Calvin, Farel, and the Anabaptists:
On the Origins of the Briève Instruction of 1544

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[Trans. by John D. Roth]

Abstract: The fact that both Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin felt compelled to write a refutation of the Schleitheim Articles of 1527, and to do so only seventeen years apart, establishes the importance of these texts, not only for Anabaptism but also for the history of the emerging Reformed tradition. Through a fresh reading of the primary sources, the following essay illuminates for the first time: 1) the steps leading up to Calvin’s Briève Instruction of 1544 within the larger context of the theology of John Calvin and William Farel; 2) details regarding the Anabaptist movement in French-speaking Switzerland, which has not yet been adequately studied; and 3) the context surrounding the publication of the 1543 French version of the Schleitheim Articles, which is no longer extant.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

In his Vita Calvini of 1564, Theodor Beza fervently affirmed the rhetorical abilities of his friend and predecessor, John Calvin: “I believe there is no old, warmed-over, or newly-invented heresy that he did not destroy at its very foundations.” The spectrum of theological controversies that the theologian from Geneva engaged is broad indeed. On the right, Calvin attacked the theologians of the papacy from Paris to Trent along with the religious politics of the emperor (1536-1550). In the center, he called on those who were indecisive—known as Nicodemites—to declare themselves (1537-1562). And on the left, he distinguished himself firmly over against those whom he identified in his writings 152 times as “anabaptistes” and five more times as “catabaptistes,” though he hardly ever bothered to provide a coherent

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definition of these terms.\textsuperscript{2} According to Karl H. Wyneken, Calvin used these labels to characterize “radicals” in general,\textsuperscript{3} even though, as George H. Williams has made clear, the terms did not provide a clear profile of his opponents. In the words of Williams, “the Radical Reformation was a loosely interrelated congeries of reformations and restitutions which, besides the Anabaptists of various types, included Spiritualists and spiritualizers of varying tendencies, and the Evangelical Rationalists, largely Italian in origin.”\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{calvin Drawing.png}
\caption{John Calvin, ca1558/64. Quill drawing by the student, Jacques [?]. Bourgoin, (Bibliothèque de Genève, BGE Gg 15\textsuperscript{*}).\textsuperscript{5}}
\end{figure}

Although Anabaptism was rarely a uniform movement anywhere, it was least uniform in French-speaking regions where, according to Lucien Febvre, the pre-confessional Reformation movement expressed itself as “a long period of grand religious anarchy.”\textsuperscript{6} For Calvin, whose life work was ultimately characterized by a focus on “church” [\textit{ecclesia}] and “society” [\textit{civitas}], it was precisely this chaotic character that irritated him about the Anabaptists. Their teachings appeared to him as “an abyss

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} An exhaustive etymology by Fritz Blanke can be found in \textit{Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke}, ed. Emil Egli, et al. (Berlin, 1905-1991), VI/1: 21f., fn. 1 [hereafter cited as \textit{Z}].
\item \textsuperscript{3} Cf. Karl. H. Wyneken, “Calvin and Anabaptism,” \textit{Concordia Theological Quarterly} 36 (1965), 18-29, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{4} George Huntston Williams, \textit{The Radical Reformation}, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, Mo.: SCSC, 2000), xxix.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer,” 5f.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Lucien Febvre, “Les origines de la Réforme Française et le problème des causes de la Réforme,” \textit{Revue Historique} 54 (1929), 1-73, 70.
\end{itemize}
from which I would never escape,” “a whole sea of insane views,” and “a forest from which no one should ever emerge.” That Calvin classified the “Anabaptists” absolutely as heretics is not nearly as surprising as the fact that he did this so early. Already in a letter of dedication to Francis I in the first edition of the Institutes in 1536, Calvin—who was then barely 25 years old and writing in the context of persecution—assured the king that the current confusion and obscuring of the Gospel was not the fault of the Reformers, but of Satan himself “through his Anabaptists [catabaptistes] and people of their type.”

Once Calvin had settled on this judgment, he would never again revise it.

Scholars have not yet explored the influence of contemporary anti-Anabaptist writings on Calvin. He likely was aware of the early polemical writings of Zwingli and Bullinger, at least those in Latin, since he did not understand German. This is evident, in any case, by the fact that his rebuttal of Anabaptist views on the sacraments and civil government in the 1536 edition of the Institutes corresponds to a large extent with Articles I and VI of the Schleitheim Confession, in the same way that Zwingli cited and rejected them in his own polemic, In Catabaptistarum Strophas Elenchus (Against the Schemes of the Anabaptists) of 1527. Oddly, Calvin scholarship has not taken into account the influence of Heinrich Bullinger’s very successful and tendentious book Vom unverschampten Frävel, which was accessible since 1535 in a Latin edition, Adversus omnia catabaptistarum prava dogmata (Against All the False Teachings of the Anabaptists).

Willem Balke, in his Calvijn en de doperse Radikalen of 1973, has provided the most extensive treatment of the theme of Calvin and the Anabaptists. The opening “historical” portion of the book gives a


10. Richard Stauffer claims that we will never know whether or not Calvin was aware of the Elenchus.—“Zwingli et Calvin. Critiques de la confession de Schleitheim,” Archives internationales d’histoire des idées 87 (1977), 126-147, 145.


chronological overview of Calvin’s encounters with the Anabaptists and examines the relevant motifs in the four editions of the *Institutio* (1536-1559) and the *Briève Instruction* (1544). A shorter “systematic” portion illuminates the theological controversies, primarily in regards to “church” and “state.” The merit of Balke’s study is undoubtedly to be found more in its engagement with Calvin’s theology than in the actual research on the Anabaptists, since Balke avoided any engagement with primary sources related to the largely unexplored story of French Anabaptism. Instead, as he writes, he preferred to “apply the term ‘Anabaptist’ in the same way that Calvin did.” In light of the exclusively polemical tone that the term had for Calvin, such a decision was methodologically questionable and of little profit in terms of advancing historical understanding. When Balke later asserted that “in French-speaking regions one can scarcely speak of Anabaptists as such . . . since the radicals there were primarily free-spirits or ‘spiritual libertines’ (*libertins spirituels*),” justifiable doubts arise as to whether the book’s title, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, is at all meaningful. These difficulties of definition, arising from the object of investigation itself, call for a critical re-reading and broadening of the sources that Balke used based on current Anabaptist research.

In the essay that follows we will limit ourselves to Calvin’s encounters with “Anabaptist” dissidents in the period between 1534 and 1564 and to the circumstances related to the composition of his only systematic writing on the Anabaptists, the *Briève Instruction* of 1544 (*Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists*).

**CALVIN AND THE ANABAPTISTS (1534-1564)**

The first reference to “Anabaptists” in Calvin’s writings can be found in a handwritten first draft of his *Psychopannychia* (1534), which disputes...
the “Anabaptist” teaching on the “sleep of the soul” following death.\textsuperscript{16} However, this “apprentice work” by Calvin was not actually a text about the Anabaptists, since he mentions them (anabaptistæ; catabaptistæ) only three times, and then only in passing.\textsuperscript{17}

Walther Köhler was the first to recognize that “Calvin engages with the Anabaptists already in the first edition of his major dogmatic work.”\textsuperscript{18} The first edition of the \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion} (\textit{Institutio Christianae religionis}), which made the youthful scholar immediately famous, appeared in March 1536 in Basel with the explicit intention of distancing the evangelicals from Anabaptist distortions, in which the political authorities in France believed the evangelicals were entangled. In his \textit{Commentary on the Psalms} of 1557, Calvin clarified that the actual motivation for the \textit{Institutes} was the “Anabaptists [\textit{anabaptistes}] and rebels, who with their delusions and erroneous teachings destroy not only religion but also political order.”\textsuperscript{19}

In contrast to the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, Anabaptism found only tentative reception in French-speaking regions, where Calvin’s path had led in the summer of 1536. According to Henri Vuilleumier, the loyal and pious subjects of the region were not ready for the cause of freedom of conscience;\textsuperscript{20} the language barriers and repressive church politics of the Bernese occupation forces probably also had a dampening effect. Only two expressions of Anabaptism can be verified in the sources, both from the middle of the 1530s: in 1535 an Anabaptist being interrogated in Basel revealed that the number of brothers “on Lake Geneva [\textit{Losanner See}]” had increased significantly\textsuperscript{21}—a point that Bernese authorities, however, contested on April 29.\textsuperscript{22}

Further, at the Lausanne Disputation in October of 1536, Pierre Viret, while debating the eighth thesis (On Temporal Government), condemned the “rebellious spirits” at Münster along with the teaching of the Schleitheim Articles, according to which a magistrate “cannot be a

\textsuperscript{16} This teaching was advocated by a minority of Anabaptists on the basis of 2 Esdras 7:32. Cf. Williams, \textit{Radical Reformation}, index. The conflation of “Anabaptism” with “soul sleep” appears first in the appendix of Zwingli’s \textit{Elensches}.—Z 6/1:188-193.

\textsuperscript{17} CO 5:171f., 173f., 232.

\textsuperscript{18} Köhler, \textit{Täufertum}, 1.

\textsuperscript{19} CO 31:24, cf. 21:30.57.

\textsuperscript{20} Henri Vuilleumier, \textit{Histoire de l’église réformée du pays de Vaud sous le régime Berinois} (Lausanne: Éditions La Concorde, 1927), 1:220.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz}, vol. 3 (Aargau - Bern - Solothurn), ed. Martin Haas (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008) [hereafter cited as \textit{QGTS 3}], Nr. 695.
Christian.”23 But beyond this, Viret, who would become a city preacher and a professor in Lausanne until his emigration to France in 1561, had no contact with actual flesh-and-blood Anabaptists.24

**Geneva, 1536-1538**

Traveling from Basel, Calvin arrived in Geneva early in July 1536. There, the powerful words of William Farel would bind him to this city for the rest of his life. The first attacks on their reform efforts, which had barely taken root, followed in November. As Calvin recalled, “the Anabaptists [anabaptistes] began to attack us from one side; from the other side, it was the malicious apostate [Pierre Caroli].”25 The founding fathers of the Anabaptist movement in Geneva were religious refugees from the prince bishopric of Liège. After the collapse of Münster, the bilingual territory of Flanders was clearly the main point of entry for “proto-Mennonite” Anabaptism into French-speaking regions.

