

# **The Schleithem Consensus of 1527**

## **The agreement of a number of children of God concerning seven articles**

(Translated by John Howard Yoder in 1973)

### **The Cover Letter:**

May joy, peace, mercy from our Father, through the atonement of the blood of Christ Jesus, together with the gifts of one Spirit - who is sent by the Father to all believers to give strength and consolation and patience in all tribulation until the end - be with all who love God and all children of light, who are scattered everywhere, wherever they might have been placed by God our Father, wherever they might be gathered in unity of spirit in one God and Father of us all; grace and peace of heart be with you all. Amen.

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord; first and primordially we are always concerned for your consolation and the assurance of your conscience (which was sometime confused), so that you might not always be separated from us as aliens and by right almost completely excluded, but that you might turn to the true implanted members of Christ, who have been armed through patience and the knowledge of self, and thus be again united with us in the power of a godly Christian spirit and zeal for God.

It is manifest with what manifold cunning the devil has turned us aside, so that he might destroy and cast down the work of God, which in us mercifully and graciously has been partially begun. But the true Shepherd of our souls, Christ, who has begun such in us, will direct and teach the same unto the end, to His glory and our salvation, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters, we who have been assembled in the Lord at Schleithem on the Randen make known, in points and articles, unto all that love God, that as far as we are concerned, we have been united to stand fast in the Lord as obedient children of God, sons and daughters, who have been and shall be separated from the world in all that we do and leave undone, and (the praise and glory be to God alone) uncontradicted by all the brothers, completely at peace.<sup>1</sup> Herein we have sensed the unity of the Father and of our common Christ as present with us in their Spirit. For the Lord is a Lord of peace and not of quarreling, as Paul indicates (1 Cor. 14:33). So that you understand at what points this occurred, you should observe and understand the following:

A very great offense has been introduced by some false brothers among us, whereby several have turned away from the faith, thinking to practice and observe the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ. But such have fallen short of the truth and (to their own condemnation) are given over to the lasciviousness and license of the flesh. They have esteemed that faith and love may do and permit everything and that nothing can harm nor condemn them, since they are "believers."

Note well, you members of God in Christ Jesus, that faith in the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ is not thus formed: it produces and brings forth no such things as these false brothers and sisters practice and teach. Guard yourselves and be warned of such people, for they do not serve our Father, but their father, the devil.

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the old parenthesis "(the praise and glory be to God alone)," the closing phrases of this paragraph refer not simply to a common determination to be faithful to the Lord, but much more specifically to the actual Schleithem experience and the sense of Unity (Vereinigung) which the members had come to in the course of the meeting. "Without contradiction of all the brothers" is the formal description and "completely at peace" is the subjective definition of this sense of Holy Spirit guidance. Zwingli considered the very report that "we have come together" to be the proof of the culpable, sectarian, conspiratorial character of Anabaptism (Elenchus, Z, VI, p.56).

But for you it is not so; for they who are Christ's have crucified their flesh with all its lusts and desires (Gal. 5:24). You understand me well, and [know] brothers whom we mean. Separate yourselves from them, for they are perverted. Pray the Lord that they may have knowledge unto repentance, and for us that we may have stamina to persevere along the path we have entered upon, unto the glory of God and of Christ His Son. Amen.

### **Introduction:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord: these are the articles which some brothers previously had understood wrongly and in a way not conformed to the true meaning. Thereby many weak consciences were confused, whereby the name of God has been grossly slandered, for which reason it was needful that we should be brought to agreement in the Lord, which has come to pass. To God be praise and glory!

Now that you have abundantly understood the will of God as revealed through us at this time, you must fulfill this will, now known, persistently and unswervingly. For you know well what is the reward of the servant who knowingly sins.

Everything which you have done unknowingly and now confess to have done wrongly, is forgiven you, through that believing prayer, which is offered among us in our meeting for all our shortcomings and guilt, through the gracious forgiveness of God and through the blood of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Watch out for all who do not walk in simplicity of divine truth, which has been stated by us in this letter in our meeting, so that everyone might be governed among us by the rule of the ban, and that henceforth the entry of false brothers and sisters among us might be prevented.

Put away from you that which is evil, and the Lord will be your God, and you will be His sons and daughters (1 Cor. 6:17).

