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Heretical Rhetoric:

Anabaptist Rhetoric Throughout the Reformation

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis assesses how the Anabaptists during the epoch known as the Reformation were able to survive religious and political persecution that by all means should have wiped them out due to their lack of government backing and political authority. This thesis will focus on the years 1517-1648 as while the Reformation itself does not have a strict timeline, these years are the most pertinent to properly examine the movement as this was the period in which they suffered the greatest persecution while simultaneously still being able to proselytize swathes of followers. The Anabaptists were a group that was dispersed throughout Europe at the time, but this thesis will mainly focus on those enclosed within the Germanic regions, that is Germany, Switzerland, and the Low Countries, as the sources utilized to focus on those regions and these regions had large swathes of Anabaptists within them. Questions that this thesis will narrow in on pertain to how a polarizing sect such as the Anabaptists were able to survive such a harsh environment. What was it about their leading figures that inspired and brought in new followers to this demonized cause? How was it possible for a cause which would seem so small to reach so many people? Why were so many of their martyrs venerated and cataloged during this period?

Through answering these questions, this thesis will argue that the Anabaptists survival as a movement relied heavily upon their effective usage of charismatic learned preachers who were able to educate and simplify their message for the masses, along with their large and relatable catalog of martyrs who allowed individuals to believe the cause of Anabaptism to not just too plausible, but also righteous. Through this understanding, the notion of such a cause will become less fantastical and more realistic when looking at the undertones of this cause rhetoric, that being the simplification of oration and the extremely personal nature of their martyrs to people who witnessed them during this epoch.

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Introduction

Birtherd in the End



Figure 1.1¹

In 1526, legislation in the city of Zurich, Switzerland was passed by its government which ran in tandem with its religious institution under Huldrych Zwingli. This legislation made it so that all those who took part in the practice of rebaptism would be executed. The first among

¹ Heinrich Thommann, *Abschrift Bullingers Reformationschronik*, 1605, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/the-reformation-eats-its-young_the-anabaptist-felix-manz-meets-a-terrible-end/43485650

these martyrs was a man by the name of Felix Mantz in 1526. He, as well as three other men, would be forcibly drowned in the Limmat. Before his death he let forth a flurry of biblical passages, defiantly stating to all, that those killing him as the “children of Belial” and that he would “firmly adhere to Christ” as he is “acquainted with all my needs, and can deliver me out of it.”² By all means Felix Mantz was a Protestant just like the other Zwinglians, someone who should have been part of their religious brethren, yet his single act of rebaptism led to him and three others being drowned in front of a crowd. What was it about this single act that alienated him so virulently from others that he was not just cast out as a social leper, but brutally killed? How is it that this one act of rebaptism would leave a stain on all those who partook in it during the Reformation that would cause some of the most violent religious responses?

While Felix Mantz would not serve as a leader of the cause, his martyrdom would lead to the provocation of an entirely new movement. Anabaptism was a movement that centered around the notion of infant baptism, or rather centered around the flaw of it. It was a cornerstone of every Christian society to baptize their child as every child is born with the Original Sin, caused by the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where they defied God by allowing themselves to be tricked by Satan to eat the apple. However, to the Anabaptists, this concept of washing away the Original Sin of the children did not make sense as baptism was a sacrament which, to them, could only be undertaken when one had the conscious ability to understand and profess their love and faith in Christ, thereby naming their new baptism believers baptism. This would not be the only creed the Anabaptists generally prescribed, though it is the practice that helps to differentiate them from other causes.

² Denis R. Janz, “Anabaptist Origins,” *A Reformation Reader*, (Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 200-201.
Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (The Project Gutenberg eBook, 2021), pp. 400.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65855/pg65855-images.html>

The Reformation was a period marred by religious isolation. Martin Luther, a former Augustinian Monk had nailed his Ninety-five theses in a relatively mild form of protest against the various practices incorporated by the Church. While this act itself did not cause the Reformation, it created a domino effect that quickly spiraled out of control and led to Europe being a religious battlefield. Religion spurted forth like wildfire with figures all over rushing to find a religious order which could give them the necessary tools to attain salvation and gain a proper relationship with God. From this movement arose a movement in Switzerland in the city of Zurich led by Huldrych Zwingli.³

Zurich in 1525 had become a city whose government was being run in tandem with its now official religion of evangelicals, a religion which had been birthed forth from the Reformation as a response to the perceived failures of the Catholic Church. However, despite this change, there will still be figures who were chafing at the neck against what they viewed as Zwingli's backtracking and failure to implement real change in the region. This would come to a pass in early January of the year when a group of believers chose to rebaptize themselves and run rampant.⁴ This would be the catalyst that led to the creation of the Anabaptists in the first place, and the death of Felix Mantz.

Other common beliefs within the Anabaptist circle that led to their ostracization included a general leaning towards nonresistance as during this epoch people all over were persecuting those who should be considered God's chosen, so if the Anabaptists themselves did not take part in this persecution and only got persecuted, then according to Dirk Philips, a Mennonite leader (a group of Anabaptists), then they must be "the people of God" fighting against "the people of the

³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, (Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 150.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 150.

devil.”⁵ To Philips as well as many others, “the children of God must suffer persecution from the children of the devil” thereby making it so those who were persecuted but did not persecute themselves must truly be God's children. Many Anabaptists also held to the notion that Church and State should be separated, an idea popularized by one of their earlier leaders Michael Sattler who proclaimed “the rule of government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the spirit.”⁶ This idea made the Anabaptists particularly vile in the eyes of secular authority, especially the Hapsburgs, the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, as they legitimized and believed themselves to have divine authority from God and the Church. Notions such as these would make it so that the Anabaptists, whose central notion was already threatening to many, were even more hated as their nonresistance made it so they were easy to persecute, and their refusal to legitimize secular authority under spiritual guidelines made them threatening to magistrates all over.

Anabaptists also consistently failed to gain any form of actual political authority or backing as will be showcased with their attempts to do so in regions such as Münster and due to their convictions never had any government backing generally as well. By all means, this was a religious denomination that should have been wiped off the face of the map from its very inception. Despite this, during the Reformation between the years of 1517 and 1648, there were over 10,000 who were martyred under Anabaptist charges.⁷ Anabaptism, a polarizing sect within the Christian world, held little favor with any religious institution or political authority and yet there were over 10,000 individuals who were martyred, this of course does it include those practicing both openly and in private during this epoch. How was this possible?

⁵ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 223.

⁶ Denis R. Janz, “The Schleithem Confessions,” *A Reformation Reader*, (Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 210.

⁷ Kirk R. MacGregor, “Hubmaier’s Death and the Threat of a Free State Church,” *Church History and Religious Culture*, (Brill, 2011), pp. 321.

This survival and arguably flourishing of Anabaptists comes down to their ability to have extremely capable and erudite leaders espousing their religious doctrines to the masses allowing for their message to be spread. This in tandem with many Anabaptists' ability to meet their end in a biblical fashion allowing for them to be out in contention with some of the greatest martyrs in history made it so Anabaptists had an extremely large well of rhetoric for them to bring in new believers to their cause.

The central focus of this paper will be to properly show the varying ways in which Anabaptists utilized varying forms of rhetoric in as effective a manner as possible. The paper will begin with a chapter regarding learned preachers and the efficacy of their rhetoric. For this to be properly highlighted it is important to start the chapter with varying figures who stood as leaders of this movement. From there it will move on to why these figures in particular, through their espousal of biblically backed sermons and learned education were able to turn so many people to their cause in the first place. From there the paper will aim to show not just how effective these people were acknowledged to be, but also the threat many viewed them as posing as showcased through the targeted attacks on these figures. Due to the effectiveness of these individuals, it will be shown not just how much they affected those who believed them, but also how far they could turn these individuals such as with the instances of Münster and the Blutsfreunde.

After this first chapter, the thesis will move on to discuss the rhetoric surrounding Anabaptist martyrs and how those figures stood as the epitome of Anabaptist rhetoric. The chapter will begin with what it took to become a martyr during this epoch, and what being a martyr meant to the movement. From there the chapter will center its focus on how these martyrs were at times legitimized in a sense through the descriptions of divine portents or omens which

took place before, during, and or after their somber end. Subsequently, this chapter will end on how all this together helped the image of these martyrs take a life of their own through songs and stories. However, irrespective of the martyr's decision, their image and existence was used as something to highlight not only the rhetoric surrounding the Anabaptist but also stood as symbols for what it meant to truly be an Anabaptist.

Chapter 1

Learned Words

On March 10th, 1528, Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier was burnt alive in the city of Vienna. Hubmaier was a prominent Anabaptist leader, who on the surface should not have held much influence. Anti-Nicodemite (those who did not represent their true beliefs, choosing instead to hide them) antipathy ran rampant during this period and Hubmaier had privately stated that he would be willing to recant his religious views to the Swiss Reformation leader Zwingli, another prominent figure in the Reformation in Zurich.⁸ Furthermore, Hubmaier's execution, which should have caused him to be in contention for being a martyr, was put into question as instead of being tried for his religious beliefs Hubmaier was tried for sedition.⁹ Here was a man who had repudiated his religious beliefs, although he did go back on this, and whose death which should have instated him as a martyr was viewed with much scrutiny. Despite his seemingly poisoned legacy upon his death, different echelons of Anabaptists sprouted up, spreading his message, inspired by his willingness to die for his convictions, namely those of believers baptism and separation of Church and State.¹⁰ This led to various Anabaptist groups holding Hubmaier up as an early figurehead of the Anabaptist faith. So why was it that Hubmaier was able to leave such a lasting legacy? How are they famous preachers when everyone hates them?

⁸ Kirk R. MacGregor "Hubmaier's Death and the Threat of a Free State Church." pp. 336.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 324

¹⁰ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 206.

To properly espouse these notions which would be propagated by scripture, it was essential to have figures well-versed in said notions. Three figures who undeniably stand at the forefront of Anabaptist scriptural rhetoric were Balthasar Hubmaier, Michael Sattler, and Menno Simons, each having a longstanding education regarding the scriptural interpretation, and each arguably being on par with one another to a degree. Nevertheless, among the three, few could boast to be as erudite as Balthasar Hubmaier, whom the Anabaptists held as a central figure to their cause. Hubmaier was regarded as “probably the most learned of the early Anabaptist leaders.” This was partially due to his learned background, as shown by his theology doctorate which he gained under the theologian Johannes Eck.¹¹ Despite having a pastorate under the Church, Hubmaier soon changed his religious views and emphasized that every idea he espoused could be backed through scriptural evidence. This benefited Hubmaier and others greatly as during the beginning of the Reformation’s epoch the pre-Reformation did not expect its clergy to be masters of theology like Hubmaier only expecting much of their clergy to be able to recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed.¹² Due to this, figures such as Hubmaier could potentially make the average clergy seem about as learned as a layman in his presence regarding scripture, helping to emphasize his knowledge of scripture.

