

## ***De Brès vs. Simons: A Sixteenth Century Debate that Still Matters***

By W.L. Bredenhof

As we commemorate the incarnation of the Son of God, we do well to remember that this event has been hotly debated in the history of the church. During the first centuries after Christ's ministry on earth, numerous heretics questioned or rejected what lays at the heart of the incarnation, the Biblical understanding of the two natures of Christ. The rise of these heresies were instrumental in bringing the church to carefully define the natures of Christ in the Chalcedonian Definition, and later, the Athanasian Creed. However, such documents did not put an end to heresies and errors regarding the incarnation. During the sixteenth century, old errors were revived and found a certain degree of acceptance, particularly among those known as Anabaptists.

This explains the stance of the Belgic Confession in Article 18, "Contrary to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of his mother, we therefore confess that Christ partook of the flesh and blood of the children." Our confession insists that the Anabaptists hold to **heresy** on the matter of Christ's incarnation. In the context of the sixteenth century, this means that the Reformed regarded the Anabaptists as holding a doctrine which jeopardizes one's salvation. This was not a minor error or a slight departure from orthodoxy, but a matter of heaven or hell. How and where did the Anabaptists go so wrong on this doctrine? How did Reformed believers of the sixteenth century respond? What can we learn from this debate? Those are questions that we'll explore in this article.

### **An Anabaptist Departure from Orthodoxy**

During the Reformation, the position and role of Mary was being re-evaluated by many ex-Roman Catholics. To explain the sinlessness of the Lord Jesus, the Roman church had resorted to the doctrine of the immaculate conception. That doctrine states that not only was the Lord Jesus free from original sin, but also his mother. The conception of Mary *in her mother* was immaculate. Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543), an early Anabaptist, believed that Jesus was born sinless, but he could not agree that this was because of the sinlessness of his mother. So, Hoffmann taught instead that Jesus was born from Mary, but that Mary did not contribute anything to Jesus' being or substance. She was simply the "container" in which the heavenly Jesus came to earth in the form of a man.

Menno Simons (1496-1561) shared Hoffman's concern for an explanation of Jesus' sinlessness that would not resort to an immaculate conception of Mary. Like Hoffmann, Simons argued that Christ's person (divine and human) had been implanted in the virgin Mary and she had made no material contribution to his being whatsoever. She was simply the field in which the seed had been sown. To support his position, Simons appealed to Scripture. However, even contemporary Anabaptist scholarship recognizes that Simons' view was also influenced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle who held that the woman is entirely passive in the normal reproductive process. According to Aristotle, the father has the seed of life and implants that seed in the woman, who then nourishes it to the time of birth. If Scripture taught the same thing, Simons reasoned, then Mary

could not have contributed anything to the person of Jesus. Then Jesus did not assume human flesh from his mother, but from heaven.

Contributing to Simons' thought on this point was his interpretation of Hebrews 11:11, "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed..." (NKJV). Menno Simons could not read Greek, but being a former priest he could read Latin. The Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible seemed to support his position: *Fide et ipsa Sara sterilis virtutem in conceptionem seminis accepit* (By faith also Sarah, though sterile, received strength to take in seed). In the Latin, this text says that Sarah received the seed from Abraham, but she did not contribute anything material to the conception of Isaac. Simons therefore used Hebrews 11:11 as one of the texts from Scripture that supported his doctrine of the heavenly flesh – the idea that the humanity of Christ came from heaven, and not from Mary.

### **A Reformed Response**

Guido de Brès is most well known as the author of the Belgic Confession. However, he wrote more than just the Confession. He wrote a substantial work showing how the Bible and the Church Fathers are opposed to Roman Catholicism. He wrote many letters, some of which were later published. He contributed to Jean Crespin's book of martyrs – and more. But his greatest work, his *magnum opus*, is his book dealing with the Anabaptists. *La racine, source, et fondement des Anabaptistes* (The Root, Source, and Foundation of the Anabaptists) was first published in 1565. A Dutch translation was first published in 1570 and a much-abridged version of the first part was published in English in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1668.

