Spirit.”⁶⁰ By beginning with this blessing, Sattler demonstrates that the God he serves is the Trinity and that his faith in God is one that coheres with centuries of Christian orthodoxy. Throughout his letter, Sattler gives his exhortations in light of the members of the Trinity. When he urges his readers to live righteously so that they might be “recognized in the midst of this adulterous generation of godless men,” he likens them to “bright and shining lights which God the heavenly Father had kindled with the knowledge of Him and the light of the Spirit.”⁶¹ For Sattler, those who knew the Father were led to this belief by the light of the Spirit. Further, the only way that they could hope to persevere in blamelessness would be to “walk the surefooted and living way of Christ” and be “purified through His blood.”⁶² Persecution should not trouble them because these temporary trials are like a father chastising a son in whom he delights.⁶³ Sattler ends his letter by reminding his readers that their ability to exist depends upon the work of all three members of the triune God that they serve. Sattler makes it clear that it will be the “peace of Jesus Christ,” the “love of the heavenly Father and the grace of Their Spirit” that will enable the believers at Horb to persevere to the end. This robust view of the Trinity forms a foundational aspect of Sattler’s theological framework.

Sattler also undergirds his call to perseverance in eschatological realities. He urges his readers to endure all things in the hope of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ Throughout the letter, Sattler sternly warns his congregation about “the

⁵⁹Yoder notes that this letter is the “best source of insight into the kind of ministry he exercised in South Germany between his departure from Strasbourg and the Schleitheim meeting. It includes as well clear indications of the significance which he ascribed to the Schleitheim decisions.” *Legacy*, 55.

⁶⁰Michael Sattler, “Letter to the Church at Horb,” in Yoder, *Legacy*, 56.

⁶¹Ibid. In this statement, Sattler alludes to Mark 8:28 and Phil 2:15ff.

⁶²Ibid., 58.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., 63.

wolves” among “the sheep of God” who threaten the church of Christ either by false teaching within or by merciless attacks from without.⁶⁵ He urges, “Let no one shift your goal . . . which is sealed by the blood of Christ and of many witnesses of Jesus” so that they might “be found to be the humble, fruitful, and obedient children of God.”⁶⁶ The primary reason to follow this exhortation is because “the day of the Lord draws nearer.”⁶⁷ Indeed, Sattler’s call to perseverance is not without an underlying context. His vision of the future realities of God’s judgment and reward undergirds his call to persevere and enables himself to do the same.

In exhorting his congregation at Horb, Sattler betrays an awareness of his own impending death. Already in the Binsdorf tower, Sattler and the other prisoners “underwent all sorts of attacks from the adversaries.” He recounts that his attackers “menaced us once with a cord, then with fire, then with the sword.” Sattler responded to this physical threat by completely abandoning himself to the Lord and by readying himself “for death for the sake of His testimony.” Realizing that his time was near, Sattler prepared himself to be “released” and “with Christ to await the hope of the blessed.”⁶⁸ He describes the opposition he has seen by asserting that “the world has arisen against those who are redeemed from its error.” In this situation, “the day of the Lord must no longer tarry.”⁶⁹ For Sattler, the coming kingdom is the primary incentive for remaining faithful to the end, for the end is near.

Sattler’s own boldness under persecution that he would soon demonstrate to the world came from an eschatological vision that included a Good Shepherd who would give eternal rest to those who would faithfully devote themselves to the kingdom and its purposes in this world.⁷⁰ At the close of his letter, Sattler again warns his congregation of the “false brothers” who would rob them of their future inheritance as those who kept the faith till the end. He reminds them that if he is in fact martyred, it is because the Lord had called him home: “for the Lord will perhaps call me.”⁷¹ For Sattler, persecution for faith in Christ and commitment to the church was bearable through “[treasuring] the jewel which the calling of God holds out . . . for those who conquer.”⁷² Indeed, the ultimate

⁶⁵Ibid., 58, 60.

⁶⁶Ibid., 60.

⁶⁷Ibid., 62.

⁶⁸The preceding quotations in this paragraph are found in Ibid., 60. Sattler viewed the persecution he and his companions endured in prison as “God’s combat.”