Hubmaier was not the only member of the Anabaptists whose message spread like wildfire. At the outset, this should not have been possible for a group such as the Anabaptists who never truly had any lasting government or political authority from which they could situate themselves compared to other evangelicals, such as the Lutherans with Wittenberg and the Calvinists with Geneva. Nevertheless, Anabaptism, while not flourishing, still grew in various

¹¹ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 207.

¹² Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation.” *Past & Present*, no. 136 (1992) pp. 52.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/650901>.

areas. The answer to this can be found through the cornerstone of scripture. During the Reformation, the idea of sola scriptura (the Bible as the sole source of scriptural authority) was a paramount concept to many different Protestant denominations. This notion is epitomized by Brad S. Gregory in his work *Salvation at Stake*, where he points out that Anabaptists “rarely referred to any other sources other than the Bible,” as it was “the expression of God’s will.”¹³ However, few during this period could fully comprehend the bible due to low literacy rates among more pauper individuals leading to many relying on “hybrid forms, such as reading aloud,” such as preaching to learn about the Bible.¹⁴

This chapter will focus on how by utilizing the word through scripture, it became easier to enrapture soon-to-be believers in the Germanic regions of Germany, Switzerland, and the Low Countries. By tackling how scripture was an essential part of everyday life it can be made possible to understand just how effective proper utilization of this rhetoric was, especially when one understands the difficulty for others to interpret such ideas themselves, due to poor religious education and low literacy. Literacy is a difficult concept to measure during the Reformation. There has never been hard evidence that helps scholars to measure the level of literacy, notions such as schools or work were rough methods used to try and quantify this.¹⁵ However, there is no doubt that the majority of people during this period were at the very least looking for someone to outline scriptural teachings to them in some manner. The Council of Trent acknowledged during one of their meetings that people were looking for answers, and by failing to put forth answers with sufficient scriptural backing they would most likely lose more people to Protestantism, making sure to emphasize “briefness and plainness of speech.”¹⁶ The discourse surrounding this

¹³ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 107.

¹⁴ Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of the Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ Frederick J. McGinness. “Preaching Ideals and Practice in Counter-Reformation Rome.” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 11, no. 2 (1980): pp. 111-112.

topic of rhetoric regarding scripture is undoubtedly prevalent, however, it lacks an overview of the larger picture, failing to take into account just how expansive its role was.

Scholars outline the power of rhetoric in a fantastic fashion, however, they neglect a multitude of key points. Learned preachers were no doubt one of the most effective weapons in this theological battle, being able to inspire both wonder in the eyes of the common man and fear in their enemies through their words alone. Both scholars seem to fall short of outlining just how important scriptural-backed preaching was. The word of the Gospel was the word of God, without its usage nowhere near as many individuals would have turned to Anabaptism. It was so essential, particularly to Anabaptist denominations that almost all their martyrs died reciting it, showcasing not just its widespread use, but also how it was used as a core principle for piety. Furthermore, it was clear that scriptural usage was not limited to those of a higher social echelon, with members of a large variety of the social ladder espousing these lines of scripture. Perhaps those on the higher end of the social ladder had read these texts themselves, but those on the lower end most likely had it taught to them by preachers in sermons. This perfectly encapsulates both the power that scriptural rhetoric held over people of all social statuses and the need for a learned clergy to teach such things in the first place.

This chapter will mostly be composed of records kept of Anabaptists before their deaths. It will particularly touch on texts such as *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660* as these were the most widespread and complete works that pertained to Anabaptist martyrs at the time, as most other records account for Anabaptists as a sect within their texts while *Martyrs Mirror* strictly highlights the Anabaptist's struggle, allowing for a more complete picture of the

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2540035>.

Anabaptists martyrs. This text worked to intertwine the ideas and deaths of Anabaptist martyrs with the martyrs of the past, showcasing forms of Anabaptist propaganda while simultaneously giving a window into the last words of many Anabaptist martyrs. This chapter will also outline various sermons from prominent Anabaptist preachers. These texts are essential as littered throughout them is scriptural implementation, as well as constant evidence of the necessity of scripture, not just in turning one towards Anabaptism in the first place, but dying for it as well.

Background

In a time in Europe where few were truly literate, many relied on the knowledge of others to hopefully grasp the truth of the gospel themselves. Due to this, scholars such as McGinness and Parker touch on how important it was for Protestants to make sure that their messages reached the common man who had no other way to learn. Both scholars use different methods of showcasing this with McGinness showing the Catholic fear of it, while Parker touches directly on the Protestants / Anabaptists. Both men attribute success to preaching with McGinness emphasizing the Ciceronian techniques utilized by Protestants that lead Catholics to declare it should be “wrenched from the arms of the impious,” whereas Parker more so emphasizes the erudite knowledge of Protestants rather than technique as they were expected to have “detailed theological knowledge.”¹⁷ Both scholars center their focus on the ability of these preachers, both having merit to their argument, as during this period to spread one's theology it was important not only to have a compelling preaching method, Ciceronian, but also to have the knowledge to answer hard theological questions at a time when salvation was in question. Another point touched on is in regards to distilling these arguments so that it will be easier for the common

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 118.

Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation.” pp. 56.

pauper to parse. Once again both scholars go in different directions for the same conclusion as Parker touches on the utilization of popular methods of spreading the religious message, such as songs, not just bolster one's theological argument but also as a method to spread anticlerical sentiment. McGinness on the other hand focuses on the use of simplified preaching to make it easier for the masses to comprehend the message while, much like the singing, simultaneously bringing down their theological opponents, that being “demonstrative preaching (the art of praise and blame).”¹⁸ Through these arguments, both scholars, despite having separate examples, come to the same conclusion that preaching was imperative to the spread of the Reformation. Though preaching can only reach a set amount of people if they only preach to those they “tolerate.”

Sola Scriptura was an essential cornerstone of the Anabaptist faith as well as all the Protestants. For any theological principle to be justified in the eyes of Anabaptists it must first be able to be proved through scripture. There is no clearer example of this than in the very principle of the Anabaptist faith itself, rebaptism. Every Anabaptist leader argued that the necessity for rebaptism lay in the fact that there is no mention of infant baptism in scripture, making it so the notion itself lacks any backing, and that there is backing for baptism to take place as an adult as Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved’ (Mark 16:16; Matt. 28:19). This scriptural line demonstrates in the eyes of Anabaptist leaders that to be properly baptized one must first have the ability to showcase their beliefs and convictions. It is due to this necessity of scriptural evidence that lays the foundation of their theology that Anabaptist leaders make sure that every point they make can be backed up with scriptural evidence.

¹⁸ Frederick J. McGinness, “Preaching Ideals and Practice in Counter-Reformation Rome.” pp. 120. Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation.” pp. 63.

Sermons and Semantics

Due to this reliance on preaching for many parishes, it became extremely imperative for preachers of the Reformation to do this in as engaging a manner as possible to garner a wider following. One manner of achieving this was demonstrating a better command of the bible. It was due to these factors, that through high-quality and erudite Anabaptist scholars as well as preachers, despite Anabaptist persecution, their message was still able to spread to individuals of different social classes. As aforementioned, Hubmaier made it central to his cause that every view he held was backed by scripture. Scripture was used not just to elevate him and his followers in the eyes of others but also to denounce and repudiate his opponents. In his work, *Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them*, he espoused the notion that inquisitors were “the greatest heretics of all, since, against the doctrine and example of Christ, they condemn heretics to fire,” backing such a claim through scripture as “Christ did not come to butcher, destroy, and burn, but that those that live might more abundantly (John 10:10).”¹⁹ This quote encapsulates Hubmaier's ability not just to back his claims through scriptural evidence but also to denounce his opponents, going so far as to use such information to claim that they have in some way gone astray from it. This works to not just undermine his Catholic opponents but also his Protestant counterparts as well, castigating their violent actions with a single Biblical passage. Through this interpretation of the Bible, Hubmaier invalidates all his opponents whilst simultaneously espousing an extremely radical view. Furthermore, there are a few lines in most of Hubmaier's works that do not to some degree refer to the Bible, making sure every notion he states has some form of scriptural backing behind it.

¹⁹ Denis R. Janz, “Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them,” *A Reformation Reader*, (Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 202.

This need for not just sufficient knowledge, but knowledge of scripture that exceeds that of their contemporaries is showcased in another extremely erudite leader of the Anabaptists, Menno Simons. Simons, much like Hubmaier, was a former Catholic clergyman with an extensive knowledge of theology, especially for this period.²⁰ Much like Hubmaier, Simons also showcased a necessity to back all his beliefs behind scripture. However, whereas Hubmaier showcased the need for a learned clergy and the awe that came from them, Simons showed the fear of them. It was said that Simon in “his glorious admonitions, and writings from the word of God, so flourished, that none of his adversaries dared come before him in an open and free scriptural disputation, though he at various times and very earnestly requested it.”²¹ In this description, one thing highlighted by this chronicler regarding Simon's abilities is his writings from the word of God, most of which were undoubtedly backed by scriptural knowledge to justify his claims. Furthermore, an important notion that is exemplified in this account is the fact that his opponents feared debating him, showing not just the need to be well-read in scripture, but also the fear of being outdone by another regarding it. However, this description may be an exaggerated account of Simon's abilities and the fear of his opponents, there is clear evidence that backs this claim. In 1543, the Emperor himself had a decree proclaimed “in which all malefactors and murderers were offered remission of their crimes, the pardon of the Emperor, the freedom of the country, and one hundred Carl Guilders, if they could deliver Menno Simon into the hands of the torturers and executioners.”²² This showcases that even if Simon's theological abilities may have been exaggerated to a degree, his in-depth knowledge of scripture and sermons was still seen as a big enough threat in the eyes of the Emperor that a bounty was put on his head in his region.

²⁰ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 207.

²¹ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 439.

²² *Ibid*, pp. 439.

Another learned figurehead of the Anabaptist movement who backed many of his statements through the effective implementation of scripture was Michael Sattler, the leader of the Swiss Brethren and apparent author of the Anabaptist Schleithem Confessions. In a final epistle, written before his impending execution, Sattler sends a letter to believers at the Church of God at Horb that is to be read as a sermon, which is rich with constant spiritual support. Nearly every paragraph in this epistle implements at least one line from the Gospel. Sattler warns his followers to “Not become weary if you are chastened of the Lord (Heb. 12:5),” and that they should “Beware of false brethren (Acts 20:39).”²³ In a final act of defiance Sattler uses scripture to both implore his brethren to stay strong in their convictions and to spread it to those in need of it while simultaneously denouncing the false brethren, most likely pertaining to other Protestant denominations and Catholics. Despite his impending death Sattler stays strong in his convictions and allows scripture to empower Anabaptist doctrine, showcasing both how much he believes in what he preaches, but also the credulity of it through scriptural backing. While it is not possible to tell how many people this epistolary act was read to, there is no doubt that its emphatic implementation of scripture allows it to outshine many notions espoused by Catholics and other Protestants.

