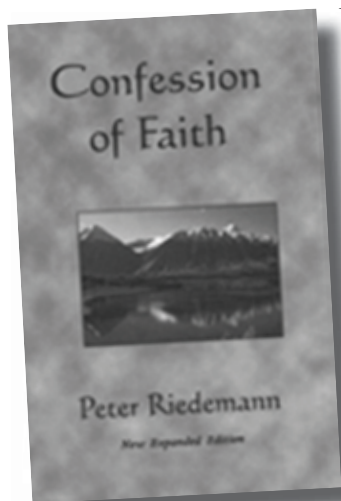


Peter Riedemann's Confessions

A book review by Dean Taylor

A young converted shoemaker turned Anabaptist missionary and pastor, Peter Riedemann seemed to have lived tirelessly in sharing and living his faith. Traversing literally thousands of miles, writing songs and letters, visiting churches, working as a pastor, and publishing books, he helped shape the early days of the Anabaptist movement. Besides his pastoral letters and a few songs written from prison, Peter Riedemann is remembered today because of two books that he wrote while in prison. Both of his books are works explaining the faith of the early Anabaptist movement to outsiders. His first book, written from prison in Gmunden, Austria, is published today under the title "*Love is Like Fire*." His second and most significant, written from prison from the little German town of Wolkersdorf, is published simply under the title "*Confession of Faith*," or an older publishing under the more denominational sounding title "*Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith*." Historically, Peter Riedemann is also known for being (next to Jacob Hutter) as the second founder of the Moravian/Tyrolean Anabaptists, which later became known as the Hutterian Brethren. Perhaps because Riedemann was a labeled a Hutterite instead of a Mennonite, he and his works remained virtually unknown to the English-speaking world until 1950.



The disclaimer

As we do with most of our books, I think it is fair to mention some of the things about a book that could be seen as

controversial by some of our readers. Certainly the most controversial thing surrounding Riedemann's writings is his concept of community of goods. After all, he was a Hutterite. However, this point only takes up a very small part of his writings—about one page out of a 170-page document. Even those few passages could still be beneficial for defending the general practice among Anabaptists for charitable relief and radical sharing of material goods.

Second, Riedemann presented a view that it was wrong for Christians to pay what people in his day were calling a "war tax." I'm not sure how to feel about this one. In keeping with Romans 13, I believe in paying all taxes. So this seems a bit odd to me. Thankfully, today most of our taxes come lumped together in a nice package. Who knows, perhaps it would look different if someone was coming around today demanding money specifically for building a nuclear missile to blow up Iran? I don't know ... I just thought it worth mentioning in the disclaimer.

A positive statement

Right from the first chapter of any of his books one quickly senses a different tone than that of many of the other early Anabaptist writers. With many of the others, I often feel that one thing lacking is a more positive expres-



sion of their faith. Written on the run, defending themselves against a false accusation, or having to scratch out a few lines through the terrible conditions of dungeon life made many of the Anabaptist writings come off as defensive or polemic. Having the luxury for careful editing or even the chance to make meaningful analogies to express their heart in a devotional style was uncommon in the early days of the Anabaptist movement. It is here that Peter Riedemann shines most. Riedemann was a very spiritual, expressive, and passionate writer. A longing for Christ and total dependence on the Holy Spirit flows through every page. Riedemann captured the devotional style. He comes off more like an Andrew Murray than a Menno Simons.

Riedemann started to write his first book in 1529 while imprisoned in Gmunden, Germany. He finished it approximately in the year 1532 shortly before he escaped from that prison. During his early years, Riedemann had fellowshipped and studied with some of the most gifted Anabaptist leaders of his day. After his escape from prison, he threw his lot in with the newly-forming Hutterian Brethren in Moravia. The brethren quickly recognized his gifts, and the next year they sent Riedemann out as a missionary, in 1533. In that same year he was again captured and put into prison until 1537, this time in the town of Nuremberg. After his release he traveled as a missionary and did pastoral work until he once again landed in prison around the year 1540, where he wrote his second book.