Dear brothers, keep in mind what Paul admonished Titus (Tit. 2:11-14). He says: "The saving grace of God has appeared to all, and disciplines us, that we should deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live circumspect righteous and godly lives in this world; awaiting the same hope and the appearing of the glory of the great God and of our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to redeem us from all unrighteousness and to purify unto himself a people of his own, that would be zealous of good works." Think on this, and exercise yourselves therein, and the Lord of peace will be with you.

May the name of God be forever blessed and greatly praised, Amen. May the Lord give you His peace, Amen.

*Done at Schleithem, St. Matthew's Day [February 24], Anno 1527.*

### **The Seven Articles:**

The articles we have dealt with, and in which we have been united, are these: baptism, ban, the breaking of bread, separation from abomination, shepherds in the congregation, the sword, the oath.

#### **Article I. Notice Concerning Baptism**

Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life and [who] believe truly that their sins are taken away through Christ, and to all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and be buried with Him in death, so that they might rise with Him; to all those who with such an understanding themselves desire and request it from us; hereby is excluded all infant

baptism, the greatest and first abomination of the pope. For this you have the reasons and the testimony of the writings and the practice of the apostles (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:6; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36; Acts 16:31-33; 19:4). We wish simply yet resolutely and with assurance to hold to the same.

## **Article II. We have been united as follows concerning the ban**

We have been united as follows concerning the ban. The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves over to the Lord, to walk after [Him]<sup>2</sup> in His commandments; those who have been baptized into the one body of Christ, and let themselves be called brothers or sisters, and still somehow slip and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken. The same [shall] be warned twice privately and the third time be publicly admonished before the entire congregation according to the command of Christ (Mt. 18).<sup>3</sup> But this shall be done according to the ordering of the Spirit of God before the breaking of bread<sup>4</sup> so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and drink from one cup.

## **Article III. Concerning the breaking of bread**

Concerning the breaking of bread, we have become one and agree thus: all those who desire to break the one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ and all those who wish to drink of one drink in remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, they must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ, that is the congregation of God, whose head is Christ, and that by baptism. For as Paul indicates (1 Cor. 10:21), we cannot be partakers at the same time of the table of the Lord and the table of devils. Nor can we at the same time partake and drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. That is: all those who follow the devil and the world, have no part with those who have been called out of the world unto God. All those who lie in evil have no part in the good.

So it shall and must be, that whoever does not share the calling of the one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one spirit, to one body together with all the children of God, may not be made one loaf together with them, as must be true if one wishes truly to break bread according to the command of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nachwandeln, to walk after, is the nearest approximation in the Schleithem text to the concept of discipleship (Nachfolge) which was later to become especially current among Anabaptists.

<sup>3</sup> This reference to Mt. 18 is the only Scripture reference in the earliest handwritten text. "Rule of Christ" or "Command of Christ" is a standard designation for this text. Cf. J. Yoder: "Binding and Loosing," Concern 14, Scottdale, 1967, esp. pp. 15 ff. Other Scripture allusions identified in parentheses have been supplied by later editors. This abundant citation of scriptural language without being concerned to indicate the source of quotation is an indication of the fluency with which Anabaptists thought in biblical vocabulary; it is probably also an indication that they thought of those texts as expressing a meaningful truth rather than as "proof texts."

<sup>4</sup> At this point Walter Köhler, the editor of the printed version, suggests the text Mt. 5:23. If "the ordering of the spirit" relates specifically to "before the breaking of bread" and means to point to a Scripture text, this could be a likely one; or 1 Cor. 11 could also possibly be alluded to; but "ordering of the spirit" is not the usual way in which the Anabaptists refer to a Bible quotation. The phrase can also mean a call for a personal and flexible attitude, as the Spirit leads, i.e., in the application of the concern for reconciliation.

<sup>5</sup> Most ecumenical debate about the validity of sacraments focuses upon either the sacramental status of the officiant or the doctrinal understanding of the meaning of the emblems. It should be pointed out that the Anabaptist understanding of close communion refers not to the sacrament but to the participants. It is invalidated not by an unauthorized officiant or an insufficient concept of sacrament, but by the absence of real community among those present.

#### **Article IV. We have been united concerning the separation that shall take place**

We have been united concerning the separation that shall take place from the evil and the wickedness which the devil has planted in the world, simply in this; that we have no fellowship with them,<sup>6</sup> and do not run with them in the confusion of their abominations. So it is; since all who have not entered into the obedience of faith and have not united themselves with God so that they will to do His will, are a great abomination before God, therefore nothing else can or really will grow or spring forth from them than abominable things. Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are [come] out of the world, God's temple and idols. Christ and Belial, and none will have part with the other.