⁶⁹Ibid., 61.

⁷⁰Ibid., 62. Though he draws this specific imagery from the apocryphal text of Esdras, Sattler only uses it as an illustration of truths deeply rooted in the Scripture. This entire letter, much like his other letter and trial responses, is imbued with Scriptural language and imagery.

⁷¹Ibid., 63.

⁷²Ibid., 59.

explanation of Sattler’s endurance in the midst of literal trial and tribulation can be traced to Sattler’s final words of his letter to his church: “I wait upon my God.”⁷³

Sattler’s Contribution to Our Baptist Heritage

The Swiss Anabaptists of the sixteenth century played a pivotal role in the Radical Reformation and the beginning of the Anabaptist movement as a whole. They were not radicals in the sense of seeking social change solely for economic or revolutionary ends. Rather, they were radically devoted to the simple teaching of the New Testament regarding what a true church should look like. Though his career as an Anabaptist was abruptly cut short, Michael Sattler was the most memorable and influential Anabaptist of the Swiss Brethren. The testimony of his life and death proved instrumental in holding together the diverse Anabaptist movement at a critical time. He served as the “bridge” between the precarious beginnings of the movement and its structured consolidation years later.⁷⁴ In studying Sattler, one cannot escape the interplay between his theological underpinnings and his dramatic life and death. The two are linked in a way that defies separation. Though Sattler was not the only Anabaptist to be cruelly put to death, his execution was certainly the most memorable, as the words he wrote and the martyrdom he endured have strengthened and edified countless since his time. As one Baptist theologian has rightly articulated, “The impact of Sattler’s superlative witness is felt to this day.”⁷⁵

Oftentimes in contemporary Baptist life, the Anabaptists are used in the debate over Baptist origins as a piece of evidence rather than a source of inspiration. On the one hand, there are those who seek to draw a straight line from contemporary Baptists to the Anabaptists and defend an organic succession from then until now. On the other hand, there are those who reject this kinship with the Anabaptists and argue that Baptists began in seventeenth century England from Puritan and Separatist roots. The former sometimes argue that Baptists should renounce any ties to Reformation teaching in favor of Anabaptist principles. The latter sometimes focus solely on the influences of the Reformation and Separatism to the exclusion of the Anabaptist influence. In this polemical context, the leaders of Anabaptism are oftentimes overshadowed by rhetoric, as they are either vilified or romanticized by participants in the origins debate.

Despite the reality of this situation, there is perhaps a more nuanced way forward. Because the primary Baptist distinctives are based on a close reading of the New Testament, it is no surprise that throughout church history different groups have independently reached similar conclusions.⁷⁶ Viewed in this light, the Anabaptists can be

⁷³Ibid., 63.

⁷⁴See Yoder, *Legacy*, 7: “That Anabaptism survived as a viable movement with visible structures from the naïve beginnings in Zurich in the mid 1520s to the time of the synthesizers of the 1540s, was the work of Michael Sattler more than any other one person.”

⁷⁵Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 44.

⁷⁶Cf. Thomas Armitage’s comment in the preface of his *A History of the Baptists* (New York: Brian Taylor & Co., 1887), iii: “It is enough to show that what Christ’s churches were in the days of the

appreciated as believers who submitted to the authority of the Bible and were willing to hold fast to their confession of faith even unto death. Further, the substance of their confessed beliefs resonate with the contemporary Baptist distinctives of a believers’ church, believer’s baptism, and religious liberty. Whether or not there is a direct historical link to these Radical Reformers, the lives of the Anabaptists can still serve as powerful examples of how a bold commitment to Scripture and a passion for the purity of the church can greatly impact one’s life and confession. Indeed, however one construes the nature and extent of Anabaptist kinship, any Baptist heritage devoid of the testimony of Michael Sattler’s life, death, and theological conviction is an unnecessarily impoverished one.

Apostles, that the Baptist churches of today find themselves. The truths held by them have never died since Christ gave them, and in the exact proportion that any people have maintained these truths they have been the true Baptists of the world.” This is Armitage’s articulation of the theory of Baptist origins known as “principle successionism.”

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