

LOVE IS LIKE FIRE

Peter Riedemann (1506-1566)



Introduction

The author of this article, Peter Riedemann, was born in 1506 in Hirschberg, Silesia (now Jelenia Bóra, Poland). At the time this article was written, however, Peter was in Gmunden, Austria ... sitting in prison. He had been captured while on a mission journey.

Peter was, arguably, the most articulate of early Anabaptist writers. Thankfully, his works lack some of the vitriolic name-calling that was a part of the culture of the day, even in some Anabaptist writings. Believe it or not, the following article (which is but an extract of the beginning) was sort of a “Confession of Faith.” Have you ever seen a Confession of Faith that begins with an enthusiastic outflowing of praise for the beauty of God’s love?

Undoubtedly Peter would have preferred to have written this defense of his faith in the comfort of his own home. But like many blessings in disguise, the opportunity to write came in the form of a prison term (the first of three!). If he had not been captured, his busy life of preaching and shepherding Christ’s flock may not have permitted him time to write long articles about his faith. But once captured, he put his pen to the paper as a way of explaining to the authorities what he believed.

Much could be said about Peter Riedemann (hopefully some day we can get a biography of him

in *The Heartbeat of the Remnant*) and his “confession.” We could speak of his interpretation of the Christian faith, how that it was more concerned with orthopraxy (correct living) than orthodoxy (correct theology); how he viewed justification as the act of actually “becom[ing] devout and just before God.” When the spirit of a man was set on fire with that great love of God ... it burned up the dross and left only those things that were “completely pure, holy, and godly.” We could speak of one of his definitions of faith: “faith is a power that works righteousness and easily carries out all God’s will.”

Peter most likely never had any formal theological training. His articulation of the Christian faith sprang from a simple reading of the Bible, and following hard after the Lamb that was slain to take away the sins of the world.

Without further ado, we turn to Peter’s confession. May the ardor of God’s love burn in us!

The love of God

God in his almighty power and divine nature hovered in the wind before there was a place to stand, and before the foundation of the world was laid; he, the infinite Being, was alone in his glory. It seemed to him not enough to be alone, however, as there was nothing to praise and glorify his name, for he wanted praise. So in his wisdom, which endures for ever and never changes, he created heaven

and earth and filled them with his glory—that is, with all creation, the work of his hands in which we recognize his invisible being and eternal power, if we note and observe it. On looking at it, he declared that everything was very good, made according to his will and without blemish; but among them all there was no creature able to give him the praise he wanted. So he said, “Let us make human beings in our image, that is, beings who are perfectly pure and completely without blemish.”

Then he made a man and a woman and gave them dominion over all the work of his hands, except the tree of life and of the knowledge of good and evil. Regarding this tree, he said, “When you eat of it you shall die.” But

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the human beings whom God had made for his praise soon turned away and forgot their Creator's command and all the good things he had given them. They exchanged obedience for disobedience and ate of the forbidden fruit. This caused them to fall, and their descendants also, for the wrath of God came over them, and as a result the earth, too, came under

a curse, and as a punishment bore thistles and thorns where they had hoped for good. God had expected goodness and obedience from them, but they had been disobedient and caused thistles and thorns to grow. Therefore eternal death and damnation came over them and all their descendants, and it became impossible for any of them to attain what the one man, Adam, had lost—that is, God's favor and grace; for the wrath of God had come upon them and they lay in the power of death under sin, as under a heavy load that none of them could lift. Only the one eternally powerful God, against whom they had sinned, could do so through his dearly beloved Son.

But God in the very great wrath which had befallen us could not restrain and hide his love. This was impossible, for he himself is love. So he had to show himself and make himself known, and extend love to the human race, and after the curse give comfort once more through his promise. In order that man might have comfort and hope, he said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between your seed and the woman's seed, and her seed will crush your head.” This seed is Christ our Savior, who crushed the serpent's head, that is, robbed the Devil of his power and dominion.

What great love that is! God comforts us, his greatest enemies, with such a glorious and wonderful promise to free us from death (which we had willfully deserved) and give us everlasting life freely, without our earning or deserving it.