To us, then, the commandment of the Lord is also obvious, whereby He orders us to be and to become separated from the evil one, and thus He will be our God and we shall be His sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:17).

Further, He admonishes us therefore to go out from Babylon and from the earthly Egypt, that we may not be partakers in their torment and suffering, which the Lord will bring upon them. (Rev. 18:4 ff.).

From all this we should learn that everything which has not been united with our God in Christ is nothing but an abomination which we should shun. By this are meant all popish and repopish works and idolatry, gatherings, church attendance<sup>7</sup>, winehouses, guarantees and commitments of unbelief, and other things of the kind, which the world regards highly, and yet which are carnal or flatly counter to the command of God, after the pattern of all the iniquity which is in the world. From all this we shall be separated and have no part with such, for they are nothing but abominations, which cause us to be hated before our Christ Jesus, who has freed us from the servitude of the flesh and fitted us for the service of God and the Spirit whom He has given us.

Thereby shall also fall away from us the diabolical weapons of violence - such as sword, armor, and the like, and all of their use to protect friends or against enemies - by virtue of the word of Christ: "you shall not resist evil" (Mt. 5:39).

#### **Article V. We have been united as follows concerning shepherds in the church of God.**

We have been united as follows concerning shepherds in the church of God. The shepherd in the church shall be a person according to the rule of Paul<sup>8</sup>, fully and completely, who has a good report of those who are outside the faith. The office of such a person shall be to read and exhort and teach, warn, admonish, or ban in the congregation, and properly to preside among the sisters and brothers in prayer, and in the

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<sup>6</sup> Note the shift from "world" to "they." "The world" is not discussed independently of the people constituting the unregenerate order.

<sup>7</sup> Kirchgang, literally meaning church attendance, has no congregational dimension to it but refers to the conformity to established patterns of those who, while perhaps sympathizing with the Anabaptists, still avoided any public reproach by regularly being seen at the state church functions.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Tim. 3:7. Interpreters are not clear where the focus of Art. V lies. Its first thrust is a call for the shepherd to be a morally worth person, i.e., a critique of the practice of his being appointed on the grounds of his education or social connections without regard to moral stature. Zwingli's translation moves the accent by translating "the shepherd should be one from the congregation," i.e., not someone from elsewhere. As Zwingli knew, the Anabaptists also rejected the naming of a minister to a parish by a distant city council, and he let that knowledge influence his translation. Previous to 1527, the only generally practiced leadership model was the itinerant. Schleithem shows the consolidation of the local small congregation with its own leaders from its midst.

breaking of bread, and in all things to take care of the body of Christ, that it may be built up and developed, so that the name of God might be praised and honored through us, and the mouth of the mocker be stopped.

He shall be supported, wherein he has need, by the congregation which has chosen him, so that he who serves the gospel can also live therefrom, as the Lord has ordered (1 Cor. 9:14). But should a shepherd do something worthy of reprimand, nothing shall be done with him without the voice of two or three witnesses. If they sin they shall be publicly reprimanded, so that others might fear.<sup>9</sup>

But if the shepherd should be driven away or led to the Lord by the cross<sup>10</sup> at the same hour another shall be ordained to his place, so that the little folk and the little flock of God may not be destroyed, but be preserved by warning and be consoled.

#### **Article VI. We have been united as follows concerning the sword.**

We have been united as follows concerning the sword. The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established<sup>11</sup> over the wicked for punishment and for death and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.

But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

Now many, who do not understand Christ's will for us, will ask; whether a Christian may or should use the sword against the wicked for the protection and defense of the good, or for the sake of love.

The answer is unanimously revealed: Christ teaches and commands us to learn from Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart and thus we shall find rest for our souls (Mt. 11:29). Now Christ says to the woman who was taken in adultery (Jn. 8:11), not that she should be stoned according to the law of His Father (and yet He says, "What the Father commanded me, that I do") (Jn. 8:22) but with mercy and forgiveness and the warning to sin no more, says: "Go, sin no more." Exactly thus should we also proceed, according to the rule of the ban.

Second, is asked concerning the sword: whether a Christian shall pass sentence in disputes and strife about worldly matters, such as the unbelievers have with one another. The answer: Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgement between brother and brother concerning inheritance, but refused to do so (Lk. 12:13). So should we also do.

