

# SABBATARIAN ANABAPTISTS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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## PART II\*

### *V. Andreas Fischer*

Fischer was born about 1480 at Kremnitz in what is today Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> We may assume from his title *Magister* and the fact that he was a former priest that he had finished his training at a university.<sup>2</sup> Valentine Crautwald reports that Fischer had a good knowledge and command of Greek, Hebrew and Latin.<sup>3</sup> Fischer became a member of the Anabaptist congregation of Linz, Austria. He joined in missionary work and was known as overseer of the Anabaptist congregations at Passau, Obernberg, and Wels successively. He appeared in Nikolsburg, Moravia, probably in 1527/28, where he seems to have adopted the Sabbatarian beliefs of Glait and where he became his co-worker.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Petr Ratkoš gives the fullest treatment available on Fischer in "Die Anfänge des Wiedertäuferums in der Slowakei," *Aus 500 Jahren deutsch-tschechoslowakischer Geschichte*, K. Obermann and Joseph Polisenky, eds. (Berlin, 1958), pp. 41-59: Ratkoš utilizes a long-forgotten primary source: the *Diarium* of Konrad Sperfogel of Constance. Sperfogel settled in Leutschau, Slovakia, where he held the office of town-councilor from 1517-1537 and also that of town-judge for some years. Sperfogel hated Fischer but still gives important information about him, especially from 1529 until Fischer's martyrdom. In our discussion we rely heavily on Ratkoš' treatment.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Valentine Crautwald, *Bericht vnd anzeigen | wie gar one Kunst vnd guotten verstandt | andreas Fischer. vom Sabbat geschrieben | auch Das er Inen wider alles rechten sucht | noch als nöttig Im Christenthum zuhalten Hab mögen schützen* (1532), pp. 2, 3.

<sup>4</sup> S. D. Hartranft and E. E. Johnson, eds., *Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum* (Norristown, Penna., 1907-), IV, 450 (hereafter cited as

The two Sabbatarian Anabaptist apostles, Fischer and Glait, actively promulgated their beliefs in the area of Liegnitz, Silesia, in the year 1528. They met Valentine Crautwald and Caspar Schwenckfeld, who were active in the same area. At Liegnitz Glait debated with Schwenckfeld on the Sabbath.<sup>5</sup>

For some reason Fischer left Silesia, for we find him on March 3, 1529, at Leutschau, Slovakia, where he taught Anabaptist doctrines in secret meetings. By Easter of the same year he was expelled along with his wife. Briefly he stopped at Neudorf but settled at Schwedler, Slovakia, which was then under the rulership of the Lord of Thurso. Fischer's preaching in Schwedler was highly successful; among the miners of the town he won a great number of enthusiastic followers. On May 9, however, he appeared again in Leutschau; five days later he and his wife were imprisoned and taken to the Castle of Tschitschwa. At their trial on July 2 Fischer was sentenced to die on the gallows and his wife to die by drowning. Both were charged with heretical doctrines and inciting to rebellion against the authorities. Fischer's wife also confessed belief in community of goods. According to Sperfogel the sentences were immediately executed. The wife was drowned, but Fischer himself fell from the gallows and thus escaped death.<sup>6</sup>

After this test Fischer returned to Leutschau to strengthen the Anabaptist congregation there, but after some days, he went again to Schwedler, where at the beginning of November he baptized 70 to 80 adults. On November 10, he married the young daughter of the widow of Johann Maler of Leutschau. Six days later a unit of some 100 soldiers with cavalry moved out of the castle of Zips and the town of Leutschau with

CS); William Klassen, "Sabbatarian Anabaptists," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Penna., 1959), IV, 396.

<sup>5</sup> CS, IV, 450-454; cf. R. F. Loserth, "Glait, Oswald," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, I, 523; George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 410.

<sup>6</sup> Ratkoš, *op. cit.*, pp. 46 ff., 57.

orders to imprison the leading Anabaptists of Schwedler. The fact that the inhabitants of Schwedler rendered only passive resistance indicates that it was a "peaceful" Anabaptist community. Fischer had been warned shortly before and withdrew with many Anabaptists into the mountains. During the winter of 1529-30 he left the group, fleeing with some of his faithful followers to Zeben in Poland. His disciple Johann, who was imprisoned and executed on the gallows on February 21, 1530, says that Fischer intended to go to Moravia to attend a planned congress of the "brethren," and that he intended then to return to Hungary. <sup>7</sup>

It is likely that Fischer returned to Moravia <sup>8</sup> that same winter. Glait published his book *Buchlenn vom Sabbath* around 1530. Crautwald was urged by Duke Friedrich II and probably also by Schwenckfeld, to compose a criticism of Glait's book, <sup>9</sup> which is not extant. Glait asked Fischer to reply to Crautwald, but his reply is not extant either. Crautwald's second treatise, however, is preserved. <sup>10</sup> It is the only work available that gives important information on Fischer's Sabbatarian teachings.