Evidence of the essential nature of knowledge of scripture is not just showcased through the learned preachers who utilized it but also those who upon being interrogated show its enticement. *Martyrs Mirror* is littered with accounts of Anabaptist martyrs who, nearing their death, fall upon scripture to justify not just their decisions but also their impending end. Four brethren and sisters were captured in 1529. Upon being questioned one of these brethren, Brother Wolfgang of Mos acknowledged that he and 2 others were swayed towards the theology of Anabaptism by a wandering preacher by the name of Michael. When inquired as to how he was

²³ Ibid, pp. 405.

turned Wolfgang directly quotes scripture as he was rebaptized “according to the command of God. Matt. 28:19.” Rather than proclaiming his own beliefs or different theological doctrines as the reason for his newfound convictions Wolfgang directly quotes a scriptural passage as to how he was rebaptized showing the power this had over others. Furthermore, from this group, Thomas Imwald of Aldein, Mankager of Fuessen, Barbara of Thiers, Agatha Kampner of Breitenberg, and Elizabeth, Agatha’s sister, all proclaimed that they had been turned by clergymen, two of them being former priests. These figures would have no doubt had scriptural training, the extent of which is admittedly unknown, and would have been at the very least more knowledgeable in matters of scriptural doctrine helping to showcase the high education levels of these figures.²⁴ This notion is further exemplified as each of these members themselves directly quote scripture as well as justification for their acts along with their reassurance for the fate that was waiting for them. None of the figures of this one group had concluded themselves but had been guided by figures who would have been trained in scriptural theology and showcased the power that learned preachers had in turning others towards this faith. It is made clear that by having just a rudimentary understanding of scripture one has a far better chance of converting others.²⁵

Something striking about this utilization of scripture is how clearly it is shown to be essential to many of those who turned towards the Anabaptist faith. Weynken, an Anabaptist who was burnt to death in the Hague in 1527 for her convictions was not some learned clergyman but rather a widow. Despite having no theological education she is shown to recite scripture to showcase why she chose to turn towards Anabaptism and as a way to justify her beliefs. This scripture she most likely either learned through a vernacular printing of the Bible or more likely,

²⁴ Robert W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*, (Hambledon Press, 1988), pp.128.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 420-421.

a wandering Anabaptist preacher who used this scripture to warrant his convictions. Upon being asked several questions regarding her convictions and impending death Weynken almost exclusively relies on scripture to answer these questions, helping to showcase not just how scripture was used to help people find their faith, but also how important it was in the eyes of many concerning the faith they followed. When questioned as to how she first became an Anabaptist Weynken answers, “The Lord, who calls all men to him; I am also one of his sheep; therefore I hear his voice (John 10:27.)” This quote showcases the absolute power of the word as scripture is generally considered to be the voice of God and by using it to back her claims and without it being used to refute such claims Weynken can stand by her newfound faith.²⁶

So why did figureheads like Hubamaier have to rely so heavily on proving their knowledge of scripture? There has been widespread debate among scholars as to just how affected the masses were by the influence of the Reformation. Much in the same vein as literacy, it is extremely difficult to measure how much people in separate regions were affected by the Reformation as there are a wide variety of statistics with some being misinterpreted in certain regions and others being exaggerated.²⁷ This was partially because there were very few who could interpret these new religious doctrines by themselves. Geoffrey Parker states that in some regions hardly fifty percent of the inhabitants would have been able to interpret Protestant doctrine without having some expert to guide them in the matter, as there are cases throughout a plethora of regions with testimonies of congregations.²⁸ This need for scriptural guidance made it so that anyone who could espouse sermons through the backing of scriptural knowledge was an especially effective tool in the battle for theological enlightenment.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 408-409

²⁷ Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation.” pp. 54.
Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany*, (Oxford University Press 2015), pp. 9.

²⁸ Geoffrey Parker, “Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation.” pp. 54.

This need for scriptural emphasis is clearly outlined in many Anabaptist martyrs' death as not their social strata, whether it be peasant or erudite scholars they all seem to fall back on scripture before meeting their death. When asked as to whether or not she feared being burnt at the stake, Weynken falls back on scripture to steady herself at the sight of her end stating, "No, for I know how I stand with my Lord." Other martyrs such as Little Hans of Stotzingen and another group of nine brethren and three sisters used scripture to portray themselves as willing sacrifices for the lord with Han's beseeching to "partake of the sacrifice of thy Son Jesus Christ. Amen Heb. 9:14," and the brethren and sisters cheerfully proclaiming, "This day we will suffer in this place for the word of God, and offer to him our sacrifice. Rom. 12:1; 2 Tim. 4:6."²⁹ The fact that scores of Anabaptists of various Anabaptist denominations and social echelons all fell back on scripture showcases the power of it had not just in being utilized to turn them towards this faith in the first place, but also empowering it and making it so that they can see themselves transcend death.

Learned preachers were seen as such an essential asset for these theologies that this theological battle did not stop in the realm of sermons. During the Eighty Years War, which took place in the Low Countries, Catholics and Protestants targeted the other's respective clergy as by doing so they aimed to weaken the other's ability to indoctrinate more believers. The Army of Flanders went out of its way to hang any Calvinist minister or elder they came across in the region whenever they had the chance. The Protestant Geuzen (Sea Beggars) also targeted any Catholic clergy. This ranged from nuns to priests to monks scattered throughout the region.³⁰ The fact that during war times differing religious authorities would purposefully target not just followers of these respective religions, but their most learned and esteemed members showcases

²⁹ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 413-414.

³⁰ Geoffrey Parker, "Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation." pp. 59.

the power that came with knowledge of scripture and the ability to do so in an effective manner. Many authorities would aim to reform more pauper members of the Anabaptist faith as overall many secular authorities' goal was not wanton violence against their religious enemies but rather to reform others of their mistakes.³¹ However, much like how the Army of Flanders and the Geuzen targeted each other's respective learned clergy, whenever secular authorities got their hands on more esteemed or learned Anabaptist leaders they tended to go out of their way to dispose of them.

Learned preachers and scripturally backed sermons were recognized to be so effective for Anabaptists and other Protestants that the Church began to widely adopt it. During the Council of Trent, many on the council emphasized the need to base more of their arguments and sermons on scripture to emphasize for their side that the Gospel backed their ideas.³² The Third Session of the Council of Trent (1562-1563) further expanded on this need for a more learned clergy in regions by commanding that there must be a Sunday school and confraternity in each parish.³³ The main purpose here was to outnumber Protestants in scholarly clergy, and to, at the very least, outwit them in scriptural matters. By doing so the Church was seemingly hoping that they would entice more individuals to their cause as by having clergy who could espouse doctrine in a more enticing and or learned manner they may be able to combat the Protestants, such as the Anabaptists in the battle of rhetoric.

Furthermore, the method of preaching that was used was also acknowledged for its effectiveness. This preaching is known as demonstrative preaching, where the sermons focused on praise and blame, the praise was centered towards their side, and the blame aimed at whatever

³¹ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 78.

³² Frederick J. McGinness, "Preaching Ideals and Practice in Counter-Reformation Rome." pp. 112.

³³ Geoffrey Parker, "Success and Failure during the First Century of the Reformation." pp. 71.

the moral of the sermon was or whoever it was targeted against.³⁴ This is showcased in Hubmaiers earlier quote pertaining to the heretical nature of the Inquisition and the foundation they set. He first clearly outlines their heresy through their violent acts, choosing then to move this blame towards praising his idea of pacifism and tolerance concerning this vile heresy set out by the inquisitors. This method of demonstrative preaching was proven to be so effective that it became the main method of preaching implemented by the Council of Trent, helping to outline both how mainstream it was for Protestants as well as how effective it must have been for it to be put forth as the de facto form of papal preaching.³⁵ Another highlight of this was that a formerly mainstream method of preaching, judicial preaching, began to take a back seat and became utilized far less. This was because it was now needed less, but also that it was far too confusing and to combat Protestant conversions the Church would have to become more centralized and set forth a message that was easier to understand and simultaneously more enticing than the arguments of their contemporaries, and backed by better theological knowledge.

Preaching the Classes

Although knowledge of scripture and charisma were essential parts of Anabaptist rhetoric, what was just as important was how this information was implemented. During this epoch a high ranking noble during the Reformation generally wouldn't turn the same as a pauper in the streets of Waldshut would, nor would they be able to utilize certain methods on them. There was a wide range of differing methods one could implement to reach those in differing positions.

³⁴ Frederick J. McGinness, "Preaching Ideals and Practice in Counter-Reformation Rome." pp. 120.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 120.

This malicious targeting of learned preachers most likely played into the aspect that many Anabaptist preachers in regions such as Germany tended to give little away about their person to those they initiated. Frequently those who were inquired about who it was that baptized them had little knowledge themselves, seemingly with many describing them either as a “stranger.”³⁶ Admittedly this could simply be because those interrogated were protecting their baptizers. However, Luther himself recognized these Anabaptist preachers as being “infiltrating preachers,” known for “creeping and running.”³⁷ This plays against the notion that Anabaptists only achieved their success through learned and famous preachers, and while these figures were essential, they were able to inspire others to follow in their footsteps. No matter the rhetoric people were susceptible to it so long as it was either espoused charismatically, taught simply, or at the very least came from a figure who others could look up to and be inspired by.

There is no doubt that the Reformation, especially for a movement such as the Anabaptists, had a “clerical stamp” on it.³⁸ However, not all of these figures had to have a reputation behind them so long as they were able to properly showcase the aforementioned traits of charismatic oration, biblical knowledge, and simplification. It's no secret that “only a tiny number of the male population aspired to university education.”³⁹ This fact lies as a double-edged sword. On one end, it made it so that any mildly educated preacher with even a minute level of knowledge of the bible could waltz in to convert new followers. This was not just because he had little resistance from others, but also because since so few were fully educated it would make those unnamed Anabaptist preachers, mainly uneducated paupers, more susceptible to their doctrine and rhetoric. Scribner defines how these preachers, no matter their background

³⁶ Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany*, pp. 34.

³⁷ Ibid, 33.

³⁸ Robert W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*, pp. 124.