*La racine* is a huge book of 903 pages. It consists of six parts. In the first, de Brès gives an overview of the history of the Anabaptist movement. The second part deals with the Anabaptist beliefs about Jesus Christ and his incarnation. In Book Three, de Brès refutes the Anabaptists on the issue of infant baptism. The fourth part discusses the authority of the civil government. Fifth, de Brès takes on the Anabaptist teaching about the swearing of oaths. The last section discusses the immortality of the soul.

Given their name, one might be inclined to think that the major point of dispute with the Anabaptists was infant baptism – after all Anabaptist means "re-baptizer." The section on infant baptism takes up 306 of the 903 pages in *La racine*, 34% of the book. It was a significant issue for de Brès. However, if we go by the number of pages given, an even bigger issue was the Anabaptist doctrine of the incarnation. This section takes up 370 pages, 41% of *La racine*.

De Brès specifically engaged Menno Simons on the question of the origin and character of the human nature of Jesus Christ. He dealt with him on two levels. The first and most important was the Biblical. For instance, de Brès discussed Genesis 1:28 and noted that when God said "Be fruitful and multiply," the command was addressed to both the man and the woman. De Brès could read Hebrew and he rightly noted that the commands in this verse are in the plural. From this, he concluded that both husband and wife

contributed something materially to the reproductive process. Thus, when the Lord Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, she also contributed something materially: human flesh. He also discussed Genesis 3:15, what de Brès called “the evangelical promise.” He noted that it was to be the seed of the woman that would bruise the head of the seed of the serpent. Thus, this foundational text insists that the Messiah to come had to take his flesh from his mother. He had to be a true man with human flesh like any other human being. According to de Brès, Genesis 3:15 leaves no room for the heavenly flesh doctrine of Simons and other Anabaptists.

One of the clincher texts for de Brès was Hebrews 11:11, the foundational text for Simons’ position. As mentioned, Simons did not read Greek. However, de Brès did and he rightly insisted that the Vulgate was wrong in its translation of this text. He translated it: “By faith Sarah received strength to cast seed.” In other words, Sarah (and all women with her) had seed within her. De Brès noted that this was not only a better translation of the Greek, but it was also found in other Latin translations of the Bible and with some of the church fathers. De Brès concludes, “Since, then, the Apostle says Sarah received power to cast seed, what madness is this to want to deny it?” (*La racine*, p.200)

There are many more arguments that de Brès brings forward from the Scriptures to refute the Anabaptist position, but passing those over we can note that he also takes another line of attack. While he was reluctant to get into the scientific side of the question, he did so nonetheless. He argued not only that Simons had misconstrued Aristotle (who allowed a minimal contribution from the woman, even a contribution of substance), but also that Simons was out of touch with sixteenth century science. The Roman physician Galen had first observed that women do in fact actively contribute to the reproductive process. In the sixteenth century, these observations were recovered and confirmed. For instance, the Italian anatomist Gabriele Falloppio (Fallopian) had carefully observed the tubes (oviducts) which today bear his name. De Brès wrote,

We see that all those who have ever done anatomy on the female body, with all those who do it still today, show visibly to our eyes the spermatic tubes in the woman, as in the man, just as they show us the veins and arteries by which the seed is sent to the man just as to the woman. (*La racine*, p.209)

While today we may quibble over some of the details, it is well recognized that de Brès, following Galen, Falloppio and other anatomists, was closer to the truth than Simons on the question of female anatomy and its role in reproduction.

But why did all this matter so much to de Brès? For him, what was at stake in this debate? De Brès believed that Simons and other Anabaptists had compromised the true human nature of Christ and violated the clear teaching of Scripture. If Christ had a heavenly human flesh, then it was not a truly human flesh. He was no longer the seed of the woman promised in Genesis 3:15. He was disqualified from being the Mediator and consequently, salvation was at stake. While the Roman church had departed from God’s truth with its formulation of the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary, de Brès looked back and could see an unbroken line of teaching asserting that Jesus Christ was

truly human and truly divine. Those who departed from this line were always regarded as heretics whose very salvation was in jeopardy. The exact means by which Jesus took our human flesh without our sinfulness is a mystery, to be explained neither by an immaculate conception nor by a heavenly flesh doctrine. The most we can say is that it happened “through the working of the Holy Spirit.” (HC QA 35).