Third, is asked concerning the sword: whether the Christian should be a magistrate if he is chosen thereto. This is answered thus: Christ was to be made King, but He fled and did not discern the ordinance of His Father<sup>12</sup>. Thus we should also do as He did and follow after Him, and we shall not walk in darkness. For He

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<sup>9</sup> The change in number here from "a shepherd" to "if they sin" is explained by the fact that this sentence is a quotation from 1 Tim. 5:20.

<sup>10</sup> "Cross" is already by this time a very clear cliché or "technical term" designating martyrdom.

<sup>11</sup> "Law" here is a specific reference to the Old Testament. Significantly the verb here is not *verordnet* but merely *geordnet*: conveying less of a sense of permanence or of specific divine institution than "ordained" does. It should be noted that in this entire discussion "sword" refers to the judicial and police powers of the state. There is no reference to war in Art. VI; there had been a brief one in IV.

<sup>12</sup> Two interpretations are possible for "did not discern the ordering of His Father." This may mean that Jesus did not respect, as being an obligation for Him, the service in the state in the office of king, even though the existence of the state is a divine ordinance. More likely would be the interpretation that Jesus

Himself says: "Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). He Himself further forbids the violence of the sword when He says: "The princes of this world lord it over them etc., but among you it shall not be so" (Mt. 20:25). Further Paul says, "Whom God has foreknown, the same he has also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son," etc. (Rom. 8:30). Peter also says: "Christ has suffered (not ruled) and has left us an example, that you should follow after in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

Lastly, one can see in the following points that it does not befit a Christian to be a magistrate: the rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the spirit. Their houses and dwelling remain in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven. Their citizenship is in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). The weapons of their battle and warfare are carnal and only against the flesh, but the weapons of Christians are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldly are armed with steel and iron, but Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and with the Word of God. In sum: as Christ our Head is minded, so also must be minded the members of the body of Christ through Him, so that there be no division in the body, through which it would be destroyed.<sup>13</sup> Since then Christ is as is written of Him, so must His members also be the same, so that His body may remain whole and unified for its own advancement and upbuilding. For any kingdom which is divided within itself will be destroyed (Mt. 12:25).

#### **Article VII. We have been united as follows concerning the oath.**

We have been united as follows concerning the oath. The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the law it is commanded that it should be done only in the name of God, truthfully and not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the law, forbids His [followers] all swearing, whether true or false; neither by heaven nor by earth, neither by Jerusalem nor by our head; and that for the reason which He goes on to give: "For you cannot make one hair white or black." You see, thereby all swearing is forbidden. We cannot perform what is promised in the swearing, for we are not able to change the smallest part of ourselves (Mt. 5:34-37).

Now there are some who do not believe the simple commandment of God and who say, "But God swore by Himself to Abraham, because He was God (as He promised him that He would do good to him and would be his God if he kept His commandments). Why then should I not swear if I promise something to someone?" The answer: hear what the Scripture says: "God, since he wished to prove overabundantly to the heirs of His promise that His will did not change, inserted an oath so that by two immutable things we might have a stronger consolation (for it is impossible that God should lie)" (Heb 6:7 ff.). Notice the meaning of the passage: God has the power to do what He forbids you, for everything is possible to Him. God swore an oath to Abraham, Scripture says, in order to prove that His counsel is immutable. That means: no one can withstand and thwart His will; thus He can keep His oath. But we cannot, as Christ said above, hold or perform our oath, therefore we should not swear.

Others say that swearing cannot be forbidden by God in the New Testament when it was commanded in the Old, but that it is forbidden only to swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and our head. Answer: hear the Scripture. He who swears by heaven, swears by God's throne and by Him who sits thereon (Mt. 5:35). Observe: swearing by heaven is forbidden, which is only God's throne; how much more is it forbidden to swear by God Himself. You blind fools, what is greater, the throne or He who sits upon it?

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did not evaluate the action of the people wanting to make Him King as having been brought about (ordered) by His Father.

<sup>13</sup> Here the printed version adds Mt. 12:25: "For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed."

Others say, if it is then wrong to use God for truth, then the apostles Peter and Paul also swore.<sup>14</sup> Answer: Peter and Paul only testify to that which God promised Abraham, whom we long after have received. But when one testifies, one testifies concerning that which is present, whether it be good or evil. Thus Simeon spoke of Christ to Mary and testified: "Behold: this one is ordained for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign which will be spoken against" (Lk 2:34).