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 130.

or education, were fulfilling a need of these people, that is “the desire of the community for a godly preacher.”⁴⁰ This demand for proper preaching would stand center stage for one of the most successful, and undoubtedly stained events of Anabaptist proselytizing, Münster.

A Painted City of Radicals

The effectiveness of learned preachers' simplification of biblical scripture and effective oration is highlighted when one peers at the steeple of St. Lambert's Church, where one will see three iron gibbets. These macabre and lifeless devices stand as a testament to the sin which took place in Münster in the 1530s. Jan van Leiden, the self-proclaimed “King of David” of his “New Jerusalem” set in the city of Münster, along with Bernhard Krechting and Bernhard Knipperdolling met grim fates before having their corpses displayed within these devices. Jan's forces had been defeated by a joint coalition of Catholic and Protestant forces and upon being captured, he, along with his contemporaries suffered excruciating torture before being put to death. Jan was “tied to a stake and tortured with fiery and glowing tongs and eventually killed, presumably under the applause and pleasure of the priests.”⁴¹ Despite his hopes of creating a New Jerusalem, Jan had instead suffered within its corpse, laying within a twisted realm of perdition, a place one might imagine to be seen in a painting, in which its clergy gave thunderous applause when he met his end, having been placed there by two sides of this religious reformation who on paper should have been putting each other to the stake. How is it that even though during the Reformation, when Lutherans and Catholics were butchering each other and tearing each other asunder they were able to find common ground in crushing this lone Anabaptist stronghold? Why is it that even Anabaptists afterward would look back at this event

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 133.

⁴¹ Denis R. Janz, “The End of Jan Van Leiden,” *A Reformation Reader*, (Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 224.

in horror, not at the actions of their enemies but rather at their religious brethren? Finally, what was happening in Münster was so radical and gut-wrenching that two enemies, each of whom would consider the other an agent of the Devil, could anyone follow such a sinful cause?

Background

An alternative method to gauge the effectiveness of Anabaptist rhetoric regarding its ability to draw followers while simultaneously showcasing the inability of the Catholics to do so in certain regions, or at the very least their failure to give a standard religious education is through viewing the more radical denominations of the Anabaptist sect. Anabaptism itself is already an extremely radical notion, especially during this epoch. The central notion of community according to late medieval Christianity revolved around the sacrament of infant Baptism. Upon being baptized an infant was brought into the “community of Christians,” by being baptized a child was not just being freed of the sin their parents had committed by producing them as well as a ward against the Original Sin, but they were also welcomed into the religious community of the Catholic order.⁴² By rejecting the notion of infant baptism due to its vessel being unable to comprehend their faith, Anabaptists were essentially turning their back not on the sacrament, but also on the community that entailed it. Furthermore, Anabaptists strongly believed in notions such as nonresistance or pacifism. During a period when religious denominations such as Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics were calling for the massacres of their religious opponents, Anabaptists shockingly took the path of non-resistance, something that will be expanded upon further later. Anabaptists viewed their stance as being a form of “nonresistance against evil.”⁴³ With these already radical notions in place, many probably

⁴² John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700*, (Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 15.

⁴³ Donald B. Kraybill, *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites*, (John Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 162.

wondered how much farther Anabaptists may go, this question would of course be answered with the city of Münster.

Münster's Crucible

The radical Anabaptist sect that would eventually become known as the Münsterites would come to pass under the guidance of Melchior Hoffmann in the city of Strassburg. During the Reformation Strassburg had become a hotspot for theological mingling, a place where figures of all religious denominations could try their hands at different forms of religious dogma with many proclaiming that Strassburg could be a “New Jerusalem.”⁴⁴ Amongst these figures was Melchior Hoffmann, a dissatisfied Lutheran who upon meddling with notions such as Joachimite apocalypticism (holding onto a strong conviction that God would return in 1533). When many of his ideas began to falter, primarily his conviction surrounding the Lord’s return, many of his followers began to disperse, primarily a man by the name of Jan Matthijszoom. Charismatic, something already shown to be indispensable during this period, he put forth the idea that the real failure of their cause lay in the fact that he had faltered in his convictions when secular authorities came knocking at his door. Believing Strassburg to be a lost cause this Matthijzoom proclaimed to the Anabaptists that they would finally find a true lasting government and political authority, the city of Münster.⁴⁵

Already the soon-to-be Münsterites had taken a step towards real radical changes as not only did they implement Anabaptism, but had also begun to reject secular authorities. This was radical in the sense that many Anabaptists, despite their distrust of the Church, still followed the laws put down on them by secular authorities. Anabaptist martyrs such as Dirk Willems, who

⁴⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pp. 179.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 205.

will be discussed in the next chapter, upon being imprisoned willingly gave his land to his lord King Philip II as his fight was against the religious failing of the Church, not the temporal rulings of the secular authorities.⁴⁶

Münster, a city situated in the northern region of Germany was a Lutheran city under the spiritual leadership of Bernd Rothmann. Due to turmoil among the secular leaders of the region, many on the council in Münster chose to place themselves on the side of Rothmann as well as many of the incoming dissatisfied followers of Hoffman. It was under the guise of Rothmann that this sect of Anabaptists, not only steered farther in the direction of radical theological doctrine but also turned their backs on a core principle of many Anabaptists, pacifism, believing in the notion of violence being used as a tool of religious righteousness. Münster became the perfect place for newfound religious rhetoric, under the direction of learned scholars to flourish as large conglomerates of the people in Münster who took part in these religious ideas were laymen, meaning many were susceptible to this rhetoric. After seizing control of the city, a man by the name of Jan van Leiden took center stage, showing a strong charismatic deposition, along with others seized the council of Münster, setting forth to all that was to come.⁴⁷ Rothmann recorded Jan's decrease, with Jan beginning his grand oration by stating "God has once again restored scripture through us."⁴⁸ Helping outline how the notion of sola scriptura was essential not just in creating these new believers, but also in convincing them to take part in this event. After espousing this point, Rothmann moves on to proclaim statements that in and of themselves fully help to encapsulate just how radical this movement was. Jan states to the Münsterites that on top of infant baptism being abolished, they will expel the notion of private property, currency,

⁴⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 710.

⁴⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pp. 205

⁴⁸ Denis R. Janz, "Münster Extremism," pp. 222.

working for money, and the right for a man to have more than one wife just to name a few.⁴⁹ Even by modern standards to implement all these ideas would be seen as highly radical. The Münsterites in one single oration not only got rid of infant baptism and marriage as sacraments but went one step further and shattered the very idea of them in their society. Furthermore, they got rid of the idea of currency and property, things that defined society as a whole. In this way, the Münsterites, unlike their fellow Anabaptists, were not just turning their back on society, but shattering the very traditions that defined it and rebuilt it in their image. During these events, Jan would fashion himself with the title of king and would soon put on his head a painted crown which would soon bleed.⁵⁰

David's Arrival

Jan was a tailor who believed, much like his predecessors Hoffman and Matthijszoom, as well as many other religious figures during this particular epoch, that the Last Days were upon them all. Jan was so convinced of this notion that he formed an apocalyptic council of Twelve Elders and proclaimed himself the “New David,” an ironic title as he expelled any Jewish communities from the region.⁵¹ Jan, like both his predecessors, was a skilled rhetorician, as clearly outlined by Rothmann’s accounts of his orations, this being made even more clear by the fact that despite these radical notions, he was still able to draw many to his new kingdom. Jan was obsessed with protecting his new kingdom from all those that may threaten it, particularly the armed forces of Catholics and Lutherans outside his gates, being concerned not just with his reign, but what he perceived as the new holy land, ordained by God himself. Sadly for Jan, the Devil's force would break through what he may have perceived as God’s divine protection and

⁴⁹ Denis R. Janz, “Münster Extremism,” pp. 222.

⁵⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pp. 206

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 206.

was shortly thereafter tortured and had his corpse displayed as a threat to all those who may have any sympathy for him.

Jerusalem in Germany

Many radical sects sprouted forth during this epoch, particularly from the Anabaptists, such as the denomination known as the Blutsfreunde (Blood Friends), who believed that one true sacrament was through sexual communion.⁵² Despite radical denominations such as this, Münster serves as the pinnacle of this radical fanaticism, with not just a small sect, but perceivably an entire city choosing to take part in a religious movement, which during a period of religious splintering, was so fanatical it caused bitter enemies to work together to quash it. So the question remains, why did this take part in Münster of all places? Many different factors played into Münster being a perfect hotbed for this event to take place. Münster's geographical location is one. Münster is positioned in Northern Germany, right next to the Netherlands, a region known for its surprisingly large conglomeration of Anabaptists. Before and after Münster, many different Anabaptist denominations would sprout forth in this region, so much so that Anabaptism would flourish more in the region of the Low Countries than it would in German-speaking regions.⁵³ On top of this, Münster was also near Strassburg, which, as mentioned earlier, was itself a hotbed for religious exploration due to its generally laxer laws regarding it.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Münster was politically ripe for the taking. One of the reasons the Münsterites migrated to the region in the first place was due to the perceived failure of the secular authorities in the region of Strassburg, so the fact that Münster itself had an extremely

⁵² Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany*, pp. 35.

⁵³ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 216.

⁵⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pp. 180.

contentious Prince-Bishop in charge made it the perfect place to espouse such rhetoric to those dissatisfied with their authorities perceived failings.⁵⁵ Anabaptism, at its core, stood on principles laced with dissatisfaction with the current secular status quo in these regions.

However, despite these factors, the one that stands tall relative to why Münster served as the perfect place for this to happen has to do with learned scriptural oration. As aforementioned, most of the individuals involved in this movement are laymen, not clergy. This has to do with a multitude of reasons. First, many clerical leaders had been expelled, with many now turning directly to newly printed vernacular scripture for the truth regarding their faith.⁵⁶ Furthermore, there was a plethora of skilled rhetoricians in the region, ranging from Rothmann, who was himself a scholarly theologian, to Matthijszoom and Jan, who were both extremely skilled rhetoricians themselves. As outlined earlier, when addressing the masses in Münster, Jan goes out of his way to highlight the importance of scripture as being the way that God “made his will known to us.”⁵⁷ Admittedly, Jan drew inspiration more from the Old Testament, rather than the New, showcased by the Münsterites willingness to implement violence in their righteous crusade. Nevertheless, it still helps to paint the picture of how effective this scriptural preaching was during this period as through this oration Jan and others are doing far more than any of the aforementioned preachers in this chapter. While figures such as Sattler and Hubmaier can showcase how properly espoused scriptural rhetoric can get individuals to turn their back on individual sacraments and even societal norms, Jan and the Münsterites show how when implemented correctly in a proper microcosm of sorts one can get entire conglomerations of people to not just throw down these societal norms, but burn the traditions which up to this point have surrounded them their entire lives.