On March 9, 1537, the “katabaptistes” Herman de Gerbihan and Andry Benoit from the Walloon city of Enghien challenged the city priest of Geneva to a disputation,26 which was conceded to them on March 16 and 17. The minutes of the debate, which Farel led since Calvin was gone at the time, have not been preserved. But we can nonetheless reconstruct three of the articles discussed: 1) that infant baptism is a “teaching of the devil”; 2) “regarding the priesthood”—presumably referring to the classic themes of “calling” and “support” of the minister; and 3) the “teaching on the sleep of the soul.”27 On March 18 the Great Council issued a noteworthy decree that Farel “may no longer become involved in such debates in the future, and that no one should listen to either the Anabaptists or their companions.”28 Since Gerbihan and Benoit refused to yield, they were permanently banned from the city on March 19 under penalty of death. Functioning as the first Anabaptist mandate, the decree was also directed against “all other [members] of their sect,” implying that they clearly existed.29 According to the *Annales manuscrites*, written by the contemporary Jacques Savion, a number of courageous Walloons

had fled to Romandy, the French speaking part of Switzerland, “where the Bernese [authorities] executed and drowned several Anabaptists.”

Farel held a second disputation in Geneva on March 29, 1537, with two Walloons, Johannes Bomeromenus and Jehan Tordeur. In 1533, Bomoromenus, a printer, had fled the bishopric of Liège “because of Catholicism”; the wood turner Tordeur—probably identical with Jean Stordeur, whose widow Calvin would later marry in 1541—was expelled from the city of Liège on June 9, 1533, on the charge of heresy. The Anabaptists wanted to “prove that one should not administer baptism to infants, etc.” In contrast to Gerbihan and Benoit, whom Farel described as “uneducated simpletons,” these two offered thoughtful opposition.

Once again, the perfidious council used the Anabaptist attacks on the shaky Genevan reform efforts to demonstrate to the reformers who was in charge. The humiliation of that experience still angered Calvin in 1555: “Eighteen years ago,” he wrote,

when the Anabaptist came here to infect everyone with their teachings, they were cordially welcomed to the courthouse. To be sure, we were ordered to refute their teachings in public; but at the same time [the council] was flattering them. Instead of decisively resisting the Anabaptists, they offered them a banquet.

Nonetheless, the two Walloons were forced to leave the city on March 30, 1537. In the hopes of “living better and more Christlike,” Bomoromenus headed resolutely for Strasbourg, perhaps accompanied by Stordeur, who according to the sources, was also present there on September 30, 1539.

In the meantime, a conventicle with the programmatic name, “Friends of Holy Scripture [amis de l’escripture sainte],” had emerged in Geneva.
under the leadership of Jacques Mérauld, a native of Lyon. In regard to baptism, church discipline, and the nature of church offices, the group’s theology moved within the Anabaptist mainstream. Their conspicuously brusque rejection of every form of government can probably be attributed to the prejudices of the scribe. The doctrine of soul sleep advocated by the Walloons was no longer a point of discussion, although their Melchiorite Christology—in which Jesus did not take on the flesh of Mary—likely was. The anti-sabbatarian position of the group was probably directed against Calvin, who had found it necessary in the 1539 edition of the Institutes to take a stance on the Sabbath question, “because some troublesome spirits are currently fomenting confusion regarding the day of the Lord.”

Renewed Anabaptist activity is evident in Geneva in the fall of 1537. Among the relatively numerous administrative and juridical procedures that occurred between September 1537 and January 1538, the outlines of a small active Anabaptist congregation of at least twenty members become visible, primarily drawn from the handworker milieu. On October 8 the council circumvented the clergy, who feared that Nicodemite Anabaptists might present themselves at the next communion, by unilaterally forbidding the exercise of any kind of discipline connected to the Lord’s Supper: “The chasm between the preachers and the council became public,” writes Wilhelm Neuser, “and the Anabaptist question played a significant role in this.” And, indeed, “with more joy than was actually polite,” Farel and Calvin finally shook the Genevan dust from their sandals on April 23, 1538. From Neuchâtel, where he would remain until his death, Farel reported in September to Calvin, now residing in Strasbourg, about the desolate circumstances in Geneva: “They have created a whorehouse there. The Anabaptists hold

40. Ausgewertete Quellen: Staatsarchiv Genf, PC sér. 2. no. 385 (Sept. 11-14, 1537), Cf. Balke, Calvin, 349-353 und Herminjard, Correspondance, 5: nr. 678.
43. Staatsarchiv Genf, PC sér. 2. no. 385.
44. Cf. Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer,” 65 (Tab. 1).
46. CO 31:25, Cf. 21:226.
their gatherings daily, and everywhere the Mass is heard. Everything is going topsy-turvy and things could not be any worse." 47

**Strasbourg 1538-1541**

In August of 1538 Calvin responded to Martin Bucer’s call to serve as preacher of the French refugee congregation in Strasbourg, where Farel had previously served in 1525-1526, a congregation numbering some 400 heterodox souls. By the late 1530s Anabaptism in Strasbourg had already moved past its high point, so Calvin likely confronted only a few isolated groups of dissidents. 48 On July 29, 1539, Calvin was granted citizenship. The fact that he had himself enlisted in the tailor’s guild was clearly strategic, since nearly “all members were Anabaptists.” 49 On his deathbed, Calvin recalled: “I also had to deal with an Anabaptist agenda in Strasbourg, and people from five to ten miles away brought me children of Anabaptists for baptism.” 50

There is no clear evidence that Calvin had another meeting with Johannes Bomeromenus, 51 but it is likely that he did so with Herman de Gerbihan, who had joined the Melchiorites. 52 On February 27, 1540, Calvin wrote to Farel:

> If I am not mistaken, Hermann is truly and sincerely returned into the fellowship of the church. He has confessed that there is no hope for salvation outside of the church; and that we are the true church. . . . He was open to instruction on the issues of freedom of the will, the divine and human natures of Christ, rebirth, baptism of infants, and other matters, and he has accepted our teachings. He hesitated only in the question of predestination, but then he nearly agreed with me on this as well, even though he was not clear about the distinction between foreknowledge and foreordination. . . . I offered him my hand in the name of the church, after which I baptized his

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50. CO 9:894.

51. Corr. Eduard Stricker, *Calvin als erster Pfarrer der reformirten Gemeinde zu Straßburg* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1890), 15, fn. 15. All of these relevant sources could be referring just as easily to Jean Stordeur. —QGT Elsass, 3: nr. 891, fn. 1; nr. 991, fn. 3; nr. 996, fn. 2.

little daughter, who is already more than two years old. He is a godfearing man.\textsuperscript{53}

Although in Calvin’s letters from Strasbourg the identity of Jean Stordeur as the spouse of Calvin’s future wife can only be inferred,\textsuperscript{54} the contemporaries Theodor Beza und Nicolas Colladon were certain about the matter. Among the Anabaptists converted by Calvin was “a certain Jean Stordeur from Liège. When this man died of the plague sometime later in Strasburg, [Calvin] married his widow Idelette de Bure, a sober-minded and honorable woman.”\textsuperscript{55} On August 10, 1540, Farel presided over the marriage between this successful converter of Anabaptists and an Anabaptist widow. “Idelette de Bure,” Bernard Cottret has claimed somewhat flippantly, was “…a widow who did not lack a certain charm, if not a charm that was certain. Idellete de Bure was the result of a good action and a conquest.”\textsuperscript{56} Nonetheless, Calvin praised her with a quotation from Petronius as a “woman without parallel.”\textsuperscript{57}

In the significantly expanded new editions of the Institutes in 1539 and 1541 Calvin slipped in several references to his experiences with the Anabaptists in Geneva and Strasbourg—\textsuperscript{58} the development of his thoughts on covenant and election, for example, as well as the associated emphasis on the inner unity of the Old and New Testaments, and the parallel that he developed between circumcision as a “sign of the covenant” and baptism. For the first time, Calvin spoke of the “visible church.”\textsuperscript{59} In contrast to the ethical rigor of the Anabaptists, Calvin held firm to the incomplete character of the church (\textit{corpus permixtum}) and called for moderation in the use of church discipline. To separate oneself from this church, he argued—except in those instances where the integrity of teaching and life was imperiled—is of the devil. For the first time, the reformer attempted to distinguish the multifaceted concept of Anabaptism from those groups whom he later identified as “libertines,” or religious Spiritualists.\textsuperscript{60} The relatively substantial theological

\textsuperscript{55} CO 21:31f., 62.
\textsuperscript{57} CO 8:73: “Mortua uxore, singularis exempli femina.” This reference, which has not yet been noted by Calvin researchers, comes from \textit{Satyricon} 111 (the short story of the widow of Ephesus): “complorataque singularis exempli femina.”
\textsuperscript{59} CO 1:542.
annotations and amplifications of the 1539 edition of the Institutes were therefore aimed particularly at the Swiss Brethren who were then gaining strength in the lower Alsace.\(^{61}\)

With his wife and child\(^ {62}\)—and with a more fully developed ecclesiology and a somewhat clearer understanding of the Anabaptists—Calvin set out on September 13, 1541, for the return “home” to Geneva. The decision was not at all easy, “but in the end a sense of duty and commitment prevailed.”\(^ {63}\)

**The Immediate Context of the Briève Instruction of 1544**

Farel’s Letter of Request

On February 23, 1544, Calvin received a letter from Farel in Neuchâtel that preoccupied him for at least two months, detaining him from the work of consolidating the Genevan church. “A book has just now appeared,” wrote Farel, that I am now enclosing to you. It was published with the knowledge of my colleagues, who are close friends of the translator. The booklet is written very clumsily, which is not the fault of the translator, but rather the pathetic content of the German edition, which Zwingli has already critiqued. At the same time, these pitiable people, who take everything that comes from God and turn it on its head, have such an enthusiasm for this statement of unity of these profoundly unhappy people and for their teachings, which some pathetic persons have stubbornly and willfully defended until their death—that they believe it must all be regarded as the latest divine revelation. . . . Thus, our colleagues think that a refutation is needed. Not because the book is actually worthy of it, but rather for the sake of innocent people who still have some reverence for God. They ask you, for God’s sake, that you take on this task. . . . You know, of course, how this sort of people has poisoned the church and how necessary it is to bring an end to their destructive heresies. I suppose that we could ask someone else to accept this service, but tell us please: who could we find who could take up such a task?