### Lessons to Learn

As we look back to this debate from long ago, there are some instructive elements. One of those is the role of Scripture. In his response to Simons, de Brès demonstrated his adherence to the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone). Related to that was the importance of going back to the original texts in Hebrew and Greek. This is the essence of what it means to be Reformed – to keep going back to the Bible. For all of us, we must constantly be searching the Scriptures like the Bereans in Acts 17. At the same time, those of us who, like Guido de Brès, have been called to be ministers of the Word, must aim for high levels of competence in the original languages of Scripture. As a church federation, we should never take it for granted that our seminary insists on such high standards in Greek and Hebrew – we should expect that and demand it. The defense of the orthodox faith oftentimes depends on it.

Second, it’s worth noting the manner in which de Brès freely used the scientific insights of his day in this debate. As he wrote in Article 7 of the Belgic Confession, everything we need for our salvation is revealed for us in Holy Scripture. Nothing is of equal value with the truth of God revealed in the Bible. Nevertheless, we should not be surprised when careful observations from the natural world (made by scientists) are in agreement with what the Bible teaches – in fact, this is what we should expect to see. There is a lot more that could be said on the relationship between theology and science in the debate between de Brès and Simons, but suffice it to say that de Brès gave more attention to verified scientific observation than his Anabaptist opponent (who was instead influenced by the unverified theories of a philosopher).

A third lesson to be learned is with respect to the worth that de Brès placed on this doctrine. He regarded Simons’ teaching on this point as heresy – a false teaching with disastrous consequences. Our Confession takes the same perspective. In the days of the Reformation, only some Anabaptists held to the position of Hoffmann and Simons. Today, too, there is no single Anabaptist or even Mennonite position on the incarnation of Christ. Nevertheless, there are at least *some* Mennonite sects that continue to teach the position of Menno Simons. Like de Brès we should recognize this false teaching for what it is and engage our contemporary Mennonite friends on this heresy and its dangers.

Finally, this debate reminds us that we must become so much more aware of the logs in our own eyes. Sometimes without even realizing it we are just as guilty of compromising the human nature of Christ as Menno Simons and his followers. Thinking about this time of year in particular, you could think of the popular Christmas carol, “Away in a Manger.” Despite being a perennial favourite, this song undermines the humanity of the Saviour when it speaks of Jesus as a baby, saying, “no crying he makes.” That is **wrong**.

If we're to believe that romantic idea, then it's as if Jesus was not truly a human child who would not cry to let his mother know that he was hungry or wet or colicky. If "Away in a Manger" is right, then he only *appeared* to be human, and we call that docetism, an ancient heresy along the same lines as what some of the sixteenth century Anabaptists were teaching.

From the Scriptures, we confess in the Three Forms of Unity that our Lord Jesus was truly man and truly God. There is a lot at stake with that confession. Our Lord Jesus was born in and lived in poverty. During his three years of ministry, his family thought he was deranged. He experienced loneliness, deep sorrow, exhaustion, and grief at the loss of a loved one. He was attacked both verbally and physically. He was mocked and spat on. His friends turned their backs on him at his lowest point. When he was on the cross, he bled and died. For all believers who suffer today, we can be encouraged by the humanity of our Saviour. We can go to him for grace in time of need, because we know that he knows – he is an understanding and sympathetic friend. Praise God that he took on our human flesh, qualifying him not only to be our friend, but also our Redeemer!

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For this article I used the 1565 edition of *La racine, source et fondement des Anabaptistes*, published by Abel Clemence of Rouen. I also acknowledge two helpful articles by Joyce Irwin, "Embryology and the Incarnation: A Sixteenth Century Debate," in *Sixteenth Century Journal* IX, 3 (1978), 93-104; "The Use of Hebrews 11:11 as Embryological Proof-Text," in *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3/4 (Jul. - Oct., 1978), 312-316.