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 205.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 205.

⁵⁷ Denis R. Janz, “Münster Extremism,” pp. 222.

Furthermore, upon being seized by the Münsterites, much of the city's religious symbols and institutions were torn down due to the Anabaptist revulsion towards idolatry. Many figures in the city took part in various acts of iconoclasm. As highlighted by Henry Suderman regarding the situation in Münster, “Anabaptist violence against Churches set a new benchmark in the early weeks of the Anabaptist kingdom,” with sites such as the St. Maurice cathedral being burnt and its clergy suffering “forcible removal.”⁵⁸ Through acts such as this, more clergy were sent scurrying from the city allowing for the charismatic preachers to swoop in, but more than that, the fundamental identity of the city could begin to shift. Churches stood as a symbol of a city's catholic identity and for the Münsterites to not just desecrate it, but burn it to the ground is another sign of their step away from a religious institution that also serves as the bedrock of a society.

A Tale of Mad Men

At the outset, some would argue that Münsterites would serve as martyrs of sorts for the Anabaptist cause, an idea that the Anabaptists would fight for in their bid for religious autonomy. However, this was not the case as Münster instead served, not just as a cautionary tale for Anabaptists everywhere, but rather a poisoned image for Anabaptists to look back on in disgust and betrayal. Menno Simons originally looked at the Münsterites as his “dear brothers” who had walked away from God’s light.⁵⁹ Yet despite this somber eulogy by Simons, he was still utterly disgusted by the actions of his religious brethren, and he was far from alone on this matter. What began as an attempt to create a religious holy land for the Anabaptists turned into a blackened

⁵⁸ Henry Suderman, “Sometimes It’s the Place: The Anabaptist Kingdom Revisited,” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, pp. 137.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26398477>

⁵⁹ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 217.

stain on their reputation. Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that while Münster was radical in ways, within this fanatical event the most effective forms of rhetoric shine through. Through a combination of charismatic preachers, location, and political situation an entire “kingdom” was created under an Anabaptist identity. Furthermore, while many Anabaptists shunned this event due to certain notions that it proliferated, ironically it can be argued that this was one of the purest forms of Anabaptism, with Suderman declaring the kingdom to not be “antithetical to early sixteenth-century Anabaptist values and priorities.” While the violence instigated in the location did not align with the Anabaptist doctrine, many other elements did. The goal of Anabaptists was to correct the misconception of infant baptism, with Münster achieving this on a city-wide scale. Earlier it was stated that Anabaptist were essentially turning their back on through the refusal of this infant baptism, and for them to rebuild and recreate a society completely different from those around it does align with Anabaptist values, even if all the changes implemented within it did not.⁶⁰ It is through this radical display that one can fully understand the rhetoric employed by Anabaptists during this epoch, showcasing not just how far they can turn people as a whole, but also being able to alter an entire society. Through their simple yet learned leaders and charismatic preaching, people could be convinced not just to side with Anabaptist doctrine, but also turn their backs on the societies and institutions they were raised with their entire lives.

⁶⁰ Henry Suderman, “Sometimes It’s the Place: The Anabaptist Kingdom Revisited,” pp. 119.

Chapter 2

A Macabre Theater



(Figure 2.1)⁶¹

Thieleman J. van Braght first published his groundbreaking and behemoth text, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon*

⁶¹ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 710.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65855/pg65855-images.html>

confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660. This text worked to intertwine the ideas and deaths of Anabaptist martyrs with the martyrs of the past. It has been published in various languages for various regions to reach as many people as possible. The book was so incredibly popular that a deluxe edition was even produced in 1685, causing news to spread that Braght's newest edition would come with 104 copper etchings, done by Jan Luyken, an engraver with an exemplary reputation.⁶² While it is not certain how much Jan Luyken was paid to inscribe these copper etchings, it no doubt would have cost a pretty penny at the time. Furthermore, the text itself being over 1,000 pages while simultaneously being reprinted speaks volumes not just about how popular the first edition in 1660 must have been, but also how effective the message it was, having spread as far and wide as it did allowing Anabaptism to flourish to a degree in the region. Among these 104 copper etchings, Jan Luyken etched an image of a man running over a frozen lake to save another drowning man. This savior is Dirk Willems.

While within this tome each etching has its description to help tell the tale of the figures enclosed within, just by looking at this etching one can already begin to discern what it is trying to portray. The most striking and obvious tale shown is that of the two men on the ice, one man we can see valiantly running to save the man being dragged into the icy abyss below. We can see the man on the ice struggling for his life reaching out to his soon-to-be savior for salvation. While this is as clearly stated as the central story of the etching, upon closer examination one can see a larger image being portrayed. In the background, you can see other men in similar garbs to the man drowning in the lake, seemingly his contemporaries, who, rather than help him, are apathetic onlookers to their man's struggle. Further in the back one can see a church, a place where the holiest of rites are supposed to take place with the most pious of men, yet in the

⁶² Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 237.

etching, it is surrounded by the withered husks of a tree, with the Church itself being in disarray.⁶³ From this imagery, it can be inferred that this place has fallen from grace essentially, perhaps even having been abandoned by God. The apathetic contemporaries of the drowning man are also placed underneath the withered husks of trees, perhaps trying to draw a comparison between the fallen state of the Church in the background with the fallen state of these men's souls. It is through these observations that it is made clear to the viewer that even those without the literary skills to read such a tome could still understand the meaning of it through these etchings within it.

Another discourse among scholars that centers around Anabaptist rhetoric is regarding its martyrs. Where Snyder takes a more singular approach with Michael Sattler's martyrdom and views his scholarship centered around the creation of the Swiss Brethren, Gregory gives a much larger picture and tries to connect it to the rhetoric of how Anabaptists gained supporters to a degree. Both scholars center their articles around the importance of martyrs in the context of the Reformation as they gave side figures to glorify while simultaneously justifying their cause. Snyder focuses on Sattler's death and the portent that followed after his execution "the sun and moon standing still above the place of execution," with "golden letters written within." However, while he uses this example as an argument for the creation and determination of the Swiss Brethren he fails to connect it to how this scene may have caused them to grow in numbers as Gregory goes into how the Swiss Brethren used martyrs like Sattler to gain numbers through popular preaching such as songs.⁶⁴ While both articles give great examples of the importance of martyrdom to the Anabaptist cause they seem to fall short of truly espousing the importance of it

⁶³ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 711.

⁶⁴ Arnold C. Snyder, "Revolution and the Swiss Brethren: The Case of Michael Sattler." *Church History* 50, no. 3 (1981): pp. 278. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3167318>.

Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 210.

to gaining followers as while Gregory does argue this point, he sticks more to only arguing it from the martyr perspective rather than tying it into multiple other aspects.

Background

Martyrs were an essential part, not just of a religious identity, but also as a method of rhetoric. There were few groups during the Reformation that not only utilized this tactic but revered it as much as the Anabaptists did. Anabaptists as stated earlier relied solely on the notion of sola scriptura concerning their core tenants. Due to the persecuted nature of their religion as well as their commitment to notions such as nonresistance, Anabaptists had a plethora of martyrs to pull from, making it so their martyrs far outnumbered their Protestant and Catholic counterparts.⁶⁵

Anabaptists, being an extremely alienated group of protestants due to their central beliefs, had trouble at times finding what one might call their image. This etching exemplifies not just what it meant at that time to be an Anabaptist, particularly one of the Mennonite denomination, those being the practices of nonresistance and martyrdom. This also perfectly illustrates how Anabaptists espoused rhetoric to others in the 16th century and just how effective this rhetoric could be at times. People from all walks of life, nobles, clergy, and even layfolk as it was originally written in Dutch vernacular would have read this text making it available to people of every stratum. Each etching in this text was made with a degree of love and care, making sure that every detail was present in it as shown with Willems etching having large details such as the cracks in the frozen lake to the windmill far off in the background.

As aforementioned, the Catholics in the image are portrayed in a much different light to that of Willems. Unlike Willems who rushes to the aid of his enemy, the man's allies stand back

⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 198

in an apathetic manner with one just pointing towards his drowning comrade whilst the other just stares.⁶⁶ The clear purpose of this etching is not just to uplift and champion Willems but also to demonize his Catholic secular authority contemporaries. In the text, they are described as being “tyrannous papists” and “ bloodthirsty, ravening wolves,” whilst Willems is upheld as a “good and faithful servant.”⁶⁷ While Willems is unarmed and a man of the people in his common garments his contemporaries are layered in elegant articles of clothing and weapons which they will use to enact more “heavy showers of tyrannical and severe persecution.”⁶⁸ Luyken and Braght portray the Catholic secular authority figures not just as apathetic men, but seemingly also as villains whose sin seeps into nature itself. This is showcased through the withered nature of the tree they stand under, potentially being used as a vessel to showcase the withered nature of these men's souls. Furthermore, this is bolstered through the Church in the background, which despite its purpose as a holy sanctuary, is itself surrounded by these withered husks. The message showcased through this spectacle is clear, Willems is a pious honorable man and his Catholic oppressors are virulent sinners. The fact that these etchings were widespread serves to show just how many people may have come to this conclusion from the image alone without even reading the text below it.

Martyrdom 101

Martyrdom was not something that one could just achieve overnight, there were criteria that many had to meet to be able to be venerated in such a manner. While there is no strict guideline, Brad S. Gregory defines this quite loosely as revolving around “Suffering Patiently,

⁶⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 710.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 711

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 710.

Dying Well, and the Passion of Christ.”⁶⁹ A central component of martyrdom lies in one's ability to stick by their convictions and patiently wait with death looming on the horizon, also known as patient suffering. This was a stage where the mettle of the martyrs was first tested under the threat of torture or execution. Figures such as Hubmaier, one of the original leaders of the Anabaptist movement itself failed to pass this step originally, as after being tortured by Zwingli in Zurich he “finally yet disingenuously repudiated” and while he would fall back on his belief system this would never clean him of this original failure.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Hubamaier was far from the first person to fail this step and while many would like to say they stuck true to their convictions this is far from the truth during this period. While martyrology texts would put forth an image of a collective brotherhood of unrelenting zeal and faith, in reality, “Dedication to Anabaptism was inconsistent and dependent on circumstances; people were willing to recant if they needed to.”⁷¹ While this revelation undoubtedly takes away credit from many believers, it helps to lift those who are stuck true to their convictions during this time, helping to showcase just how important of a step this is, to stand in a cell, with one's death upon the horizon is no small feat.