Christ taught us similarly when He says: Your speech shall be yea, yea; and nay, nay; for what is more than that comes of evil. He says, your speech or your word shall be yes and no, so that no one might understand that He had permitted it. Christ is simply yea and nay, and all those who seek Him simply will understand His Word. Amen.<sup>15</sup>

### **Congregational Order:**

Since the almighty eternal and merciful God has made His wonderful light break forth in this world and [in this] most dangerous time, we recognize the mystery of the divine will, that the Word is preached to us according to the proper ordering of the Lord,<sup>16</sup> whereby we have been called into His fellowship. Therefore, according to the command of the Lord and the teachings of His apostles, in Christian order, we should observe the new commandment (1 Jn. 2:8), in love one toward another, so that love and unity may be maintained, which all brothers and sisters of the entire congregation should agree to hold to as follows:

1. The brothers and sisters should meet at least three or four times a week, to exercise themselves,<sup>17</sup> in the teaching of Christ and His apostles and heartily to exhort one another to remain faithful to the Lord as they have pledged.

2. When the brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together.<sup>18</sup> The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it,<sup>19</sup> the others should be still and listen, so that

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<sup>14</sup> Zwingli's translation fills in the argument here: "If it is bad to swear, or even to use the Lord's name to confirm the truth, then the apostles Peter and Paul sinned: for they swore."

<sup>15</sup> This concludes the Seven Articles.

<sup>16</sup> May mean either: "In the providence of God the Word is preached to us," whereby "Ordnung" would refer to the workings of God in bringing about Reformation and gospel preaching; or "the Word of God is preached according to the divine pattern" with the emphasis on the rediscovery of the true divinely willed church order. The following "whereby" may accordingly refer either to the preaching or to the proper ordering.

<sup>17</sup> Sich üben: perhaps includes an element of rote learning of gospel narrative and teaching, since literacy and the possession of Bibles was still rare.

<sup>18</sup> "Read" includes exposition, "Readings" had been one of the earliest names given to the study meetings held in Zurich and St. Gall prior to the foundation of Anabaptist congregations.

<sup>19</sup> "The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it" may mean that, for every particular passage, whoever understands its meaning should speak up. Then we would have a picture of a meeting with no settled leadership, with no controlling role for the "shepherd" who was called for by Schleithem Article V. Then one might infer, as does Jean Seguy, that this text testifies to a time before the Schleithem decisions, when congregations functioned without a named leader. It is, however, also possible that "the one to whom God has given the best understanding" may be a circumlocution for the already recognized leader in the local group.

there are not two or three carrying on a private conversation, bothering the others. The Psalter shall be read daily at home.<sup>20</sup>

3. Let none be frivolous in the church of God, neither in words nor in actions. Good conduct shall be maintained by them all also before the heathen (1 Tim. 2:8).

4. When a brother sees his brother erring, he shall warn him according to the command of Christ (Mt. 18:15) and shall admonish him in a Christian and brotherly way, as everyone is bound and obliged to do out of love.

5. Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need,<sup>21</sup> and as in the apostles time permit no brother to be in need.

6. All gluttony shall be avoided among the brothers who are gathered in the congregation; serve a soup or a minimum of vegetable and meat, for eating and drinking are not the kingdom of heaven.<sup>22</sup>

7. The Lord's supper shall be held, as often as the brothers are together,<sup>23</sup> thereby proclaiming the death of the Lord, and thereby warning each one to commemorate, how Christ gave His life for us, and shed His blood for us, that we might also be willing to give our body and life for Christ's sake, which means for the sake of all the brothers.

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<sup>20</sup> This "reading" may well be rote recitation. This reference to the Psalter is one of the very rare early Anabaptist references to noncongregational devotional exercises. It may be a further trace of an inheritance from monasticism.

<sup>21</sup> The common fund is seen here as a special purse for specific needs, not as a total communism of consumption such as was established not much later in Moravia. It is significant that the non-Hutterian Anabaptists also considered themselves to be following the economic example of the early Jerusalem Christians.

<sup>22</sup> Rom. 14:17. The assumption that the congregation would frequently gather around a simple meal may be linked to their avoidance of social clubs and guilds (above, Art. IV).

<sup>23</sup> The Lord's Supper, specifically identified as such, is evidently distinguished from the rest of the meal, even though both were practiced as often as the brothers met. (Cf. Art. 1.)