So loving is his compassion! Like a spring that overflows, his mercy flows over all who desire it, calling them to this grace and saying, “Everyone who is thirsty, come to the water, and those of you who have no money, come buy wine and milk without price!” Who has ever shown anyone such love as the Ruler of all has shown, even to those who despised him? He still cares daily for them, and gives them food and drink, clothing and all they need, also strength of body. Truly, what can a man have that he did not receive from him? And what could he achieve that was not done by God beforehand and given him? Yet who is thanked less for a gift than the One from whom everything comes, the One who cares for us as a mother does for the child at her breast, and wants nothing evil to befall us, but wants to save us from it all, if only we listen to his voice? For as a bird cares for its young, he watches over us to help us, saying, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will hear you and help you.” He is a faithful God who soon forgets all our transgressions and favors us with his noblest gifts.

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God's love is seen in that he did not spare his dearly beloved only Son, but sent him into the world and gave him up to death as atonement for our sin. What great love that is! He makes his only Son whom he loves alive again in us who were dead, and leads us to his kingdom. What more should he have done than he has already done, or what more should he have shown us than he has already shown? God wants to give us everything with him. But not only that; he has already given himself to us to be our Father and accepted us as his children by freely forgiving our sins. We have not repaid him for this, nor does he want any recompense except that we believe in his name and in Jesus Christ his Son, whom he sent to be the Savior of the world.

The love of Christ

Christ Jesus, the eternal Word of God Most High, was with the Father before the creation of the world and made all things together with his Father—as it is written, “Before the world was, I was, and rejoiced in his presence continually, and when he prepared all things I helped him,

for through him all things are made, and nothing was made without him.” Everything that has been made, however, has being and remains in him and through him will once more be perfected. He came from above to his property, but they did not receive him; but to those who received him he gave the power to become children of God. What great love that is! Christ Jesus, the eternal Father’s Son, left the glory beside the Father which he had had before the world was made and came into the world in the form of a servant, endured poverty, temptation, and suffering to set us free from the yoke of misery and servitude. The lord of all lords and king of all kings became poor for our sake that we might become rich in him. We see the love of Christ in that he gave his life for us and suffered death to free us, who were guilty of death; for it is written, “No one has greater love than to give his life for his friend, and you are my friends, if you do all that I command you. I lay down my life in order to receive it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down myself.” Christ had such love for us that he gave his life and suffered the most humiliating death, namely death on the cross.

Thus he became a curse for our sakes. For it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.”

How could he have a greater love than this: he suffered so much poverty and misery, and shed his blood in death and so broke down the middle wall of partition and wiped out all that was written against us. He made a sure path to the Father for us and earned for us the Father’s favor. See how he spared no effort but did all that was necessary for our blessedness simply so that we might find joy with God and that he might cast off the heavy load that had lain upon us. We could rid ourselves of this in no other way than through him, since Satan had bound us so tightly with his ropes and stood like an armed man, keeping us in his power until the appointed time of grace came to us from God, when he sent the strong hero, Jesus Christ our Lord, against whom no one can prevail. He took away Satan’s power, burst the chain and the prison that held us, and forced Satan to obey him. He redeemed us, his people, in order that we might cleave to him alone and serve him with all our hearts.



Peter may have written his confession from this castle's prison, located in the lake at Gmunden, Austria.

Now, whoever recognizes the love of God the Father and of his dearly beloved Son, and takes to heart the great grace that has come to us through him, will truly set his heart to serve him, obey his commandments, and delight in them by day and night; he will treasure and love the testimony of his God, and have no fear of what may happen to him as a result. He will let nothing hinder him in this or turn him aside: as it is written, “What can separate us from the love of God—tribulation or death, hunger or thirst, heat or frost, fire, water, or sword? As it is written, we are killed all day long and are counted as sheep for slaughter, but in all this we more than overcome for the sake of him who loved us.” Such a man, however, will watch carefully over his witness to the Lord, and will hold unhindered to God’s will against his own will, which he gives to die with Christ. He strangles and kills it, so that his whole will is changed and renewed, and he becomes a new creature in Christ. He puts on Christ and truly surrenders himself to God. Just as previously he surrendered to sin, obeying it and serving it, and going from one sin to the next, now, after having recognized

God, he gives himself and his members to God as weapons of righteousness that they may be holy. Now he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him and brings to perfection everything in him that is pleasing to God, so that he may praise God with an honest heart. For the true praise of God is to keep his testimony and love his name wholeheartedly.