Suffering patiently was an essential first step for any soon-to-be martyr, however, this step is quickly followed by what would be described as a “good death.” During the Reformation, it was the goal of all those dying for their convictions to achieve the title of martyr, a title that could only be achieved when one died. Due to this, the death itself had to be a macabre stage, where only the greatest of thespians performed. The outline of what it means to have a good death is in the Christian texts known as the *Ars moriendi*. This was a text that, much like the later

⁶⁹ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 50.

⁷⁰ Kirk R. MacGregor, “Hubmaier’s Death and the Threat of a Free State Church,” *Church History and Religious Culture*, (Brill, 2011), pp. 336.

⁷¹ Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany*, pp. 4.

Martyrs Mirror, was widely published and while many a layman may not have been able to read it, its message was widespread through oration and tradition.⁷² The very cornerstone of Christian theology which was meant to bring comfort to its believers was the notion of heaven to God's faithful followers. It was because of this that true martyrs should find solace long before they died the idea that since they are true believers they should go to their deaths prepared to be welcomed as "passing into the community of the dead" where "one was passing into a region of compulsory peace."⁷³ This is an idea widely shared among Anabaptist martyrs, no matter the social strata. When meeting his death Michael Sattler stated that "God will judge aright."⁷⁴ Jan Van Leiden proclaimed to God in front of all those witnessing his death "Father, into thy hands do I commend my spirit."⁷⁵ While both Jan Van Leiden and Michael Sattler were educated figures, it is clear that this notion of a good death was known to even the most pauper of figures. A group of laymen consisting of nine brethren and three sisters were brought forward to meet their demise, the youngest among them proclaimed to all that "God bless you, my beloved brethren; to-day we shall all be together in Paradise."⁷⁶ These examples help to emphasize a universal rhetoric regarding a Christian death, where due to the circumstances of these figures' demise they each choose to showcase their faith in God through their respective roles, that being their deaths.

⁷² Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 51.

⁷³ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700*, pp. 31.

⁷⁴ Denis R. Janz, "The Trial and Martyrdom of Michael Sattler," (Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 214.

⁷⁵ Denis R. Janz, "The End of Jan Van Leiden," pp. 224.

⁷⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 413.



(Figure 2.2)⁷⁷

The final general step regarding the achievement of martyrdom centered around following the original martyr, Jesus Christ. The first two steps, patient suffering, and a good death were things that Christ himself had displayed, therefore, the last step set forth by Jesus that must be imitated and fulfilled was his passion. Christ in his last moments in this period was displayed as a “broken, bleeding man, hammered to a wooden cross, thrust before the beholder.” The crucifixes so commonly worn by many did not display a contemplative Christ that many would associate with today's day, but a man in agony and suffering. Christ had helped give man salvation and had made him forgiven for his sins, and this had been done so through his suffering. It was due to this that it was essential for one to work towards “nurturing a devotion to

⁷⁷ *Christ as the Man of Sorrow*, anonymous woodcut, Netherlandish, ca. 1500. Rosenwald Collection, photograph Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.3746.html>

Christ's passion."⁷⁸ There was no greater act than to do one's best to not emulate, as that would not be possible, but to try as hard as possible to imitate Christ's passion in one's last moments. Luther proclaims that man's religious righteousness is "God's gift" to man and that this righteousness was bestowed upon man through Christ's decision to "transmit His righteousness by virtue" and therefore in the eyes of Christians everywhere there is nothing more virtuous, more faithful, and more befitting for a martyr than to make himself worthy of Christ via his passion.⁷⁹

How best to emulate this passion is difficult to determine, but there is no doubt that people who witnessed these martyrs' end took into account whether or not each of these figures lived up to its expectations. Hubmaier, while failing to succeed in sticking true to his convictions originally did go out of his way to try and die well, doing so by attempting to imitate the Passion of Christ. Upon being sentenced to be burnt at the stake, Hubmaier was also chosen to have gunpowder rubbed into his beard. Rather than show horror at this Hubmaier chose instead to proclaim "Oh salt me, salt me well," an action making it so one could argue for him fulfilling a good death while simultaneously attempting to act out Christ's suffering.⁸⁰ Martyrs did not only act out the Passion but also proclaimed it right before their deaths with Little Hans proclaiming "O God, let me partake of the sacrifice of thy Son Jesus Christ. Amen" clearly puts forth the fact that he has faith that he has made himself worthy in the eyes of God by acting out this passion.⁸¹

It is without question that these aforementioned steps are necessary to some degree to allow one to be a martyr as every figure entombed within *Martyrs Mirror* or just within Anabaptist culture has fulfilled at least one of these steps. Yet interestingly there seems to be a

⁷⁸ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 50, 62.

⁷⁹ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, pp. 24-28.

⁸⁰ G. W. Williams, *Radical Reformation*, (London, 1962), pp. 229.

⁸¹ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 412.

great deal of contradiction within these prerequisites. Figures such as Willems make sense to be hailed as great martyrs due to their actions, but when looking at his death it's hard not to question his candidacy for martyrdom, as will be discussed later while he did fulfill the original step of patient suffering and one could argue he fulfilled the Passion of Christ, he failed spectacularly at meeting a good death. Contrary to Willems stands Hubamaier, who is a founding figure of the faith it would be expected that he be hailed a great martyr of the cause for meeting a good death and enacting the Passion of Christ, yet tomes such as the *Martyrs Mirror* omit any mention of him, and no sect of Anabaptism seems to hail him as a martyr. This is because many seem to downplay the fact that the image of a martyr is not up to the martyr himself, but those who witness him and carry on his story. Due to this, it is imperative to look at how while it is necessary to meet the guidelines of martyrdom, it is not a guaranteed step towards martyrdom. While it is necessary to be called a martyr to meet at least one of these steps, the actual title of martyrdom lies in the hands of the layman. The greatest form of Anabaptist rhetoric does not lie in the mouths of preachers, the words of the Bible, or the sacrifices of martyrs, but rather in the hearts of the people who witness such things, with these people painting the images and singing the songs of these martyrs.

The Image and Songs of Martyrs

Anabaptists' reliance on martyrs cannot be understated, and while they had a plethora of martyrs to revere due to the fulfilled requirements to attain martyrdom, the question remains, why were these men martyrs? Many scholars have debated the rhetoric behind what made martyrs, but for this paper, the steps themselves to becoming a martyrs, while important, are less important than their image and story. While many martyrs were venerated by the Anabaptists,

there were also those, who while they met most of the criteria were not held in the same regard. This section will focus on what it was that made these martyrs stand out from the others, the answer being that their tales took a life of their own irrespective of themselves through stories, songs, and more. Every one of these figures went to their deaths hoping to be a martyr yet none had the choice as to whether or not they would become one or how they would be perceived as martyrs in the future. That task lay not in the hands of the martyrs themselves, but rather in the hands of those who witnessed their deaths, told their tales, and continued their stories, taking from these figures their ideas of who these figures were, and allowing them to guide them towards Anabaptism, or to strengthen their faith in it.

On May 16th, 1569, Dirk Willems, the aforementioned devout Anabaptist in the etching, was brought forth to what was to be his execution. Dirk Willems was said to have been “persisting obstinately in his opinion, that he shall be executed with fire,” leading to him being burnt alive in an extremely macabre manner.⁸² After suffering this fate the story of Willems would spread far and wide across Europe, particularly in Anabaptist circles. However, this was not due to these same people witnessing said execution but rather because his story itself had taken a life of its own. This is most clearly shown by the etching above of Dirk Willem’s action that led to his execution. This is important because it helps to outline the fact that many people knew of Willems during this time and helped to showcase major arguments in favor of Anabaptists, a group that was being rooted up by enemies everywhere. This etching is the epitome of the Anabaptist faith and rhetoric as it helps to portray Dirk Willems as the quintessential holy man, through his actions in the etchings while contrasting this to the apparent apathy or even potentially sinfulness that the Catholics in the image are emulsified in.

⁸² Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 711.

First and foremost, though, this image serves not just as a way to commemorate the actions of Willems, but also as a method of propaganda to lay folk. Underneath every etching is a description to help people who do not know the story off-hand to understand what it is that is being shown before them, both before, during, and after the aforementioned etching. The central theme of this etching is Dirk Willems himself, showcased on the left rushing to save the man drowning in the lake. Willems, “a pious, faithful brother and follower of Jesus Christ,” had been arrested in Asperen, Holland, and rather than staying captive had escaped his confines and ran across the frozen lake outside his prison to salvation.⁸³ However, a burgomaster had noticed this and rushed off after him. Due to Willems being malnourished, he had been able to glide across the ice without it cracking, but his pursuer, who was well-fed, fell through the ice. This is not the story shown in the etching however, the rhetorical effect of Willems being above, while his pursuer is falling below would suggest that the man who has fallen into the ice is rather being dragged into hell for his sins, while Willems, who is above such things does not fall through. Rather than allowing his pursuer to perish, Willems bravely chooses instead to save this man who had treated him so abhorrently, showcasing both his pious and forgiving nature to all those reading this text. Despite being mistreated by this man Willems wastes no time to rush to his rescue making it his utmost priority, showcasing to the common man that Willems is a pious man of the highest degree.

An important, and some would argue essential part of Willems story is showcased in his execution, or as it is more accurately described, “violent martyrdom.”⁸⁴ Upon being found guilty of his crimes Willems would have to pass what some would call the test of martyrdom. If one wished to be a martyr in the eyes of Brad S. Gregory, they would have to refuse to recant their

⁸³ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 710.

⁸⁴ Philip Fountain, “7 Everyday Embodiments,” *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2024), pp. 213.

faith in a duel with the devil, be steadfast in their convictions be ready to face their demise, and die a “good death.” On the account of Willems he passes both of the first tests perfectly, despite terrible conditions Willems never recanted his faith, being stated as “persisting obstinately in his opinion.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, at the end of his trial it was found that Willems would unfortunately be “put to death at a lingering fire,” a fate that would cause many of the most pious followers of Anabaptists to question their faith.⁸⁶ Yet, despite having this horrendous fate leer at him Willems, continued to stick to his beliefs and went to his execution with a pure heart. At the outset, it would seem just by these descriptions that Willems was the perfect martyr, having fulfilled the first two tasks with flying colors, however, it would be the last, meeting a “good death,” that Willems would soon fall short. Upon being brought to the scaffolding, and with the flames being lit, Willems would not find himself swiftly engorged in the inferno, but rather torturously toasted slowly by the flames. On the day of his execution, it was found that:

“a strong east wind blowing that day, the kindled fire was much driven away from the upper part of his body, as he stood at the stake; in consequence of which this good man suffered a lingering death, insomuch that in the town of Leerdam, towards which the wind was blowing, he was heard to exclaim over seventy times: “O my Lord; my God,” etc., for which cause the judge or bailiff, who was present on horseback, filled with sorrow and regret at the man’s sufferings, wheeled about his horse, turning his back toward the place of execution, and said to the executioner; “Dispatch the man with a quick death.” But how or in what manner the executioner then dealt with this pious witness of Jesus, I have not been able to learn, except only,

⁸⁵ Thielemans J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 711.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 711.

that his life was consumed by the fire, and that he passed through the conflict with great steadfastness, having commended his soul into the hands of God.”⁸⁷

To simply describe this as being a poor death would be an understatement. All of Willems' onlookers saw this man face what can only be described as a death dreamt up by the Devil himself. A death, so lingering that as stated in the above text the town over could hear his screams.⁸⁸ It would be thought that despite succeeding in the first two steps towards martyrdom, this absolute macabre failure of the final deed would make it impossible for Willems to be considered a martyr, yet today he is considered one of the most famous Anabaptist martyrs.⁸⁹ This is due to those who witnessed his tale and carried it on. Willems died with a crowd surrounding him, figures all over witnessing this man meet his end. Furthermore, these figures had or would soon learn the tale of the man being horrifically burnt on the scaffolding before them. They would hear about the traits he exhibited before his execution by saving that man drowning in the lake. His bravery, forgiveness, resolve, and willingness to die all would play into his character. Willems story transcended his being and went from being his personal experience to something that Anabaptists everywhere could relate to and pick and choose what they saw that made this man righteous and worthy of salvation.