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63. CO 31:27.
with your argumentative gifts or who could accomplish it as artfully as you? So with just a tiny bit of effort you could do our colleagues a great favor and complete a work that would be of value to everyone. By the way, it would also be very helpful if you could include in your work what you have already written in French regarding the “sleep of the soul” so that these teachings of this wretched sect would also be destroyed at the same time.64

Shortly thereafter Calvin informed Pierre Viret, their joint friend in Lausanne, that “the people in Neuchâtel are urgently requesting from me a further treatise against some sort of booklet by the Anabaptists.”65 Meanwhile, he did not respond to Farel until March 25: “In these past few days I have begun the refutation of the booklet. Please write if you are in agreement with me dedicating the foreword to all of you. Since you can be the best judge of its contents, I’m sending you a copy. I will pass it along to the printers only after receiving your response.”66

An “Anabaptist Book” in Francophone Switzerland

The similarity of these letters to happenings in Bern documented at the same time make it likely that both documents were dealing with the same matter. On March 28, 1544, the Bernese Council sent word to the Council of La Neuveville “that one of your citizens, who, as far as we understand, goes by the name of Le Pellouz, has had more than 1,500 copies of a book printed in the German part of Switzerland [Allemaigne] which contains doctrinal controversies by those who are known as Anabaptists [rebaptiseurs].”67 (Ill. 2).

![Image of handwritten letter]

Ill. 2: Bern to La Neuveville, Letter of March 28, 1544 (Staatsarchiv Bern, A III 160, 22v).

At the same time, a letter in German was sent to Morat and Grandson (then administered jointly by Bern and Fribourg), as well as to the

64. Herminjard, Correspondance, vol. 9, Nr. 1332.
65. Herminjard, Correspondance, vol. 9, Nr. 1336.
67. QGTS, 3: nr. 962.
Bernese bailiwicks of Erlach, Nidau, and St. Johannsen (cf. Ill. 4)—that is, the presumed scope of the book’s distribution.

Dear Bailiff, we have been informed that someone from La Neuveville on Lake Bienne ['Bielersee'] has had some 1,500 Anabaptist books printed in German-speaking Switzerland ['Allemaigne'] and has distributed these same books in the County of Neuchâtel. Since these books were likely also passed along to our subjects in your administrative district, we hereby emphatically order you to keep your eyes open and to confiscate them if at all possible.

Farel, seeing that a planned disputation with the Anabaptists was threatened by Bern’s intervention, urged Calvin on March 28, 1544, to complete his work quickly:

I am deeply grateful that your efforts to refute these misfortunate people has begun. I am extremely interested in the material that you have already written. . . . Whether or not it will come to an open exchange ['liberum congressum'] with these thrice-unhappy people I cannot say with certainty. Almost everywhere the Bernese authorities have the upper hand in this game, which does not trouble me if they would truly recognize that in this matter it would be much more helpful to allow these people to be heard. At the same time, I fear that in this case papal methods are more likely to be implemented than apostolic methods.

Calvin’s letter of dedication in the Briève Instruction confirms that the disputation with the Anabaptists that Farel was seeking in La Neuveville did indeed take place and that minutes of the meeting existed. Indeed, the Anabaptist mandate in Neuchâtel—issued on April 12, 1544, probably in response to the warning cries of Bern—mentions several disputations.

In the meantime, the other ministers in Neuchâtel discussed the draft of Calvin’s letter of dedication. On April 21, Farel reported that his colleagues feared that it could contain too much fuel for intrigue. They

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68. The standard print-run for early Reformation pamphlets was 1,500 copies. The printer was likely Nikolaus Brylinger of Basel. In 1552 Brylinger oversaw a reprinting of the Froschauer edition of the Bible, a translation highly valued by the Anabaptists.—cf. Urs B. Leu, “Die Froschauer-Bibeln und ihre Verbreitung in Europa und Nordamerika,” in Die Zürcher Bibel von 1531. Entstehung, Verbreitung und Wirkung, ed. Christoph Sigrist (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2011), 26-63.

69. QGTS, 3: nr. 961.

70. Herminjard, Correspondance, 9: nr. 1341.

71. “As I have seen from the acts of a conference held at the good town [La Neuveville].”—COR 4/2:36f.

72. Staatsarchiv Neuchâtel E 9/1. The full text can be found in Balke, Calvijn, 354f.
asked if Calvin would “alter one phrase or another” and that the French translation of the *Psychopannychia*, which they had already requested earlier, be appended to it.\(^{73}\)

Whether or not the fears of his colleagues were legitimate can be judged by the events that followed. Calvin, in any case, took heed of them. On May 27, Farel expressed his joy regarding the pending publication.\(^{74}\) Only a few days after June 1—the date of the foreword—the eagerly anticipated booklet lay on Farel’s desk. Even a cursory reading of the 190 pages, in octavo format, shows just how hard Calvin had tried, in accordance with the wishes of his friend, to “completely destroy the doctrines of this rotten sect.” Following the opening dedication and an introduction focused on confessional and hermeneutical issues, the polemical work opened with a threefold rebuttal of the “Anabaptist booklet,” the Melchiorite view of Christology, and the doctrine concerning the sleep of the soul. The conclusion consisted of a section titled “Criteria of a True Martyr.”

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Ill. 3: Jean Calvin: *Brieve instruction*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Jean Girard, 1545) (Universitätsbibliothek Basel).

Based on the ownership marking, “Nunc est Seb. Castalionis,” it seems clear that this copy once belonged to Sebastian Castellio, Calvin’s main critic in the Servetus Affair and an early defender of toleration and religious freedom.

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Anabaptist Books in Geneva

Statements made by a weaver, Tivent Bellot, on January 8, 1545, while he was being interrogated by the Geneva Small Council help to identify the ominous “Anabaptist booklet,” along with its translator and printer. To summarize: Bellot came from Geneva and was an “annabaptiste.” He peddled books “that were opposed to God.” Fifteen years earlier he had lived in La Neuveville. In 1542-1543 he took up residence in Geneva with his partner (compagnyon), Pierre Pillot (Pelot), also of La Neuveville. He was presently living in Colombier-en-Aussois in the territory of Savoy. The confiscated books, which he carried to Geneva at the behest of Jesus Christ, had been entrusted to the care of Pillot by Pierre Chambrier. Here in Geneva there were “many who wanted to follow in the way of Jesus Christ.” Bellot refused to swear a juridical oath since “God had forbidden it.” However, after the authorities showed him several instruments of torture, Bellot admitted that he already had two prior convictions, “once in Bern, though he refused to say on what grounds, that resulted in his expulsion.” On a second occasion, he had been banished from La Neuveville, likely with Pelot, because he had “followed the law of Jesus Christ [laz loy de Jesu Christi].” A witty letter from Farel to Calvin on January 21, 1545, included a caricature of the Anabaptist Bellot:

Recently an Anabaptist was arrested at my instigation for trying to offer those foolish little booklet [libellos ineptos] for sale. You know, of course, this sort of person; but until now I have never encountered this type of coarse stubbornness. Although I addressed him—politely, of course, which I am—he did not pause even a moment before he began talking to me as if he were speaking to a dog. When he was brought into the courthouse, he wanted to sit next to the council president. Turned away from that attempt, he held his head high and rolled his eyes with the majestic posture of a prophet. When questioned, he responded, whenever he deigned, with three words; mostly he remained silent. . . . After sufficiently demonstrating his thickheadedness, he was banned from the city. Two days later, however, he was apprehended again in the city.


76. We do not have sources that suggest this is a standard expression within the Anabaptist movement. Perhaps there is a link between this expression and Article IV of the Schleitheim Confession: “Christ, who teaches the fullness of the law, forbade his followers from swearing oaths.”—cf. Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz, vol. 2: Ostschweiz, ed. Heinold Fast (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 33 [hereafter cited as QGTS].
driven out with a whip, and his books publicly burned. He was instructed that he should not return under the penalty of death. What a strange person! Or, better said, what an awful, useless cow.  

Calvin reportedly debated Bellot on the oath, the authority of the Old Testament, and pastoral wages. The range of these themes, along with the attitudes of those being interrogated, reflects the state of the current conversations that were part of the Anabaptist disputations in Switzerland. Some of the evidence even hints at the possibility that Bellot belonged to the "Swiss Brethren" and furthermore that his stock of books included copies of the French translation of the Schleitheim Confession—the same book that Farel had successfully persuaded Calvin to rebut. A tentative set of conclusions, supported by the sources, can thus be posited: 1) in February of 1544 Farel was in possession of a French translation of a "statement of union" that the Anabaptists regarded as authoritative, and whose German original had been criticized by Zwingli already in 1527; 2) Pierre Chambrier consigned the booklet [libellum] to the bookdealer Pierre Pillot (Pellouz, Peloux, Pelot) of La Neuveville on Lake Bienne. Pillot then distributed these books in the County of Neuchâtel and likely in the Bernese Canton of Vaud; 3) Pillot’s longtime acquaintance and partner, Tivent Bellot, also an Anabaptist, oversaw the distribution of the booklets in Geneva, and perhaps in the neighboring region of Savoy as well.

Problems in Neuchâtel

Following Aimé-Louis Herminjard, the editor of Calvin’s correspondence, Balke has identified Pierre Chambrier as the vice-regent of the governor of the County of Neuchâtel who died in 1545. Research into the Neuchâtel patrician family of Chambrier leads us to a son by the same name, who is more likely than the father to have been the publisher and translator of the Anabaptist pamphlet in question. Pierre Chambrier the younger first turns up in the sources around 1530-1531 in

77. CO 12: nr. 752, corrects the wrong date of "21. Februar 1546."
Solothurn, when an evangelical movement was coalescing in the region that bore the marks of lay leadership and political resistance. Its similarities to Anabaptism were of great concern to Bernese authorities. Until 1536 Chambrier served as a deputy prosecutor. On February 9, 1536, the council recommended him to the king of France as a translator, writing that “he is fully qualified to translate German letters into your mother tongue.” Sometime before the fall of 1540 until at least 1558 he served the governors of Neuchâtel as a notary and translator. In 1552, Chambrier was promoted to the chancellery. He died in 1571.