Let us love God

Let us love God; for he has loved us first and sent his Son into the world, through whom he has made us holy and sanctified us to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices well-pleasing to him through Jesus Christ. This is the love of God: that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. But whoever says he loves God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. In such a man there is no truth, for whoever loves God remains in God and God in him. We recognize that we remain in God and he in us if we keep his commandments.

The chief of all God's commandments is, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You must cleave to him, serve him and love him with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength." So to love God is the fulfillment of all his commands, and to love him with all my powers is to honor him with all my works and to give him praise. This means that in all I do and want to do, I look first to see whether I seek to increase God's praise in it. If I find that he will be praised by a deed, I joyfully carry it out for God's sake, regardless of the consequences for me. Where that is not so—where I do not find God's praise in it—it is useless work. I should leave it undone



But if I consider my words and find neither God's praise nor the betterment of my neighbor, I should stop, as James teaches, keeping my tongue in control and remain silent.

For all speech that comes from faith brings betterment and merits God's Spirit and praise. But if I consider my words and find neither God's praise nor the betterment of my neighbor, I should stop, as James teaches, keeping my tongue in control and remain silent, lest my words grieve God's Holy Spirit; for the wise man says, "Where there are many words, lies are not lacking." This is enmity to God and cannot come from truth. Hence the Holy Spirit teaches us, saying, "Do not accustom your mouth to indecent words, for they give rise to sinful thoughts."

To love God with all my heart and soul means that in all my thoughts I praise God, and give no room to sinful thoughts that arise from my flesh, nor listen to them, but

in order that God's name not be profaned in my work (regardless of who becomes my enemy because of it), and so that what I do may be done or left undone in God.

To love God with my whole soul means to watch all the words I speak so that they serve for God's praise and the edification and betterment of my neighbor, as Paul teaches. One should speak words that are gracious to listen to, necessary, and beneficial for the body of Christ; words that accord with faith and serve to confess and testify to the Son of God, heedless of grumblers—as it is written, "I believe and so I speak."

fight against them with all my power, and through God's mercy turn to the throne of grace and cry for help and deliverance: "O Lord, free me from this body of death, and do not let the Enemy overcome me! Come quickly to help me!" In this way your devil with all his wickedness is overcome. This is the good fight God wants us to fight, the fight in which he has placed us. Only he who fights honestly will receive the crown.

Everyone who loves God with his whole heart, mind, soul, and strength would rather be dead to the world, and would rather die than continue for even a short time thinking a useless or vain thought. I will be silent lest he bring forth words and work through which he profanes God's precious name. It befits us to have such love for our God and Christ—not only with our words, but with power, for he dearly loved us first in his Son, and showed us great kindness. For not everyone who says, "I love God" (and everyone says this) really does love God, but only he who shows it in power. As is written, he who loves me keeps my word and walks in my precepts. Such love works God's work and makes us alive in faith. Whoever loves like this is born of God.

Let us love one another

Now, whoever loves him who gave him birth should also love one who is born of him, that is, whoever loves God should love his brother too; for whoever says he loves God and does not love his brother is a liar; for how can he love God, whom he cannot see, if he does not love his brother, whom he sees. So the man of God should also have brotherly love, as it is written, "Love one another with brotherly affection and each serve the other." Christ gave us this command. Finally, when he wanted to leave the world and return to the Father, he said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: even as I have loved you, you also love one another. If you have love for one another, men will know you are my disciples." But brotherly love implies that we lay our lives down for each other, just as Christ did for all of us, and gave us an example to follow in his footsteps. So I should not live for myself alone, but live to serve my brothers—not seek my prosperity and betterment, but theirs, my whole life long; also, I should take

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care not to let my brother be grieved or weakened by my work or words. For when my word has grieved a brother, I have lacked love. Whoever does not love his brother is still in death and darkness, as John writes. “Anyone who does not love his brother is a murderer, and we know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” Whoever loves his brother, however, penetrates through from death to life, for he loves his brethren. So let us love everyone—not with words and with our tongues, but in deed and truth. For if someone who has the goods of this world sees his brother in want and does not share with him, how can God’s love abide in him? It is rather Cain’s love that is in him. He was evil and slew his brother, because his works were evil and his brother’s upright.