Furthermore, this did not stop at these individuals either as they would share these tales with others, therefore allowing a constant cycle of rhetoric where deeds would be hailed by individuals due to certain things they related to, while others would do the same to those. Among Christians, Anabaptists were particularly effective at utilizing this with their application of

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 711.

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 711.

⁸⁹ “Dirk Willems Statue Unveiled at MHV.” *SteinbachOnline*, 2018, steinbachonline.com/articles/dirk-willems-statue-unveiled-at-mhv. Accessed 18 Mar. 2025.

various texts, pamphlets, tales, and hymns. These forms of rhetoric are extremely effective due to how personal they are in form. Through texts of martyrs, people can read and distinguish between each figure and decide what features of each they see as being pious. The espousal of tales allows ordinary laymen to share stories among the confines of their homes, or for them to be proclaimed in front of a crowd, in each instance the man telling the tale can personalize the martyr's experience perhaps with some of his own. Finally, through song, people collectively can relate tales to others, which first allows so those of a less literate station to be able to understand the tale while simultaneously creating a community of believers amongst themselves.

Martyrological texts and pamphlets are an exceptional example of the personalization of these martyrs' images. Texts such as Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* or John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* exemplify this trend. In both cases, these texts are meant to play the role of rhetorical propaganda and while doing so also stand as extremely personalized tomes of the authors themselves as well as those reading it. Braght consistently attributes characteristics to these martyrs, figures who he would have never met nor would he have been alive during their time. Yet despite this, he personalizes their experiences, not just for the reader but for himself as well. He depicts figures as being brave and steadfast in their belief while simultaneously espousing that those witnessing would be "moved in their hearts" due to these figures.⁹⁰ Foxe, while not an Anabaptist, followed the same principles of rhetoric describing his martyrs as having "wonderful patience" and as being "good and faithful martyrs."⁹¹ While it can be argued that both authors attribute these characteristics to these figures to allow a more engrossing tale therefore allowing more effective rhetoric to be espoused, it is hard to discount how personal each of these martyrs feel to the authors telling their tales.

⁹⁰ Thielemann J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 413.

⁹¹ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, pp. 149-151.

<https://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Foxes%20Book%20of%20Martyrs.pdf>

This personalization was conversely applied to their enemies as well, making it so readers could personalize with the good traits of the martyr's images while simultaneously denouncing the characteristics of their enemies. Braght describes one man as being “actuated by the hatred and envy of the old serpent.”⁹² Braght in this account is telling those reading his tale, as well as himself, that figures such as this are in league with the devil and therefore their faith is flawed and unrighteous. Foxe once again has the same strategies employed within his text describing priests as “barking” and holding immense “grudges” traits and qualities meant to help the reader alienate themselves from this “other.”⁹³ In both cases, Braght and Foxe are trying exceptionally hard to personalize both themselves and the reader with the martyrs, even though neither would have any knowledge regarding the martyr as an actual individual. They go steps further and demonize and dehumanize their opponents, making it so people of all strata and life can collectively personalize a unified hatred against a common enemy.

This rhetoric of collective personalization for things such as the image of martyrs was exemplified most in song. Many founders of the Reformation recognized this, with a Renaissance composer Josquin des Prez music as a method that allowed for “the integration of the many into the one.”⁹⁴ Anabaptists understood this and groups such as the Swiss Brethren and Mennonites made the song an integral part of their respective groups, particularly concerning martyrs. In the years 1555-1560 Mennonites alone within a single hymn mentioned the seventy-two martyrs that had been killed in the region of Antwerp alone, showcasing an immense devotion to not just their martyrs but also the effectiveness of tunes.⁹⁵ Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* is layered with tales of martyrs whose own hymns are passed down to those who

⁹² Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 413.

⁹³ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, pp. 126.

⁹⁴ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700*, pp. 165.

⁹⁵ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 226.

witnessed it and continue on the song with martyrs. Thomass Hermann, “On his way to the place of execution, he composed and sang a hymn,” which is noted by Braght to still be “extant.”⁹⁶ Hermann was executed in 1527, so for Braght to note his hymn to still be circulating is already telling as to the rhetorical power of not just the hymns themselves, but also the personalization of such hymns through the image of the martyrs.

Through methods such as this, the stories of these martyrs took a tale of their own. Each had different characteristics that were highlighted about them that were used to proselytize and inspire new followers. This made it so that due to the Anabaptists' large catalog of martyrs, and the extremely personal nature of them, figures throughout Europe could relate to these individuals, no matter their political, religious, or social standing. While it is true that “martyrdom and the memorialization of martyrs developed differently across Anabaptist groups,” it is clear that there was a form of universal rhetoric behind these figures, making it so that for every one figure that met their end, Anabaptists could find themselves with entire swathes of new followers, inspired and finding themselves relating to these martyrs.⁹⁷

God's Chosen

“Having been delivered into the hands of the executioner, and led into the middle of the city, he said: “To-day I will confess my God before all the world.” He had such joy in Christ Jesus, that his face did not pale, nor his eyes show fear; but he went smilingly to the fire, where the executioner bound him on the ladder, and tied a little bag of powder to his neck, at which he said: “Be it done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost;” and having smilingly bid farewell to a Christian, who was there, he was thrust into the fire by the

⁹⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 422.

⁹⁷ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 199.

executioner, and happily offered up his spirit, on the eighth day of February, A. D. 1527. The sheriff however, surnamed Eisenreich von Landsberg, while returning home from the place of execution, traveling on horseback; purposing to apprehend others of the brethren, died suddenly in the night, and was found dead in his bed in the morning, having thus been removed through the wrath of God.”⁹⁸

Within this dramatic passage describing the death of the Anabaptist martyr George Wagner is outlined another essential tool to the rhetoric employed by the Anabaptists which allowed for many of their martyrs' messages, and more importantly their aforementioned images to take the form of their own, divine portents. Throughout the time of the Reformation, there is a litany of texts that detail the various apparent divine omens that took place after one of God's chosen met their demise. Earlier in this chapter, Michael Sattlers apparent omen was described where the sun and moon stood still and letters appeared above.⁹⁹ Stories of divine omens taking place after one's demise are as old as Christianity itself with the story of Jesus's resurrection being one of many. It was essential for Anabaptists, a faith that used its persecution as a sign of God's favor to also have this favor shown more temporally through apparent omens and portents. The term apparent has been repeated a couple of times, as before looking into these events it is important to first outline the potential problems with them. The main source regarding omens that took place after the Anabaptists demise is *Martyr's Mirror*, and while this source is extremely useful in giving actual details of these Anabaptists, one should still try to look at it from a skeptical perspective. This work was written one hundred years after most of these figures met their end so there is no actual way for any of these events to have been witnessed from Braght, making it so most of the testimonies are from figures who no longer live. Furthermore,

⁹⁸ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (The Project Gutenberg eBook, 2021), pp. 401. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65855/pg65855-images.html>

⁹⁹ Arnold C. Snyder, “Revolution and the Swiss Brethren: The Case of Michael Sattler.” pp. 278.

one of the primary purposes of *Martyrs Mirror* is to champion the fallen Anabaptists against their Catholic oppressors, making it so there is undoubtedly some degree of bias within this text. Nevertheless, despite all this, it is imperative to understand two things, firstly, there are still first-hand accounts of these events being put forth in this text, making it so at the very least, there is an inkling of truth regarding some of these events, and at times even a group of people may have witnessed it, giving more credulity to these accounts. Secondly, whether or not these events truly took place is not important for this paper, but rather the fact that people believed these events took place. While, during the Reformation copies of Braght's work were certainly not circulating, accounts from people all over were, with many witnesses swearing to these omens taking place. Whether or not the omens took place is not important, but rather the fact that so many people believed they did is, and by doing so people throughout Europe believed that these fallen figures were God's chosen, and from this rhetoric, many would flock towards the Anabaptist cause.

While there is no exact formula regarding these omens, there is a wide array of similarities that take place, most regarding either the wicked being punished, generally via the loss of their life, some event taking place which marks the execution as wicked, or the martyrs themselves being imbued by some divine power. Relating to the first cause is of course the aforementioned case of George Wagner. While the sheriff himself was not guilty of executing Wagner, he was still the one guilty of sentencing him to his demise. Due to this sinful act, the Sheriff is of course punished as by apparent divine will the Sheriff was found to be dead in his bed while hunting other figures in Wagner's group.¹⁰⁰ This form of omen, regarding the punishment of the abusers, was seemingly one of the most common forms of omen. It works perfectly for the image of these martyrs as it not only helps to show God's favor of them as they

¹⁰⁰ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 401.

were righteous enough to have God come and punish their abusers but also helps to show the sinful ways of the Catholics and other Protestants as they were sinful enough for God to come after them. It also interestingly plays into the notion that by not persecuting anyone while always being persecuted the Anabaptists were God's favor as since they went after no one it would seem that rather God himself would. Wagner was of course nowhere near the only figure to have his tormentors meet their end through God's fury. After Thomas Hermann and sixty-seven other Anabaptists were tried and killed in 1527, the town clerk, a man guilty of shedding this "innocent blood" was soon to be punished. While riding on a sleigh through the town "the horse threw him against a wall, and an oak tree in the street, so that his brains were dashed out, and thus he did not lay down his head in peace, but came to a terrible end, as the brethren Hans Kitzbuehl and Christian Haring have testified concerning it."¹⁰¹ Once again, it is important to repeat that this account is brought forth by two Anabaptists and that this town clerk is never named, yet there is no doubt that a story like this traveled and was pertinent. It was important enough that the names of the two brethren who gave this account are still published one hundred years later for Braght to use, and that the story remains intact, meaning that this tale was probably spread among Anabaptist circles throughout the century, being used as rhetoric for all soon to be believers.