While in prison, Riedemann took advantage of a few privileges that other Anabaptist prisoners never had. While it is true that his books were written from a castle dungeon, as far as dungeon life in the 1500s went Riedemann had it better than most. The Protestant ruler of this area, Philip of Hess, did not allow the Anabaptists of his region to be executed. So while Riedemann was imprisoned he was allowed some privileges—like writing. Many scholars think that these “Confessions of Faith” were actually written in answers to questions that Phillip of Hess had personally asked him.

Orthodoxy

One of the most obvious things you quickly notice about “Confession of Faith” is that he presents the faith following the lines of the ancient Apostles’ Creed. Some have suggested that he did this to prove the orthodoxy of the Anabaptists to Philip of Hess ... who knows? Whatever his motive, the beauty of this approach was that it presents the early Anabaptist faith based on one thing—their understanding

of God. Just as A. W. Tozer said over 400 years later in the opening line of *The Knowledge of the Holy*, “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” Riedemann’s theology flows from his view of God Himself. However, flowing from this creedal approach, Riedemann rescues the Apostles’ Creed from a mere head knowledge by insisting that this ancient faith must affect our life—or it is vain. As he wrote, “no one may truthfully ascribe such glory and honor to Christ unless he has experienced this victory in himself.”¹

Clear salvation

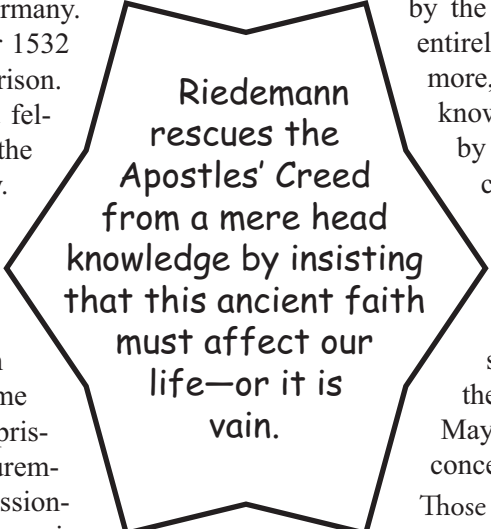
Pouring through almost every topic is Riedemann’s passionate appeal that the Law has been replaced by the Spirit and grace, and that salvation is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this salvation *cannot* stop with a head knowledge, but is always made manifest by a changed life. Riedemann argues very convincingly that *by faith* this salvation brings a great confidence and even an assurance of our salvation. Riedemann’s careful balance through these often controversial topics surrounding salvation theology is refreshing. Under the chapter entitled “How People Again May Find God and His Grace,” he writes concerning remorse about our sin:

Those who want to repent with all their heart must first feel genuine remorse for their sins.

Remorse, however, means first recognizing how wrong, evil, harmful, and destructive sins are. Otherwise, repentance cannot endure, and still less can the sinner receive grace. True remorse follows the recognition of sin and is the basis on which people feel repugnance and horror of their sin. Yes, they even loathe themselves for being guided and controlled by sin for so long ...²

Speaking of how the Spirit prepares our hearts for salvation, Riedemann says:

What does the Lord say? ‘No human shall see me and live!’ Therefore, when God starts to speak in us, something must begin to die. We must hear, see, taste, and feel the Lord God in the countenance of Jesus Christ. All of this must happen before such construction can begin.³



Riedemann rescues the Apostles’ Creed from a mere head knowledge by insisting that this ancient faith must affect our life—or it is vain.

1 Peter Riedemann and John J. Friesen, *Peter Riedemann’s Hutterite Confession of Faith: Translation of the 1565 German Edition of Confession of Our Religion, Teaching, and Faith, by the Brothers ...* (Herald Press, 1999), 67.