Christ, our Master, gave himself completely to us with all he had and kept nothing back. He himself said, “All that I have received from my Father I have given to you.” He has become our own with all that he has, and we have become his, so that he is in us, and so that we live and move in him. In the same way we should give ourselves to our brethren and keep nothing from them, but gladly give them love, life, and all that is ours in order to become one indivisible body whose head is Christ. Whoever remains in such love remains in Christ and Christ in him, and he will bring forth much fruit for eternal life. But whoever does not abide in me, says the Lord, will be cast out to wither and be burned. That is the end and the recompense for the hypocritical and ungentle love of which the world is full.

Brotherly love should come wholeheartedly from pure hearts and not be tainted but remain pure. God the Lord knows what is in man; he searches the heart and mind. Thus neither outward show nor hypocrisy means anything to him, no matter how fine they seem, for God is not deceived. He wants a sincere, renewed heart. As it is written, “A broken and contrite heart you will not despise.” God wants to be praised in spirit, heart, and conscience. As he is a spirit, he does not look for outward ceremony which is not founded in the heart. That is an abomination to him however fine and good it seems. What comes from the heart in faith, however, and is carried out in deed is a pleasing and fragrant offering to his glory.

Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the second commandment and is like the first. On these two depend all the law and the prophets. Indeed, the law: you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not commit

fornication, you shall not defame, you shall not covet, and all other commandments, however many there may be, are fulfilled in the saying, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But love of one’s neighbor, as Christ himself teaches, consists in this: what you would like men to do to you, do to them first—then you will fulfill God’s law. Now, no one desires evil to befall him; he desires good from all, therefore, in obedience, we should first show men love, loyalty, and goodness, then they will not speak against the praise of God. In this way we gladly make ourselves of service to all men for Christ’s sake, that his name may be praised through us, also by unbelievers, for when they see how we serve they will have no ground for blasphemy. Such love flows from brotherly



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erly love, as Peter shows us when he says, “Supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with modesty, modesty with godliness, godliness with brotherly love, and brotherly love with the love of all. If these things are in you, you will not be lazy or unfruitful in the knowledge of God and of Christ.” It follows that every human being who is born of God is inclined to show his neighbor love, loyalty, and all that is good spontaneously and without end.

But whoever wants to strive for perfection is obliged, in order to reach this goal, to love all who hate and despise him as well. For Christ taught, “to the men of old it was said, ‘You shall love your friend and hate your enemies,’ but I say to you love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun rise over the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” For that is God’s way: through patience he calls sinners to repentance. So the children who have received his Spirit should walk in its footprints and be disciples of God. Paul teaches, “Be followers of God as beloved children.” Through patience and through returning good for evil, they should point their enemy to uprightness, for

it is written, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink, for in so doing you will heap fiery coals on his head.” Perhaps this kindness may affect him so that he considers deeply and turns over a new leaf. He will think, “I treat this man badly, and he repays me with kindness and does all he can to serve me and is my friend. Oh, what am I doing? I want to change and do as he does—leave the evil and pursue the good, for what does it help me to live in wickedness and oppose the will of God?” When this takes place—when you move a human being to have a good conscience—you have helped a soul from death to life, which is sure to be rewarded by God. Where this does not take place—where God sees you repay evil with good—he will say in his heart (even though he does not let it be seen), “This man accepts everything patiently that I maliciously do to him, and is so ready to do good to me—he is truly better than I am.” In this way your well-doing becomes a witness to him. Such love is a band of perfection. But if he does not better himself and repent after such a witness, he increases God’s wrath upon him in the day of judgment. When love takes hold of a man, he is pleasing to God and approved by man. Where there is need, he walks and abides in God, and God in him, and his life and all his work is accomplished in God; for God’s clarity enlightens and surrounds him so that he walks in the light of God’s grace and is no more surrounded by darkness. Bright radiance and great light has enlightened his heart, and he is defended by the Holy Spirit and led with sure conscience to the peace of the saints. Whoever does not have this is blind; groping for the wall, he does not know where he will fall or that the pit of hell is close to him.