After Calvin agreed to the request of the rest of his colleagues in Neuchâtel that he modify the letter of dedication in the Briève Instruction, “in order not to give the most shameless and evil plotters of intrigue new opportunities for slander—or better still, to give them no opportunity whatsoever,” the Neuchâtel initiative and goals regarding Calvin’s Anabaptist tract virtually disappeared from memory, visible only in the booklet’s subheading, “John Calvin to the Ministers of the Churches in the Canton of Neuchâtel.” Indeed, Calvin went so far as to maintain that the Anabaptist booklet to which he was responding had been sent to him “from some distance” by “several good, faithful men.”

The identity of the schemers, who by association with the publication could have harmed Calvin’s friends in Neuchâtel, can only be guessed. Perhaps least convinced by Farel’s information was a colleague who, as a close friend of the Anabaptist pamphlet’s translator, supposedly knew everything and told nothing. With good reason Aimé-Louis Herminjand has settled on Jean Chaponneau (Capunculus), the quarrelsome second pastor of Neuchâtel, whose relationship to Farel was headed for rock bottom. In 1543 he, along with his son-in-law, Jean Courtois, openly defamed Calvin’s Christology and teachings on the Trinity, and in 1544 he would oppose Farel and the brotherly censure with much ado. By concealing from Farel the Anabaptist activities of his bosom friend Chambrier, Chaponneau could inflict serious damage to the prestige of his disagreeable colleague, implying that the head of the Neuchâtel church was either an Anabaptist sympathizer or at least naive and inept.

82. Cf. QGTS 3, Nr. 1122.
85. Herminjard, Correspondance, 9: nr. 1347.
86. COR 4/2:35.
87. Herminjard, Correspondance, 9: nr. 1332, n. 11.
Calvin’s idealized editorial tone in the *Briève Instruction* clearly had the intent of keeping Farel and the Neuchâtel church as distant as possible from any hint of Anabaptist influence. Similarly, the simultaneous presentation of his friend as heroic had a similar goal of strengthening his reputation, no matter how beleaguered. For a long time already, he wrote, Farel ‘has fought against all the enemies of the truth.’ As the disputation with the Anabaptists in La Neuveville revealed once again, Farel could have easily written the extant rebuttal himself, but instead appealed to Calvin’s sense of duty as a friend “to accept this charge . . . without offering further excuses.”89 Was the basis for this encouragement Farel’s modesty, which he had already revealed in the foreword of the *Sommaire* of 1542 when he advised his readers that “they should look in the *Institutes* [of Calvin], and if they do that . . . they could spare themselves the effort of reading [my] booklet.”90 Or was it a healthy assessment of his own abilities—since Farel, the fearless champion of the Reformation in Meaux, Basel, Metz, Strasbourg, Neuchâtel, Geneva, and Lausanne, was indeed “a powerful and popular speaker, yet despite twenty-five publications was not a gifted writer”?91 In addition to this, Calvin could easily draw on his *Psychopannychia*, recently published in 1542, as a clear and indisputable rebuttal of the theory of “soul sleep.”92 Nonetheless, the question remains why Farel preferred to have the Neuchâtel Anabaptists attacked “from some distance [de bien loin]” instead of taking initiative against them himself, which clearly would have been within the purview of his authority as a leading figure in the church. In answering these questions, an investigation of the *Briève Instruction* of 1544 in the context of the Neuchâtel church and the biography of William Farel proves to be indispensable.93

89. COR 4/2:36f.
Ill. 4: The region between Lake Neuchâtel und Lake Biel – Nuwenburg (Neuchâtel), Nuwenstat (La Neuveville). Based on a map by Gerhard Mercator, *Das Wiflispurgergou* (Amsterdam 1636).

**CIRCLE OF RADICAL REFORMERS IN CRESSIER AND CORNAUX, 1534-1543**

One fruit of Farel’s sermons and Bern’s far-reaching religious politics was the fact that on November 4, 1530, Neuchâtel, by a majority of eighteen votes, decided to eliminate the Mass. In 1529-1530 the evangelical movement gained a foothold in the prince-bishopric town of La Neuveville. In the years that followed, the Reformation established itself only slowly within the villages situated along the south face of the Jura: Saint-Blaise (with Huterive) in 1531; Cornaux in 1532; and Lignières in 1553 (cf. Ill. 4). In contrast, the district of Le Landeron, along with the wine-producing village of Cressier that belonged to it, were supported by Solothurn, which had reverted to Catholicism, and the district remained strongly Catholic even in the face of fierce minority resistance after 1561.

**Cressier**

In the Catholic village of Cressier, Antoine Jaccotet, a vintner, shows up in the sources as a supporter of the Radical Reformation. Already in 1534 he was fined for his opposition to ecclesiastical holidays; in 1537 he attacked the disciplinary authority—or the “power of the keys”—of the local priest with the words, “he is claiming for himself the honor that belongs to God.” When the priest responded by calling him a liar, the peasant lodged a charge of defamation “in order to provoke a debate” as people in Solothurn correctly noted.94 And, in fact, this imitation of the Zwinglian Disputation’s artificial occasioning of a legal procedure, also

94. Piaget, *Documents*, Nr. 112.
promoted here the “development of public awareness, legal foundation, and formulation of decisions for the Reformation movement.” 95 As expected, the judgment of the Neuchâtel tribunal—which was friendly to the Reformation—favored Jaccotet. 96 In 1542 he formally complained to the court of Le Landeron, that “we evangelicals” (nous) were forced to attend Mass and to listen to the ringing of the storm bells. Since the Catholic judge appeared “suspicious” to him, Jaccotet sought and found refuge and a spiritual home with his influential brother-in-law, Jacques Claude, in the neighboring reformed village of Cornaux. 97

**Cornaux**

Received as a “brother and member of the church” in Cornaux, 98 it did not take long for Jaccotet to cross swords with the local priest Antoine Thomassin. 99 In a public statement to the congregation in the spring of 1543, he accused the pastor of “selling” the Gospel (cf. 2 Cor. 11:7-9), for which he was arrested. 100 This insult is reminiscent of the social critique of the peasant confederations, raised increasingly in Switzerland as well since the 1520s, demanding that local parishes control the election of priests and the church treasury. 101 Thomassin thought that he knew the source of this attack since in a revealing argument he denied any guilt for Jaccotet’s imprisonment, “. . . as if I was responsible for the honor of the Anabaptists [rebaptizeurs] in this county!” 102 With that, the spirit of resistance in the village was truly awakened.

On March 11, 1543, the fifth Sunday of Lent, the priest Michel Mulot 103 of Saint-Blaise officiated at the worship service in Cornaux. However, the baptismal service was disrupted by shouts such as “other books are more important for us [than the liturgy book]!” and “Where does one find in Holy Scripture that we should baptize children?” These questions were clearly on the minds of everyone present since “no one was ready to defend this Servant of the Word.” 104 Thus, on the following Sunday,

96. Piaget, *Documents*, 330, n. 5. The legal documents are no longer extant.
Pastor Thomassin vigorously reproached the congregation declaring that the Anabaptists [rebaptizeurs] have always “. . . preached their false doctrines secretly [cf. John 3:20f.], in order to mislead simple, unlettered people.” Scriptural proof for the baptism of infants is superfluous—after all, even girls are baptized even though there is no explicit mention of this in Scripture.105 In general, the people of Cornaux were rejecting infant baptism and were therefore “Anabaptists.” Two congregational gatherings ensued—on April 22 in the church and on May 12 under the roof of the oven house—whereupon the “church members of Cornaux” presented “seven articles of complaint against their pastor” that they sent to the Gouverneur.106

Ill. 5: Cornaux, Rue du Vignoble 1. The Anabaptist book peddler, Pierre Pelot, lived for a time in this large house, built in 1543, along with his relative, Jacques Claude.

This resolution and the court proceedings that followed not only cast a revealing light on the background of the actual conflict but also provide welcome information regarding the book dealer Pierre Pelot, whom we last encountered in Geneva. Specifically, the sources reveal that Pelot had been banned from La Neuveville in 1542 “because he was a stubborn Anabaptist” and that prior to his appearance with Tivent Bellot in Geneva in 1542-1543 he clearly found accommodations with his


106. The letter of complaint, which is no longer extant, can be reconstructed on the basis of Thomassin’s rebuttal.—Cf. Herminjard, Correspondance, 8: nr. 1232.
relative, Jacques Claude in Cornaux (cf. Ill. 5). In addition, he found here in Antoine Jaccotet, his brother-in-law or half-brother [*fraillard*], a battle-tested comrade in spirit. The priest Thomassin assumed this interrelated trio of Jaccotet, Pelot, and Claude was the epicenter of all the deviant attitudes and actions in his parish.

Jacques Claude was also the one that the congregation identified as their speaker [*parleur*] to explain the Seven Articles of Complaint issued by the villagers to the Gouverneur. To paraphrase these complaints: 1) it is malicious to accuse those who simply demand scriptural evidence for the baptism of children with attempting to do away with the practice; 2) it is also a lie when Pastor Thomassin characterizes the “Anabaptists” as corner preachers, since the whole congregation can testify that Pierre Pelot had proposed a public debate with him, to no avail; 3) unfortunately, the priest opted to humiliate Pelot before the whole congregation; 4) furthermore, Thomassin claimed that some people possessed “neither God nor a soul”; 5) he denounced Antoine Jaccotet of Cressier to the authorities; 6) he also had Thomas of Cornaux thrown into prison because of something he had said regarding the apostle Paul; 7) in readmitting excommunicated members of the congregation, Thomassin humiliated them deeply by calling them to beg for God’s mercy and to give him, the priest, their hand.

Thomassin’s remarkably extensive “Response to the Articles Raised [Against Me]” on May 21, 1543, interpreted the fundamental basis of the peasant complaints as being “that I did not carry out my office appropriately.” Four of the seven articles of complaint had to with an inappropriate application of church discipline, an essential Anabaptist mark of the church. Article II of the Schleitheim Confession (“The Rule of Christ”) refers to Matthew 18:15-18 and the escalating sequence of steps for carrying out church discipline—namely, an effort to first resolve the matter privately; then seeking resolution in the presence of several witnesses; then bringing the matter to the whole congregation; and then excommunication. In the eyes of the congregation, Thomassin had violated these principles not only by publically disciplining Pelot from the very beginning, but also by going beyond the ban by appealing to the political authorities, which violated the congregational tone of Article IV of Schleitheim that described the sword as an instrument of God “outside the perfection of Christ, . . . for in the perfection of Christ only the ban is to be used.” The people of Cornaux were further offended by a pattern of returning to Catholic practices.