2 Ibid., 95.

3 Ibid., 174.

Following the spirit of remorse, Riedemann says the Spirit leads us to repentance:

Remorse, then, leads to true repentance, and repentance means to humble and submit oneself before God, to bow down, and to be ashamed because of one's wickedness. This shame brings about a genuine return, so that one hastens to God, cries aloud, and prays to him for forgiveness and grace."⁴

After surrendering to Christ, Riedemann writes that God's salvation is real and life-changing. He, along with other early Anabaptist writers, insisted that salvation goes beyond mere mental assent. He offered beautiful analogies of how the nature of Christ is infused or poured into our hearts, giving us life and spiritual power. He even argues that this salvation gives us a real assurance of our hope in heaven:

He has given us a new birth to an imperishable hope, grafted us into his divine nature, and after we believed the gospel, sealed us with his promised Spirit. This Spirit now accomplishes *everything* in us, eradicating and destroying the sin that we have by nature so that what is good, true, and holy, which he brings with him and plants in us, may take root and bear fruit.⁵

Speaking of the incarnation and the receiving of the divine nature of Christ, he writes:

Through his actual strength and activity, Christ leads us to be partakers of his nature, character, and being. ... Christ is our righteousness and goodness. He is our life; we ourselves do not live, but Christ lives in us. Christ is our resurrection, our salvation, and our all in all. We also believe that Christ's incarnation means that we can be transformed. His suffering and death are salvation and life for us. In Christ we truly have everything.⁶

He [the Holy Spirit] also teaches and guides us, assures us that we are children of God, and makes us one with him, so that through his work, we are made part of the divine nature and character. We experience his work within us in truth and power in the renewing of our hearts. God be praised! In God we have absolute certainty that he has drawn our heart to him and made it his dwelling place.⁷

Christ is the root and the vine, and we are grafted into him through faith. Just as the sap rises from the root

and makes the branch fruitful, so the Spirit of Christ rises from the root, Christ, into the branches and twigs, to make them all fruitful. The twigs are of the same nature as the root and bears its kind of fruit.⁸

Christ has given us his Spirit, which joyfully and without compulsion accomplishes God's will within us.⁹

Speaking of the assurance of our salvation, but yet our continual need of God's grace, Riedemann said:

Leaving everything else, we cleave to him and depend on him with absolute certainty that we can acknowledge that everything we have comes from God. Since God's nature and character is eternal life, he has made us partakers and sharers of himself by sealing our faith with his Holy Spirit, which is the security of our inheritance. Through his grace, for which we praise him, we experience his works in us, and this makes us certain of all his promises.¹⁰

Spirit and church

As with his view on personal salvation, Riedemann speaks of the church as completely dependent of God's Spirit and grace. Pointedly, Riedemann also argues that the true church is only made up of the company of those who are born again and walking in the Spirit and truth:

The children of God, however, become his children through the unifying Spirit. Thus it is evident that the church is gathered through the Holy Spirit; the Church has its being, and continues to exist, through the Spirit. There are no churches apart from those which the Holy Spirit gathers and builds.¹¹

The church of Christ is a pillar and foundation of truth and continues to be that. Truth itself is expressed, confirmed, and put into action in the church by the Holy Spirit. Thus, whoever endures and submits to the working of the Spirit of Christ, is a member of this church. Whoever does not want this and allows sin to rule over them, does not belong to the church.¹²

Real Spirit-led ministries

Speaking of the pastors and missionaries of these Spirit-led churches, Riedemann writes of the absolute necessity for the anointing of God in order to have a real ministry:

⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹¹ Ibid., 77.

¹² Ibid., 78.



Just as the sap rises from the root and makes the branch fruitful, so the Spirit of Christ rises from the root, Christ ... to make them all fruitful.

⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Ibid., 76.