What love is

As so much has been said about love so far, we must show what it is like in order that it is better understood, that one may not think he has love when it is only an illusion. Love cannot hide itself because its nature is light. It must shine and show itself in active work, serving all men and doing good. For love does everyone good. It is ready to serve; it is kind, gentle, mild, patient, humble, pure, temperate, modest, sympathetic, brotherly, warm-hearted, good, compassionate, gracious, lowly, forbear-

ing, loyal, and peaceable. Love is not repulsive; it is not proud, puffed up, boastful, envious, or drunken; it is not self-willed, disobedient, deceitful, quarrelsome, or thieving. Love does not gossip; it is not jealous, irate, or spiteful, it despises no one, but bears all things and suffers all things; it is not revengeful; it does not repay evil with evil; it does not rejoice in what is wrong, but rejoices in truth. Only love does God’s work.

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.

What faith is

Faith is a certain assurance of what we hope for, a clear revelation and a conviction of things that are not seen, a conquest of the world, the Devil, and the flesh; it is a sure guide to God, an assurance of the hope and purification of the heart; through it a man becomes completely pure, holy, and godly. But faith is also a justification, because through faith in Christ we become devout and just before God—as a gift. Faith is a power that can do everything—nothing is impossible for it. As Christ testifies, “If you have faith like a mustard seed, say to this mountain, ‘Get up from here and cast yourself into the sea,’ and it will obey.” Or, “Be it done for you as you have believed.” Faith is also an assurance of the conscience that it stands firm and trusts God’s promise. Thus it is a confirmation

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of the supplication, for God does not disdain the prayer of the believer, but must grant his request since it comes from faith. John says, "We are certain that we have received what we have asked him for."

As Paul teaches, faith is a power that works righteousness and easily carries out all God's will. A man who says he cannot carry out God's will shows that he is not a believer but an unbeliever, for all things are possible to him who believes. It is easy for him to walk in the footsteps of Christ, who has said, "My yoke is easy and my burden light." The man who does not believe considers him a liar and accuses him of not meaning it; that is, he accuses him of loading unbearable burdens upon us, although in fact, he has placed the very lightest that he could upon us; for he took upon himself and carried a heavy burden which we could neither move nor carry, and he has reduced the burden of all the commandments to one commandment, namely love, that we may the more easily grasp it and reach our goal.

Whoever believes also confirms and testifies that God is faithful in all his promises. "For he who is righteous through faith shall live." However, it is impossible to believe before one knows God and the strength of his power as well as his love and faithfulness to us. Paul writes, "How can they believe before they hear?" Therefore God sent his own Son into the world, who has proclaimed to us the name of God, our Father, in order that we can believe and have hope in God, as it is written: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sing your praise in the great congregation." Further, "I have made known your name to the children of men." John writes, "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son of the Father has made him known to us." And "We have believed and bear witness that God is light, and we know that our witness is true." He revealed God's will so clearly that nothing is left that he has not told us. He went before us, not with words only but also with deeds and power, and he has shown us the way to follow him. For he walked in obedience to his Father unto death—even death on the cross, which he endured for our sin. So the Father awakened him again and raised him up as king over all the kings of the earth and gave him a name that is over all names; at the name of Jesus every knee

will bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and all tongues will confess that God has made him lord of all lords and king of all kings. His kingdom endures for ever and has no end, as is written: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." Mount Zion is the community of believers gathered and united in love by the Holy Spirit through unity of faith, building up those who are consecrated through the blood of Christ to be a holy house. That is why Christ, after he had risen and before he took possession of heaven, appeared to his disciples and commanded them to be his witnesses of all they had seen and heard, and said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creatures; he who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

He went before us, not with words only but also with deeds and power, and he has shown us the way to follow him.

Here Christ follows the method of his Father, who arranged everything in his creation not in confusion, but in the right order. First he created the earth, and then the grass that came from the earth as food for the cattle, in order that they, when made, might have fodder and not suffer want. The cattle, however, were food for man, prepared before man was made, so that each created being would have what it needed before it actually was. God acts wisely in all his works and sees that everything is rightly ordered. Christ did the same: when he wanted

word of his good deeds to be spread among the children of men, he first sent the disciples saying, "Go!" and commanded them to preach the Gospel.

They did not go of themselves, but through being sent they received strength for their task and were not unfruitful. In the same way Paul writes:

How can they hear without preachers; how can they preach before they are sent? Yet, have they not heard? Their voice has gone out into all the world, its sound to the end of the earth; thus faith comes from hearing, hearing through preaching, but preaching through the Word of God. ~

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