On the Path to Separation

Pastor Thomassin’s detailed statement of defense reveals the following: 1) a deep dissatisfaction with the official church expressed in
the desire for a shepherd [pastor], who would not “sell” the Gospel and who would teach the congregation from “other”—that is, from the correct books. 2) The church fellowship of Cornaux regarded the ban as the only appropriate instrument of evangelical discipline within the congregation, in contrast to Thomassin, who turned erring members of the congregation over to the authorities. 3) Although adult baptism was not yet being practiced, infant baptism was clearly being called into question. 4) The defiant congregation of Cornaux appeared to be well on the way to separatism. 5) The concept of congregation and church emerging here is consistent with the Schleitheim Confession. 6) This same congregational model was likely also spreading in other villages in the region around Lake Neuchâtel and in the Canton of Vaud in 1544 at the time that the *Briève Instruction* was being written. 7) The modus operandi of these Radical Reformation actors reveals similarities to corresponding events in the neighboring region around Bern.

Moving in a quite different direction was an anonymous woman from Cornaux who, in 1540, claimed that “the soul of humans would die with the body” and, consistent with an extreme view of the death of the soul, rejected every form of resurrection, including that of Jesus Christ. In his rebuttal of her in church, Thomassin preached from Psalm 14:1—“The fool says in his heart that there is no God”—and claimed that the woman had only expressed what others around her were thinking. The conclusion he drew from this—that “whoever rejects the immortality of the soul does not have a soul”—led the writers of the complaint in 1543 to the conclusion that the pastor believed some of them possessed “neither God nor a soul.”

The source of this belief in absolute mortality is not clear. It could be connected to an extremely simplified form of the Melchiorite “soul sleep” tradition as defended by the Walloon Anabaptists, Gerbihan and Benoit, in Geneva before they continued their missionary trip across the

108. Henri Meylan has expressed the urgent need for more research into the entire region of western Switzerland.—“Martyrs du Diable,” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 9 (1959), 114-130, 125.
Canton of Vaud in March of 1537. Thus, it is not completely out of the question to bring the Anabaptist movement in Neuchâtel—and perhaps also in La Neuveville and the Vallon de Moutier—into some connection with the founders of the Anabaptist congregation in Geneva. In any case, “Anabaptist” concepts of soul sleep had spread sufficiently so that in April of 1544 Farel urgently requested Calvin to add a French version of his Psychopannychia of 1542 to the Briève Instruction. All this, however, is not yet the full explanation for Farel’s refusal to take up his own refutation of the Anabaptists within the church that he served as reformer and leader.

**William Farel and the Anabaptists (1524-1550)**

“As I have seen from the acts of a conference held at la Bonne Ville [i.e. La Neuveville],” wrote Calvin in the opening of his Briève Instruction, “our brother, Master William Farel, . . . has ably fulfilled in part [en partie] what you require of me. . . . In fact, with regard to the articles that are treated therein, no one could ask for a clearer explanation.” Calvin’s use of the phrase “in part,” was obviously not a reference to the quality of Farel’s argument. Rather, it referred to the fact that the Briève Instruction would address themes that went beyond the agenda of the disputation at La Neuveville. Perhaps he meant those “two articles that are at least as significant as any of the others”—namely, Melchiorite Christology and the teaching on soul sleep—which Calvin had added in his rebuttal of the “seven articles . . . for in general all the Anabaptists hold to them.” Alternatively, one could conclude that in La Neuveville it was above all the “Seven Articles” that were debated just as they “were found in the book of the Anabaptist patriarchs” that the bookdealer, Pierre Pelot, was currently distributing.

Mirjam van Veen has insightfully explained Farel’s notable restraint in responding with a written rebuttal of the Anabaptists by noting the

112. Although Gerbihan was converted in Strasbourg by Calvin, Benoit suffered a martyr’s death in Metz, probably on Aug. 27, 1538.—cf. Hermijnard, Correspondance, 5: nr. 743. According to contemporary sources, he also defended the doctrine of soul sleep there.

113. A certain “Hanns Heinrich Schnider of Münstertal [Fürstbistum Basel],” who is otherwise unknown in the sources, participated in the Anabaptist disputation in Bern in March 1538.—cf. QGTS 3:266.

114. Blough (“Calvin,” 205 fn. 35) does not rule out a “rapprochement between the ‘Swiss’ (Schleitheim) and the ‘Dutch’ following the episode in Münster, who were in the process of becoming ‘Mennonites.’”

115. Two French editions of the unabridged Psychopannychia appeared in 1558, after Farel had repeated his request for such a volume in 1546 and 1551.—CO 12: nr. 825, CO 14: nr. 1468, Cf. de Greef, Writings, 151-153.

116. COR 4/2:36f.

117. COR 4/2:94.
“awkward position in the Anabaptist debate” into which Farel had maneuvered himself by distancing himself from distinctive Anabaptist positions in only minor ways.\(^\text{118}\) Reinhard Bodenmann has recently confirmed this view in his commentary on Farel’s *Traités Messins* (1542/45).\(^\text{119}\) In light of the fact that this aspect of Farel’s life and work has scarcely been researched, what follows here is only an initial, clearly incomplete, survey.

**Points of Convergence**

An older tradition of Mennonite scholarship has already established a certain affinity between Farel and the Anabaptists,\(^\text{120}\) which it attributes nearly exclusively to their shared roots in Zwingli’s theology.\(^\text{121}\) Extensive congruences are evident, for example, regarding “biblicism,” spiritualizing tendencies, and understandings of the sacraments and Lord’s Supper. Growing differences emerged, not surprisingly, in their teachings on baptism as well as the relationship of the congregation to public order (e.g., teachings on government, the oath, and the sword).

Most striking in Farel’s first publication, *Le Pater noster & le Credo en français (The Lord’s Prayer and the Confession of Faith in French)* of 1524, is the passage, deleted in the 1529 edition, that postulates “perfectionism” as an outcome of faith, a charged leveled by the reformers against the Hutterites, Swiss Brethren, and all Anabaptists. In this book, Farel wrote, “since I stand in your grace through this faith, I can no longer sin.” Equally awkward was the social-revolutionary emphasis evident in Farel’s open affirmation of community of goods: “I believe that in this Christian community all things should be held in common and that no one possesses anything of his own.”\(^\text{122}\) On September 7, 1527, in a long letter to Noël Galiot, Farel also affirmed a delayed baptism, albeit without demanding that infant baptism be eliminated.\(^\text{123}\) Farel’s teaching on baptism in the first edition of his main work, *Sommaire*, that appeared in 1529, was quite similar to that of Grebel’s and to that of Zwingli’s

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118. COR 4/2:15.


prior to 1525, coming very close to a view of baptism upon confession of faith. The sacraments, he wrote, are “signs of faith and love” as well as a “confession to follow after Jesus Christ.” “The baptism of water serves as a sign of this.” Along the way, Farel defended the Anabaptists, as in a letter written early in 1529 to his former student, Émile Perrot. And in May of 1529, he recommended to Martin Bucer that love would be the most effective approach to use against the dissenters: “The Anabaptist sect (catabaptistarum secta) can easily be dried up with their own water if blazing love is brought to bear.”

Boundaries

David Wiley has suggested that Farel’s sympathy was known to the Anabaptists and that they reciprocated in kind: “At one time,” he wrote, “the Anabaptists thought that Farel was one of them.” Farel, however, rejected these assumptions with sociopolitical arguments and with a tone of growing acrimony. Not coincidently, the earlier evidence of sympathy came to an end in 1542, that is, with the coalescence of the Anabaptist movement in the County of Neuchâtel and the simultaneous alignment of his theology with that of Calvin.

Already in his Sommaire of 1529 Farel had criticized the “new style of making new sects, rules and constitutions outside of the Word and to give to all of this the appearance of holiness and divine love.” To the contrary, he insisted that “neither faith nor renewal of life—much less, baptism—frees one from an obligation to submit to the magistrates.” Farel repeated this longstanding suspicion of sedition in his Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques of 1541, which demanded that the preachers of Neuchâtel “resist by means of Holy Scripture all Anabaptists and likeminded people who wish to act in ways against the authority and lordship of our ‘Souvereign Dame’ [the duchess Jeanne de Hochberg].”

126. Cf. Herminjard, Correspondance, 2: nr. 252, 166.
130. Farel, Sommaire (1525), 66, 262, which is identical with Sommaire (1552), 17, 164f.
Likewise, the chapter on civil government in *Sommaire* in 1542 cited the Anabaptists by name:

for the pope, who is the true Antichrist, as well as for the demonic Anabaptists [*anabaptistes demoniaques*], the government and those who attend the state church have always been irrelevant. The pope wants to hold everything in his hand, as if he alone was the true church and political power and the people had no place whatsoever, whereas the Anabaptists forbid Christians to carry the sword. However, the government clearly can belong to the church and be truly Christian, and government officials can be members of the church as individuals.\(^{133}\)

In an appendix titled “The Reason Why This Work was Written and Expanded,” Farel complained about the malicious resistance to his reforming efforts by the pope, the renegade Peter Caroli,\(^{134}\) the Bernese who favored Luther, and the Anabaptists.\(^{135}\) All of these groups disrupted the good order of the church—the Anabaptists, above all, through their rejection of infant baptism. “Thus,” Farel wrote, “they assure themselves that I am of the same opinion [as they are], though in reality I have testified in print—and this even before I set my hand to the writing of the booklet [*Sommaire*] in 1529—that baptism should be given to little children.\(^{136}\)

Early in 1544 the old traces of Farel’s “secret love”\(^ {137}\) for the Anabaptists were nonetheless still fresh enough to awaken uncomfortable memories and questions among both friends and enemies if Farel himself would have undertaken the refutation of the “Anabaptist booklet” that had appeared in Neuchâtel instead of requesting that Calvin respond. Only in 1550, in his treatise *The Sword of the True Word*, did Farel feel sufficiently free to take up his own reckoning with the “diabolical sect of Anabaptists,” along with their antinomian spiritualism and all of the social-political consequences that followed from it.\(^ {138}\)

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133. Cited in Farel, *Sommaire* (1552), 160f.
135. Farel, *Sommaire* (1552), 221.
136. Farel, *Sommaire* (1552), 226f. For more on Farel’s liturgical works, see Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer,” 94, fn. 190.
CALVIN AND THE ANABAPTISTS:
THE “BRIÈVE INSTRUCTION” OF 1544

The Schleitheim Articles of 1527

Farel’s letter to Calvin of February 23, 1544, helps to identify the Anabaptist pamphlet in French that appeared from the French-speaking “three lake” region of Bienne, Neuchâtel, and Morat to Geneva. Calvin found the pamphlet, to which he would respond three months after Farel’s letter, important enough to integrate portions of it into the editorial portions of Briève Instruction. Although he thought the pamphlet had been written in an entirely “inept and haphazard” fashion, the “statement of union [consensus] of these profoundly unfortunate people” had the status of “an absolutely true revelation.” They regarded it “with common accord as the invincible foundation of their faith.” It was “a final statement . . . in seven articles to which all Anabaptists commonly adhere.” His attention to the booklet reflected the fact that it contained “doctrinal assertions,” which “a wretched people willfully and stubbornly defended unto their death.”