Those who have been on the mountain with Christ and have seen the tabernacle with all its adornments and furnishing, they and only they are able to know how to do the work to please him whose dwelling it shall be.¹³

If anyone is to go out [as a missionary] for the Lord, he must be chosen by the Lord and endowed with his power; he must feel that power working in him. Above all, he must let the Lord's power rule over him and lead him. ... Christ will not permit a messenger to go out who is not first clothed with the power of his Spirit. Those who feel this power will heed the command of their Lord, who has sent them.¹⁴

Kingdom-based missiology

The goal, calling, and desire of Peter Riedemann and these radical brethren was Christ and His kingdom. His heart beat with the heart of Christ with his appeal to manifest God's kingdom on earth. This Kingdom-based missiology caused these early Anabaptist communities to pour out their lives in missions, even in the most difficult times of war and persecution. What's more, when they built these missions they understood that disciplining them in all of the teaching of Christ was what was expected of them. They believed Jesus actually meant it when He said, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

The Son does what he sees the Father doing. When the Son wished to create a new humanity, or to renew humanity in the likeness of its Creator, he also wanted to do everything in the proper order.¹⁵

Since they cannot preach without first being sent, it is certain that God, in giving them his command to go out, puts his word in his messengers' mouths. The Lord himself testifies to this when he says, "I have put

my words in your mouth. I have set you over nations and kingdoms, to uproot, pull down, and destroy, and then to build and plant anew." Therefore, all who have not been sent have no word from God. They only have what they have stolen from the Scriptures or from one

another. That is the main reason God's commission is necessary. It is not enough that they were sent; they also had to know the purpose of being sent, and what they had to do. Christ commanded them to do his work, saying, "teach all nations," and "Preach the gospel to every creature."¹⁶

Love

One last thing about the book that I feel I just have to mention. Through both of his books, Riedemann constantly speaks about the power of love. It is love, he teaches, that makes all this spiritual life work.

There is a particular point that Riedemann makes about love in the brotherhood that I don't want us to miss. He argues that the oneness and unity that the brotherhood is to have flows from our understanding of the Trinity. This "community of the Trinity," spoken of by Christ in John 16 and 17, forms the model of unity and love for the brotherhood here on earth. Riedemann used this concept of love so much that his first book has actually been named after it—*Love is Like Fire*. That title came from his inspiring analogy of a man building a fire from sticks. He says that when you first start building the fire, almost any size of stick can snuff it out. But as the fire grows, it can get to the point that even whole trees or houses can't stop it. That's the way love is.

Let it burn! ~

Peter Reidemann's Confessions can be purchased at www.hbbookcentre.com, or by writing to Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, Box 40, MacGregor, MB, R0H 0R0, Canada. *Love is Like Fire* can be freely downloaded at <http://www.plough.com/eb-ooks/loveislikefire.html>

¹⁶ Ibid., 186-187.

LOVE IS LIKE FIRE

Love is like fire, which goes out before it really ignites if one puts too much wood on it, as those who work with it know. But once it really flares, the more wood one puts on it, the better it burns, so that even houses and whole forests are burned. But when there is no more wood, however, it dies and grows cold. It is the same with love. When it is first kindled in a man, small troubles and temptations smother and hinder it; but when it really burns, having kindled the man's eagerness for God, the more temptations and tribulation meet it, the more it flares, until it overcomes and consumes all injustice and wickedness. But when love is not practiced, when the man grows lazy and careless, it flickers out again; the man's heart grows cold, faith declines, and all good works cease. Then the man stands like a withered tree fit for the fire, as Jesus himself says. Love flows from faith; for where there is no faith there cannot be love, and where there is no love there cannot be faith. The two are so entwined that one cannot be pleasing to God without the other.¹

¹ Peter Riedemann, *Love is Like Fire: The Confession of an Anabaptist Prisoner* (Plough Publishing House, 1993), 25-26.

¹³ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴ Ibid., 184.

¹⁵ Ibid., 186.