Another form of omen, as earlier mentioned, is for some sort of grand event to take place directly after the execution. Sattler's aforementioned omen comes to mind. This portent is interestingly not described within the texts of Braght's work as to Braght this apparent omen may have been too fantastical even for him, or maybe he had not heard of this account when transcribing his work. Regarding the first reason, it has already been stated that the presence of omens may or may not be an exaggerated event to render legitimacy upon the martyr, yet despite this it is important to note that all the omens presented in Braght's work tend not to stray too far

¹⁰¹ Ibid, pp. 407.

into what one may call the fantastical. Yet despite this, numerous witnesses claim to have seen the omens which took place after Sattler's demise. Whether or not this gains credence to the account is up for debate, but what is important for this is that many people witnessed it, and many believed in it and shared it. The fact that golden letters were written in the sky, by God himself, allowed Sattler to garner a kind of legitimacy few martyrs could argue for, especially due to Sattler's high standing within the Anabaptist community as a leader of the Swiss Brethren.

A final pattern regarding the omens in this text concerns the martyrs either having some form of foresight or seemingly being able to call forth God's wrath. Before being executed in 1528, the figures, Thomas, Balthasar, and Dominicus warned the council before their demise that "God would not let it go unpunished." In response to this announcement "One of the council, named Thomas Pelzer arose and did as though he were washing his hands, saying: "Thus shall I wash my hands in their blood, and think to do God's service." John 16:2. But a few days after the judgment of God came upon him. He was found dead in his bed, beside his wife; and thus by his sudden death, was not permitted to see the death of these pious persons, which struck terror into the hearts of many."¹⁰² This is a particularly interesting passage for several reasons. First, the man who would meet his end was named and was someone who held a particularly important office within the community. Another interesting fact was that this man died before the deaths of these martyrs, something very rare following the other figures in this section as most of the omens which took place happened after their demise as a response in the form of God's wrath.

Through fulfilling the prerequisites for martyrdom, Anabaptism, a faith that venerated its martyrs more than most, was able to find and inspire new followers. This faith "held their martyrs in the highest regard," and due to this they made sure to make the most of the stories of

¹⁰² Ibid, pp. 412

their martyrs.¹⁰³ Death is a terrifying notion, but by sticking true to their convictions Anabaptists were able to not just secure their place in heaven but also set forth an example to others that was extremely personal. In his work, Braght prefaces the reader to “Contemplate the suffering which these pious martyrs endured, and how wonderfully God wrought with them; how manfully, constantly and patiently they fought, through the effective and ardent love of God, confirming the truth of what is said in Cant. 8:6, namely, that ‘Love is strong as death, and jealousy cruel as the grave.’”¹⁰⁴ This encapsulates what witnesses most likely felt as they witnessed these figures face their end. Whether a penurious peasant or a wealthy noble, all witnessing would have contemplated these figures. From there each person would take something personal from it, some would perhaps hate these figures viewing them as agents of the devils. Others, however, would be inspired seeing in these figures something that inspired them and that they would spread to others. Whether it was due to how steadfastly they faced their death or how solemnly they stayed true to faith we cannot tell, what we can say is that these stories became personal to each figure who witnessed them. The tales of their deaths would be continued through psalms, pamphlets, mouth, or text, and from it, their story would live on to inspire more followers. Whether these martyrs knew it or not, their actions were the reason for this faith to be able to survive the events it did, with each single figure potentially bringing forth ten or more followers into the fold, simply because they stayed true to their convictions and tried to face their ends with grace.

¹⁰³ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 197.

¹⁰⁴ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, pp. 343.

Conclusion

The End of Rhetoric?

Rhetoric as a tool when utilized properly and effectively can change everything. The Anabaptists were a group with everything against them from their very inception. Their core tenet made it so that figures on both religious and political ends of Europe would despise and vilify their existence. Furthermore, this religious sect lacked any lasting authority or government backing that would protect them from this relentless persecution. Yet the Anabaptists are clearly shown to have survived and at times even thrived for their cause. Due to the persecuted nature of their existence, Anabaptists traveled over different territories as a way to escape “punishment by fleeing to a neighboring jurisdiction.”¹⁰⁵ This made it so Anabaptists had multiple communities spread throughout the Germanic regions and more as not only did this allow them to proselytize more followers, but it simultaneously allowed those who were turning these individuals to love and convert more. Despite the limited success of holding any actual political authority or government backing they still were able to achieve this as shown with regions such as Münster. On top of this, Anabaptists were shown to have 10,000 documented martyrs from this epoch, showing that there were undoubtedly more who died for their cause, not to mention the untold numbers of followers still living.

The ability of the Anabaptists to survive and thrive in such conditions is a feat. The Anabaptists did not have numbers to fight holy wars, or officials with high political positions to

¹⁰⁵ Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany*, pp. 9.

back their cause, but they did have rhetoric. Figures such as Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Menno Simons were leading figures in the cause of Anabaptism. While these men never knew each other and were in their respective regions and Anabaptist sects they all relied on universal means of rhetoric for the Anabaptist cause. All these figures were well educated in the scriptural texts making it so in a period of questionable clerical education they could stand out amongst the crowds, especially for a cause that centered its belief around biblical scripture¹⁰⁶. These figures made it easy for their followers to understand their message of salvation and scripturally backed doctrines, making it so that while their cause was extremely persecuted and vilified, others could either sympathize or even be inspired by these men's message, even with the threat of execution. Even when meeting their deaths these followers helped to show just how inspiring these figures' messages and causes are to them with many reciting their passages.

Furthermore, the large catalog of Anabaptist martyrs played in the Anabaptists favor. Through so many willing to die for their cause the Anabaptists were able to show to many that they were God's chosen, why else would they be getting persecuted by the children of the devil while simultaneously refusing to take part in the same activity? Their martyrs helped show conviction to nonbelievers, giving the cause a strong sense of legitimacy, with many martyrs putting on a show at the end of their lives. After death, the part of the martyrs was not done either as their stories began to be spread all over. Thanks to all these factors Anabaptist martyrs were extremely relatable to many, making it so that whether you were a pauper in a random Germanic region or a high-ranking prince in the Holy Roman Empire you could relate to their cause to some extent, looking at their deaths and saying I could do the same for my beliefs.

The discourse centered around Anabaptism has always been multifaceted in manner. However, despite its generally complex nature, much of the discussion tends to be hard set on

¹⁰⁶ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation At Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 107.

singular notions rather than trying to look at the larger conversation. Scholars do a fantastic job outlining Anabaptist beliefs and convictions, but at times seem to lack information on how they utilized these theological convictions to garner a larger following. While several scholars tend to agree on varying minute points, many of them tend to either disregard the larger picture or while trying to view the larger picture place many of the other factors in the back behind one singular focus point. Due to this, despite there being a plethora of discourse surrounding the study of Anabaptism, the field surrounding their rhetoric seems to still be ripe and unexplored. This thesis has shown this, underlying how through effective use of biblical knowledge and charismatic orations figures such as Anabaptist preachers could proselytize new followers to a cause generally vilified by the masses. Furthermore, the utilization of their large list of martyrs allowed individuals to be awestruck by the varying personal nature of these figures.

However, despite all the thesis does add to the current circulating scholarship, there are limitations behind it. Due to the inability to go to archives in certain regions, it is difficult to get the necessary documents that would allow for a more personal touch to this paper making it so there could be letters from individuals rather than just stories written by figures of each person. Furthermore, there are many factors that this paper undoubtedly is not able to properly delve into such as how effective this rhetoric itself was in comparison to other factors. There is no way to truly tell just how many of the followers of Anabaptism were literate and what their general social class was, things which would undoubtedly play into their reasons for turning to the cause of Anabaptism. It is also difficult to account for the argumentation behind just how effective this rhetoric was as there is no way to exactly pinpoint what form of rhetoric it was that inspired people to join this cause. For all we know people may have joined the cause for none of the

reasons mentioned and there is a different category that is being neglected that there was not sufficient time to talk about or that is hidden in an archive somewhere.

Future research could expand upon all of these questions. Through better resources and a more prolonged period to research such a topic, it would be possible to find more information regarding the Anabaptists and their rhetoric. Perhaps it would be possible to do a more in-depth look at the martyrs and the preachers and look at more minute things they did. Were there certain passages that Reformation preachers utilized over others, in what exact ways did they outwit and downplay their religious opponents, and in what manner did Anabaptist martyrs do better than their contemporaries? These are all great questions to delve into, yet they are not the main focus of this paper.

Nevertheless, this thesis has grappled with a multitude of questions throughout its pages that it has been able to. Anabaptism, a sect that by all means should've been extinguished, found its survival through the implementation of effective rhetoric. Despite its inability to showcase an entirely personal viewpoint, it is still able to give a sense of how the masses could be inspired and therefore the individual by this cause and its figures and martyrs. However, there is one question that this paper has not answered yet, and that is, from a modern view, why does this research matter?

From a modern standpoint, it is difficult to understand why this thesis is relevant. At the outset, these forms of rhetoric are fanciful, fantastical, and most likely farcical. In modern times the notion of martyrs and roaming charismatic preachers, while still in existence, is far less prevalent and even less effective than during the Reformation. Despite this, the underlying tone and methods implemented in this rhetoric are universally still implemented in everyday life. The necessity to have something taught to you by someone more educated is part of everyday life in

schools, universities, and more. Furthermore, these topics need to be simplified so people of all social strata and those who don't originally believe in it may begin to understand and even believe in these notions. It is also extremely important to allow for one's arguments to be something that is relatable and can become personable to someone. Through the utilization of both these methods it is not hard to envision inspiring people to believe or join someone's cause in a modern setting and by all means this rhetoric does not have to be used in a strictly religious manner. When walking around in one's life perhaps you need to look around and ask yourself whether or not this rhetoric is affecting you in any way. Perhaps you're a college student who, due to his professor's succinct teaching style and erudite reputation you allow yourself to be influenced not just by the information he is setting forth, but also by his convictions which he sprinkles in here and there. Maybe you're a voter who, by listening to the words of a politician you feel a personal and relatable connection to them, even though this connection is only to a fiber of this person's being and relates in no way to their entire character. Through actions such as these we can begin to understand just how effective and minute these kinds of rhetoric can be, and perhaps even use it ourselves or try to combat its effects.

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