Following the work of Aimé-Louis Herminjard, George H. Williams and Olivier Labarthe thought that Calvin was referring here to Balthasar Hubmaier’s Von der christlichen Taufe der Gläubigen 1525, even though the portions of text cited by Calvin—along with Farel’s comment that Zwingli himself “criticized the impoverished nature of the German edition”—clearly point to the Brotherly Union of Schleitheim. Prior to the important essay by Hans Stricker, Michael Sattler’s role as the

139. COR 4/2, 35f.
141. COR 4/2, 39, Cf. 41, 55, 94f.
142. COR 4/2, 141.
143. Herminjard, Correspondance, 9:173, n. 14; Williams, Radical Reformation, 596; Farel, Traité, 220, n. 1434.
144. Articles 1, 2, 6, 7 were cited word-for-word. Cf. the synopsis offered by Balke, Calvin, 192-194. Articles 3-5 were paraphrased.
146. Locher, Zwinglische Reformation, 259: “The Schleitheim Articles are not a confession of faith but rather an inner-Anabaptist union on several contested issues.” Fundamental confessional elements such as “God,” “Christ,” and “salvation” are missing from the statement. Later generations, however, regarded it as a moment of confessional “crystallization” (Kristallisationspunkt) for the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.—Cf. Das Schleitheimer Bekenntnis 1527. Einleitung, Faksimile, Übersetzung und Kommentar, ed. Urs B. Leu und Christian Scheidegger (Zug: Achius, 2004).
composer of the Schleitheim Articles remained unclear. However, evidence of Sattler’s role is already clear in the *Briève Instruction.*

Specifically, Calvin frequently criticized the fact that the seven articles of Schleitheim substituted the deeds of the martyrs for evidence from Scripture. “Now in order to give a favorable pretext to their doctrine,” he wrote, “they have published along with their statement of unity the history of the death of a certain [je ne say quel] Michael—an accomplice and member of their sect.”

Without noting the deeply pejorative tone in the phrase “je ne say quel Michel,” Benjamin W. Farley interpreted this passage as if Calvin did not know who composed the Schleitheim Articles. Yet it is very hard to believe that Calvin would not have heard either of this foundational statement of the Swiss Brethren while he was in Strasbourg nor anything about its author, who had direct personal contact with Martin Bucer as well as Wolfgang Capito right up until his martyrdom on May 21, 1527. We should further recall that in

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148. Further evidence can also be found in Johann Heinrich Ott, *Annales Anabaptistici* (Basel 1672), 43f.—Cf. Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer,” 98.

149. COR 4/2, 141, Cf. 56: “Let the Anabaptists produce the author [of the articles] to prove what they say.”

150. Farley, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists,* 35.
1558 Calvin used the same derogatory expression when he referred to Menno Simons: “Coornhert has claimed that I am a partner in faith with a certain bizarre Menno [de ie ne sçay quel fantastique Menno], with whom I have nothing in common.”

*Polemical Vocabulary*

That Calvin did not hesitate to refer to Menno openly as an “arrogant ass” and an “impudent dog” is also food for thought. Jean-François Gilmont estimates that more than 85 percent of Calvin’s complete writings (excluding the *Institutio* and *Exegetica*) consisted of polemics. Bossuet’s insightful assessment of the reformers—“their eloquence was most fruitful in their insults”—is particularly apt in regards to Calvin’s *Brève Instruction* since he clearly was willing to use anything that could possibly serve to discredit the Anabaptists.

1) Calvin frequently referred to the Anabaptists as “heretics,” “sects and parties,” “beggarly gang,” “rebels against God,” “enemies of God and of the human race,” “enemies of all order,” and “enemies of government” and condemned their doctrine as “blasphemy against God’s heavenly majesty” and “false and pernicious opinion.” Ever since the Imperial Law against the Anabaptists of April 23, 1529, that officially charged them with the criminal offense of heresy, Calvin the lawyer painted them with the brush of sedition and blasphemy.

2) In the crass context of the age, Calvin had a special predilection for animal metaphors: his opponents were “vermin,” “swine,” and “dumb brutes.” This sort of disparaging speech had both a linguistic as well as a hermeneutical rationale. With their incoherent arguments, Calvin argued, the Anabaptists destroyed an ontological relationship among reason, perception, and rhetoric. “These words are easy to understand,” he wrote, “except these swine overturn them with their snouts, so much that they completely confound them.” They often use forms of speech that are absurd and outlandish.

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151. CO 9:593.
155. COR 4/2:52, 40, 122, 82, 69, 72, 118.
158. COR 4/2:89; for the same figure of speech against the Libertines, cf. CO 7:224, 229.
sauvages], without purpose, and that jump about like a cock-and-bull story.”

3) However, the majority of Calvin’s attacking or disparaging language drew on the rhetorical vocabulary of psychopathology and enthusiasm—words like “Schwärmerei [crazy zealots] and lunatics.” The Anabaptists are “poor fanatics,” “drunkards,” “frantic people,” “poor scatterbrains,” “harebrained and obstinate people,” and “confounded in their madness.” Their abstruse notions, with which they led so many poor people astray, stem from their “insane fancy,” “foolish heads,” and “deluded brains.” With their fantasies—phantasie or phantastique is the most frequent appellation, with twenty-five instances—the Anabaptists allow the “holy Word of God” to be debased as a “fable,” or as a “tale from the book of Mélusine.”

4) The common denominator of all the Anabaptist errors for Calvin was therefore “disorder”—the very essence of sin. Thus, the appropriate attack strategy consisted of overturning the entire “false and misguided teachings,” from top to bottom: “Now in order to confound them no better way exists than to expound and contradict the issues clearly and to restate in an orderly manner one point after the other.”

Content of the Briève Instruction

Only a few days after the appearance of the letter of dedication on June 1, 1544, the Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful appeared in ordinary, simple French at the Genevan printshop of Jean Girard. The booklet was simultaneously an “instruction” as well as a “polemic”—the second part of the title read: . . . Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists. The quite carefully-prepared publication (Ill. 3) invites a paraphrase to clarify its various parts.

159. COR 4/2 :141.
161. COR 4/2:42, 86; 80; 72, 73, 92; 74, 88, 140; 93; 95.
162. COR 4/2:93, 103; 140, 88.
163. COR 4/2 :38 (Libertines); 112 (Anabaptists). Mélusine was a figure from medieval legends.
165. COR 4/2 :141.
A. Letter of Dedication

“Jean Calvin to the Ministers of the Churches in the Canton of Neuchâtel.” May the booklet in your hands, Calvin wrote, be a testimony to the prevailing unanimity between Neuchâtel and Geneva in our teaching and in our hearts. The goal of the treatise was to point out briefly to all the poor faithful, who are uncultured and without letters, the nature and poisonous character of the doctrine of the Anabaptists, and to arm them with the Word of God against the same, in order that they might not be entrapped by it, or if there might be any who are already enveloped in their snares, to guide them back to the right road.167

B. Confessional and Hermeneutical Foreword

On the basis of his newly-revised 1539 edition of the Institutes, Calvin distinguished here and in his later writings between “two principal sects”—namely, “Anabaptists” and “Libertines.”168 In so doing, he anticipated Ernst Troeltsch’s groundbreaking distinction between the “sectarian” type of “Anabaptist” and the “free spiritual community,” or “Spiritualists.”169 This distinction was ultimately also the basis for the more systematic approach of George H. Williams. The “Libertines,” according to Calvin, are a “labyrinth” of “absurd views.” They regarded themselves as so “spiritually gifted” that they are above the word of God itself. Against these “mad and desperate” people, Calvin intends to write a separate polemic.170 The “Anabaptists” in a more narrow sense—who he identifies in the title as the “Common Sect of the Anabaptists”171—are of course also trapped in their “pervasive and pernicious errors.” But “this sect at least receives the holy Scripture, as we do,” so that there is some hope they will come to their senses. Thus, Calvin cast the Briève Instruction in the form of a written disputation of specific biblical references that had been the focus of debates between the Anabaptists and the Reformers for twenty years. The most important criteria was the “testing of the spirits” (1 Jn. 4:1). Doctrinal agreement did not exist among all Anabaptists; however, they did at least have the newly

167. COR 4/2: 36.
168. COR 4/2: 38.
171. The title of the Latin edition in 1546 had only “Adversus errores sectae anabaptistarum,” whereas the English edition of 1549 remained true to the French wording: “agaynst the pestiferous errours of the common secte of Anabaptistes.”
Calvin, Farel and the Anabaptists 355

printed “Seven Articles” that served them well as the “foundation of their faith” for the purposes of responding to their opponents. In addition, they, like the papists, held unbiblical views on matters such as “free will, predestination, and the source of our salvation.”

In 1995, Cottret described Calvin as “a churchman in the style of a politician.” This provocative picture of the reformer is also confirmed in regard to the Briève Instruction, since 51 percent of the textual content is devoted to Articles I-V of the Schleitheim Confession, which are focused on ecclesiastical themes, whereas he devoted the rest of the pamphlet—a full 49 percent—to the political concerns addressed in Articles VI and VII.

C. Refutation of the “Schleitheim Articles”

Article I. On Infant Baptism: In fifteen pages Calvin summarizes his argument from the Institutes (1539/1543) against the Anabaptist interpretation of the Great Commission: a) it is true—in accordance with the Anabaptist teaching regarding Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16—that belief comes before baptism; but this sequence applies only to Muslim, Jewish, and heathen converts, not the infants of Christians. b) The argument that baptism should only be offered “to those who request it” (Schleitheim, Art. I), is an expression of an individualistic voluntarism that does not sufficiently appreciate the doctrine of election or the character of the church as an all-inclusive community of Christians. c) Scriptures neither command nor forbid infant baptism. As a sign of God’s covenant, however, it is a fully valid parallel to circumcision. Because children of the New Covenant have no less of a claim on the grace of God than children of the Old Covenant, the church began to practice infant baptism long before the creation of the papacy. d) In Acts 19:1-7 we find something like a “rebaptism” when Paul baptized several of John’s disciples. But he did this not in order to establish a new church practice, but rather “owing to their ignorance.” If it was necessary to rebaptize everyone who relapsed into sin, “we would constantly require a lake or river in readiness.”

Article II. On the Ban: At twenty-three pages, Calvin’s rebuttal of this article was as extensive as his engagement with Article VI regarding civil

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172. Foundational here is Stauffer, Zwingli et Calvin, whose analysis, however, we cannot summarize here in every aspect. For a recent account of Zwingli’s rebuttal, see Lavater, “Berner Täufer.”

173. Cf. the article negotiated with Herman de Gerbihan. — Herminjard, Correspondance, 6: nr. 854, cf. already nr. 846.

174. Cottret, Calvin, 11.

175. COR 4/2:50; cf. also Herminjard, Correspondance, 8: nr. 1232 (Report of pastor Thomassin to the Governor, May 21, 1543).
The Grebel circle regarded the ban in Matthew 18:15-18 as foundational for the constitution of a congregation and for receiving baptism and the Lord’s Supper, an argument that Zwingli, of course, disputed. Calvin could avoid a discussion on this particular point since the crucial passage, “But this shall be done . . . before the breaking of bread,” was clearly missing in his version of the Schleitheim Confession. Instead, his remarks ran in the following directions: a) The ban is “a sound and holy order, not only useful but also necessary in the church. Moreover, it is from us that these poor ingratiates have taken what they know.” b) The church becomes the church exclusively through Word and Sacrament; there is no reason to introduce the ban as a third mark of the church. After all, Paul himself openly referred to the sinful congregations in Corinth and Galatia as Christian churches. c) The church has always been a “mixed body” [corpus permixtum]. In contrast to the Anabaptists, whose Donatistic obsessions with purity drove them into separation, the prophets of the Old Testament always remained in solidarity with the stubborn people of Israel, Jesus participated in the rituals of the temple, and Paul always made his first visit to the synagogue. d) Excommunicating church members who have been overtaken by sin and charging willful sinners with the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit are both intolerable offenses against the grace of God, created only to drive poor souls to despair: “For I have seen what has happened to some who have been momentarily seduced by this wretched sect.” This is the only instance in the Briève Instruction, where Calvin acknowledges a personal experience with the Anabaptists.

**Article III. On Receiving the Lord’s Supper:** The article on the Lord’s Supper in the Schleitheim Confession, which Calvin did not bother to reproduce in the text, characterizes it as a meal (“breaking of bread”) and as “remembrance” by the congregation of the sacrificial death of Christ. It is to be given in both elements exclusively to the baptized members of the Body of Christ, who have separated themselves from the world and have no fellowship with the devil. Despite its symbolic commemoration, a point that Calvin also disliked in Zwingli, he offered his approval to the Anabaptist understanding of the Lord’s Supper in eight lines,

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176. The absence of this phrase is striking. It is well known that Grebel was not able to carry out his vision of a congregation based exclusively on the principles of Matthew 18. Felix Manz’s “Protestation” (Dec. 1524) no longer appealed to this text but instead anchored believer’s baptism on the foundation of the Great Commission. — cf. Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz (Zürich), ed. v. Leonhard von Muralt und Walter Schmid (Zürich: Hirzel, 1952), 23-28.

177. COR 4/2:61. Although it does not show up in the Schleitheim Articles, the sin against the Holy Spirit was a theme for the Melchiorites.

178. Specifically, still in the Traicté de la Saintce Cène (1541), CO 5:458, Cf. de Greef, Writings, 118-120.
concluding that “They say nothing with which we are not in accord with them.”\textsuperscript{179}

\textbf{Article IV. How Christians Should Separate Themselves from All Evil in the World:} The article on “separation” is both numerically and substantively at the center of the Schleitheim Confession. Since there can be no fellowship between Christ and Belial (2 Cor. 6:15) the separation from the world must be radical. Calvin’s rebuttal appears in the middle of the paragraph without a heading or paraphrase: a) the Anabaptists “had a good cause” when they separated themselves from the superstitions of the papacy; however, in their fundamental rejection of the world, they were acting in a socially and ethically irresponsible way. b) Anabaptist pacifism was rooted in an unbiblical individualism. To be sure, the individual Christian should not participate in private feuds, “for the arms of Christians are prayer and gentleness.” However, Christians are also members of a political and national community, whose armed defense is legitimate. Whoever does not resist unjust violence supports it.

\textbf{Article V. On Shepherds:} In little more than one printed page Calvin commented on the fact that the Anabaptists believed itinerant apostles carried out the Great Commission better and more fully than the congregational pastor.\textsuperscript{180} a) Anabaptist congregations initially established itinerant preachers, “but they wanted them to run about from one place to another, imitating the apostles like apes.” Today, the Anabaptists have come to recognize that the Gospel must be proclaimed, lived, and sustained in specific places. b) We agree with them “that no church can hold itself together without ministers.” c) The Anabaptists flee from trained preachers as if they were “ravishing wolves”; but for that reason they create their own shepherds “in a hurry, thereby creating separation in the church . . . to the extent that the name of God cannot be invoked at all in unity and concord.”

\textbf{Article VI: On the Use of Force by the Magistrates.} Calvin gives a very short summary of the Schleitheim Articles on this point, but devotes almost twenty-three printed pages to it in the longest of his rebuttals. We can summarize his response as follows: a) earlier, the Anabaptists regarded the magistrates as “as forms of criminals”; today, however, they look upon them as an ordering of God, although “outside the perfection of Christ.” b) They continue to reject the idea that a Christian

\textsuperscript{179} The \textit{Institutes} (1536/43) emphasize the complete overlap of the church of the elect with the actual congregation that celebrates communion.

can serve in a public office, despite the fact that the sacred and temporal realms are not incompatible—“Isaiah prophesies that the kings will become the foster fathers of the Christian church” (Isa. 29:43). c) It is true that the Kingdom of Christ and the public order [la police] are not one and the same thing; however, both the church community and the civil community, along with their office holders, are oriented toward the same ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{181}

\textit{Article VII. On the Oath: In the traditional feudal order, legal authority needed to be formally grounded in promissory oaths or vows. That Calvin devoted more than eighteen pages to the Anabaptist rejection of the oath underscores the fundamental significance of this institution. a) The lamentable fact that today many people misuse the oath does not rule out its appropriate legal use. b) The Anabaptist interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount destroys the unity of the Old and New Testaments and overlooks the very specific context of Jesus words, “Let your yes be yes, and your no be no” (Mt. 5:37), which were directed against the sophistry of the academic theologians.}

Here Calvin could have ended his treatise if it had not been for two significant additional articles that needed to be addressed: “In general,” Calvin claimed, “all the Anabaptists hold to them. I know that even those who composed this lovely statement taught them at the time.”\textsuperscript{182} These topics were the (Melchiorite) teaching on the “heavenly flesh of Christ” and the “sleep of the soul.” Several basic reflections on the Anabaptist “culture of martyrdom” then follow as the conclusion to the \textit{Briève Instruction}.\textsuperscript{183}

\textbf{D. Rebuttal of Melchiorite Christology}

Since 1530, the Anabaptist convert Melchior Hofmann defended the sinlessness of Jesus on the basis of a monophysite-docetic doctrine in which the Logos, through the work of the Holy Spirit, took on flesh and blood “in” Mary, but not “through” Mary. The centers of dissemination for this teachings were in the Netherlands (Obbe Philipps; Menno Simons) and Strasbourg after 1535, but we also find traces of it in 1537 in Geneva (Gerbihan; Mérauld). Calvin’s rejection of this central Melchiorite claim, which he quoted directly—”she [i.e., the Virgin Mary]


\footnotesize{182. There is no clear evidence for this in the denominational context of the Schleitheim Articles.— COR 4/2:94.}

\footnotesize{183. Foundation here is Peter Burschel, \textit{Sterben und Unsterblichkeit. Zur Kultur des Martyriums in der frühen Neuzeit} (München: Oldenbourg, 2004).}
carried Him in her body, as water passes through a tube”\textsuperscript{184}—followed the lines of the classic Christian doctrine of the two natures of Christ (true God; true human).

E. Rebuttal of the Doctrine of Soul Sleep

In response to Farel’s repeated request, Calvin included a version of his *Psychopannychia* of 1542, which he shortened by half. In this version, Calvin tightened what in the 1542 edition had still been a loose connection to the Anabaptists. What had been the “error of the Sadducees” now became the “error of the Anabaptists . . . who in the place of white robes, give souls pillows to sleep on.”\textsuperscript{185} Here Calvin sought to provide biblical proof that: a) the soul was the seat of the “image of God,” which had its own substance alongside that of the body; b) the soul did not fall asleep following the death of the body, but instead “rested” with an alert sense and intellect; and c) that humans were not resurrected in their temporal bodies until the Judgment Day.

F. On True Martyrdom

Like the oldest printed texts of the *Schleitheim Articles* (Worms 1527\textsuperscript{186} and Strasbourg, 1533), the French edition, likely printed in Basel in 1543 or 1544, also included an appendix containing the hagiographical account of Michael Sattler’s trial and execution. According to Farel, the Anabaptists in Neuchâtel had gone so far as to claim that the “Seven Articles” “were to be regarded as an absolutely true revelation from God.” In the last two pages of the *Briève Instruction* Calvin took a strong position against this uncritical credulity that had no basis in Scripture: “It is indeed an effective means of authorizing a doctrine for a man to abandon his life courageously and freely in order to confirm his belief.” Nonetheless, the truth claims of martyrdom can only be assessed by whether he is testifying to the “truth of God” rather than some sort of “erroneous and perverse doctrine.” “Indeed, what separates the martyrs of God from the devil’s disciples is that the martyrs die for a righteous cause.”\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{184} COR 4/2:97. For more evidence, see Friedrich Otto zur Linden, *Melchior Hofmann, ein Prophet der Wiedertäufer* (Haarlem: Bohn, 1885), 416.

\textsuperscript{185} COR 4/2:111.

\textsuperscript{186} In the event that the “printed booklet” of Sattler, which the Strasbourg preachers mention in their *Warnschrift* of July 2,1527, was referring to the Schleitheim Articles (cf. the reference without an commentary in *QGT Elsass, 1*:110,30), then the earliest appearance of the booklet (until now surmised as being “between 1527 and 1529”) can be established as early summer of 1527.—Cf. Arnold Snyder, “The Influence of the Schleitheim Articles on the Anabaptist Movement,” *MQR* 63 (Oct. 1989), 323-344, 336.

\textsuperscript{187} COR 4/2:141-142. Cf. Augustin, *Contra Cresconium*, III. 57. 51: “it is not the punishment but the cause that makes the Christian martyr [*Christi martyrem non facit pœna sed causa*].” Cf. also CO 8:466 and CO 7:350.
Reception

Despite growing competition from the anti-Anabaptist writings of Heinrich Bullinger, the *Briève Instruction* of 1544 was reprinted several times:188

a) French: in 1545 a second edition appeared by Jean Girard that varied from the 1544 vernacular version only in the size of the font.
b) Latin: Calvin actually wanted to avoid writing about the Anabaptists in Latin “because highly educated people already have enough books written for their instruction by academics.”189 However, he granted permission to his colleague Nicolas des Gallars for an exact translation, which appeared in 1546 as *Brevis instructio muniendis fidelibus adversus errores Anabaptistarum*. To Calvin’s disappointment, the Strassburg edition, which included his *Against the Libertines* of 1545, eliminated the dedicatory preface to the Christian brothers in Neuchâtel. Girard followed with another Genevan edition in 1552, as did Barbier and Courteau in 1563 in the context of their *Joannis Calvini opuscula omnia*. c) English:190 In Edwardian England, John Véron’s English translation of Bullinger’s *Von dem unverschampten fräfel* (1548 and 1551) set in motion a growing interest in Anabaptism.191 The second main section of the *Briève Instruction*, which provided an effective antidote to the Melchiorites, who had been active in England since 1532, was anonymously translated and published in London in 1549 as *A short instruction for to arme all good Christian people agaynst the pestiferous errors of the common secte of Anabaptistes* [including a letter of dedication by] Myster John Calvine.

**MUST WE LOVE CALVIN?**

“*A Critical Affinity*”

According to Wim Balke, following Calvin’s return to Geneva in 1541 the reformer focused less on the Anabaptists than on “radicals of a spiritualist and antitrinitarian inclination.”192 Robert M. Kingdon echoed this point with more precision, claiming that after 1541 there was no sign whatsoever of an organized Anabaptist congregation.193 Indeed, there are only sixteen isolated references to “anabaptistes” or “kathabaptistes” in the Geneva interrogation records from 1543-1562.194 In 1565, Nicolas

188. For more on the reception history, which is still not been fully studied, cf. Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer, 110f.
189. CO 7:xxvi. Above all, Bullinger’s *Adversus omnia catabaptistarum prava dogmata* (1535).
190. Oddly, this is not mentioned by Veen in COR 4/2:22f.
194. References in Lavater, “Calvin und die Täufer,” 112.
Colladon’s biography credited Calvin’s gifted leadership with the near disappearance of the Anabaptist movement in Geneva. “Concerning the Anabaptists,” Colladon wrote,

Calvin knew how to handle them so effectively and confidently in public disputations that from that point onward this type of people [race] could no longer gain a foothold in the church, even though the magistracy did not intervene. This is all the more amazing since the majority of churches in Germany are still troubled by the Anabaptists to a significant degree. And if there are some who were able to rid themselves of them, it was more often through the firmness of law than by any other means.\(^\text{195}\)

Another explanation for this substantial weakening of Anabaptism in Geneva, according to Kingdon, was their readiness to accommodate: “If Anabaptists were willing to give up their strong opposition to infant baptism they would find in Geneva the kind of church life they wanted.”\(^\text{196}\) This was possible because adult baptism, in the end, represented only the most visible identifying mark of an even more central confession of a “politically independent Christian community based on voluntary membership.”\(^\text{197}\) Klaus Deppermann has argued that “none of the great reformers . . . was so closely aligned with the Anabaptist ideal of ‘a church of visible saints’ than Calvin, who, like the Anabaptists, also rigorously applied the ban.”\(^\text{198}\) Heiko A. Oberman is also correct in his claim that for the Anabaptists, as for Calvin, “sanctification of daily life was a shared priority even more than the principle of adult baptism, which followed from it.”\(^\text{199}\) Apart from the question of “Christian identity in the world”—that is, the question of politics—recent research on Calvin has recognized with Simon van der Linde increasing hints of a “critical affinity.”\(^\text{200}\) Careful readers will discern such traces even in the Briève Instruction, albeit buried deep within the mire of harsh invective.

**Calvin and Tolerance**

“He advocated toleration, which he himself needed in France; and then he defended himself with intolerance in Geneva. Following the torture of Servetus, Calvin published a book in which he claimed to be

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195. CO 21:59, Cf. 22f.
able to prove that heretics must be punished." So argued Voltaire in 1756.\textsuperscript{201} Since then complaints regarding Calvin’s “tyranny of virtues”\textsuperscript{202} have not ceased.

The various facets of this unpleasant theme can be mentioned only briefly here. And explaining such things, of course, does not justify them. a) the 16th century generally regarded heresy as blasphemy under the influence of others and punished it “with body, life or limb” in accordance with the \textit{Constitutio Criminalis Carolina} 1532 (Art. 106), which was also enforced in Geneva.\textsuperscript{203} b) a specific right to the freedom of religion or conscience did not exist in the early modern era. Even Jean Bodin, in his \textit{Six Livres de la Republique} (1576), regarded “tolerantia” only as a means of securing domestic peace.\textsuperscript{204} c) impulses toward religious toleration in the sense of a rejection of the death penalty for heretics can be found since the time of Erasmus, “who, in his efforts to reduce and distill religious doctrine to a very few foundational principles based on the earliest texts,” as Adolf Laube observed, “was really more concerned with ‘concord’ than with ‘toleration.’”\textsuperscript{205}

In the \textit{Institutes} of 1536 Calvin, very much in the spirit of Erasmus, judged every act of religious coercion as an affront to “humanity” and, drawing on the parable of the tares in Matthew 13:24-30, argued that “as long as God’s judgment remains unknown, the judgment of an individual may not determine another person’s membership in the church.”\textsuperscript{206} The elimination of this sentence in later editions of the \textit{Institutes} is reflective of Calvin’s development, though Roland H. Bainton’s simplistic depiction of the mature Calvin as “The Peak of Protestant Intolerance”\textsuperscript{207} is not fair either to the character of the reformer or to the historical facts. More persuasive is Theodor Strohm’s description of the growing resoluteness of Calvin under the burden of


\textsuperscript{206} CO 1:77.

church leadership and the challenge of defending his reform efforts in Geneva and elsewhere against every imaginable threat. Max Weber’s approach—namely, to regard Calvinism as a fully “indirect, unwanted and sometime tragic” phenomenon—is probably a more fitting approximation, even in the question of toleration.

Did Calvin Really “Understand” the Anabaptists?

Franklin H. Littell denied that Calvin had any understanding whatsoever of his opponents: “He made no distinction between the spiritualizing and the Biblicist wings of the movement—if, indeed, he was even aware of the distinction.” On the other hand, Richard Stauffer has celebrated Calvin’s “theological perceptiveness [perspicacité]” precisely because of his capacity to make these distinctions.

Today, an impartial reader of the Briève Instruction cannot withhold respect for Calvin’s remarkable insight in grasping the focal point of Anabaptist identity. The key concepts he used to introduce and to conclude his Anabaptist treatise were the movement’s biblicism and its readiness to accept martyrdom. Unfortunately, however, the actual execution of his argument disappoints the hopes Calvin raised. For example, only a few lines after his deeply appreciative assessment of their Bible-centeredness, Calvin raises the suspicion that the Anabaptists’ talk about the “Word” is only a ruse—a means of deceiving unsuspecting Christians, “in the knowledge that even the devil has armed himself with the Word of God [Mt. 4:6].” And even though Martin Bucer himself can speak of Michael Sattler as “a friend of God”—indeed, that he was even “a martyr for Christ”—despite the fact that he was a prominent Anabaptist, Calvin does not mention Sattler’s surname a single time.

The last word in the final sentence of the Briève Instruction is “lie” [mensonge]: whatever we preach that contradicts the truth of God, “whether sealed by blood or wax—will always remain a lie.” With that, as Moisés Mayordomo perceptively claimed, Calvin touched “a
central nerve of Anabaptist identity, since martyrdom for many Anabaptists was understood to be the logical consequence of nonviolent discipleship in the way of Christ.”\textsuperscript{214} Thus, in the end Calvin might have understood the Anabaptists very well, even if it was unfortunately only “by way of negation.”

Do we have to love Calvin? The Genevan reformer, argues Richard Stauffer, is as little appreciated among some Protestants as among his Catholic antagonists.\textsuperscript{215} Modern people can understand why this might be so. The time of Protestant hagiography is finally past—and with good reason. In the current rehistoricizing of Calvin and Anabaptist research an agnostic sober-mindedness and impartiality is more appropriate. Together, both of these impulses move between the Scylla of exculpatory understanding and the Charybdis of indignation. No one has encapsulated this tension better than the great Calvin scholar, Émile Doumergue, to whom we owe the following words on the commemorative marker for Michael Servetus:\textsuperscript{216}

> We have erected this monument as respectful and grateful children of Calvin, our great reformer, who nonetheless condemn the errors into which his entire age fell, and who staunchly advocate the freedom of conscience according to the foundations of the true Reformation and the Gospel.


\textsuperscript{216} Cf. Eugène Choisy, Calvin et Servet. Le monument expiatoire de Champel (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Éditions de La Cause, 1903).