Fischer returned to Slovakia sometime in the year 1532 and preached again in Leutschau, from which city he was expelled once more in December of the same year. He is next found again as a minister in Schwedler, which he left in the summer of 1534 to minister briefly in Wallendorf. <sup>11</sup>

When during the same year one of Fischer's old enemies, Anton Philadelphus, the Catholic priest of Neusohl, attacked him from the pulpit and charged him with the heresy of

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. Ratkoš takes this view which is likely to be correct, because a messenger who was sent to Germany in August, 1530, and asked to spy on Fischer's activity in Moravia, returned bringing the report to the city council of Leutschau that Fischer was much appreciated there.

<sup>9</sup> CS, IV, 450; W. Wiswedel, "Oswald Glait von Jamnitz," *ZKG*, LVI (1937), 562.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra*, n. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ratkoš, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-56.

Anabaptism, he found safety in the village of Wisternitz near Nikolsburg, Moravia, under the protection of Lord Leonhard von Lichtenstein, whom he considered his friend. From there he challenged Philadelphus to come to the territory of that noble to dispute freely about religious doctrines.

For about two years Fischer remained in Moravia. But in the year 1536 he returned to Slovakia, where he accepted the pulpit of the congregation of the small town of Bierbrunn. Again alone, and after an unsuccessful attempt to marry the Anabaptist widow of Peter Sator (Schneider) from Leutschau, who had three children, he was married to a young lady from Neusohl by the Lutheran pastor Georg Leudischer in a public ceremony in Käsmark on July 26, 1536.

Fischer continued to preach among the Anabaptist congregations of Zips. On one of his preaching journeys in the years 1539-40 he was taken prisoner by the soldiers of the robber knight Franz Bebek. Later, by order of Bebek, he was thrown down from the wall of the Castle of Horka. Thus ended the fruitful life of the second Sabbatarian Anabaptist apostle.

### VI. *Fischer's Sabbatarian Teaching*

We learn about Fischer's Sabbatarian teaching only through Crautwald's second critique,<sup>12</sup> which was an answer to Fischer's reply (written upon Glait's request) in which Fischer criticized the former's work about the Sabbatarianism of Glait. Unfortunately Fischer's own work is not extant.

For a proper interpretation two matters should be kept in mind: (1) The following sixteen points of Fischer's teaching are taken from a polemical book, a refutation against the Sabbatarian teaching of an Anabaptist leader by a non-Sabbatarian Anabaptist. In reading Crautwald's critique, however, one is strongly impressed with his attempt to be fair in listing his opponent's teachings and to give an honest presentation. As is the case with most sixteenth-century

<sup>12</sup> *Supra*, n. 3.

controversial writings, Crautwald's reply is a point by point rebuttal,<sup>13</sup> apparently taking each point in the original order of his opponent's work. Crautwald himself states: "We want to hear the arguments of Fischer, which I have gathered together and collected from his book and how they sound in condensed form."<sup>14</sup> (2) It must also be kept in mind that these points are taken from a book which is a rebuttal of an earlier refutation of Sabbatarian teachings.

Crautwald presents sixteen points in the following order.

1. The Ten Commandments of God are ten covenant words in which the external Sabbath is instituted and included. Where the Sabbath is not kept, one trespasses the commandments of God and there remain only eight (*sic.*) covenant words.<sup>15</sup>

Fischer's main argument for keeping the Sabbath seems to rest upon the completeness of the Decalogue and the recognition that the Ten Commandments are covenant words of God which must stand as a whole. Disobeying the Sabbath commandment is sin; even worse, it is destruction of the ten divine covenant words.

2. Moses, the prophets, including the apostles, who are teachers in the New Testament, all teach the Ten Commandments to which also the Sabbath belongs; therefore one should keep it.<sup>16</sup>

Here the Biblical evidence of the leading charismatic teachers of the Old and New Testaments is marshalled to show the validity of the Decalogue for both dispensations. Since the Decalogue was taught by them, man is obligated to keep it, including the Fourth Commandment.

3. In the New Testament it is commanded that the Ten Commandments are to be kept, therefore also the Sabbath.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For example, see the point by point rebuttal in Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*; cf. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London, 1963), p. 273.

<sup>14</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, pp. 39, 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Fischer's logic leads him to conclude that since the New Testament commands the keeping of the Ten (not nine or eight) Commandments the Sabbath is automatically included.

4. Christ works the commandments of God, which is the will of his Father, into believing hearts. He makes known his work, law, and commandment, to which belongs also the Sabbath of Moses, which one should keep. <sup>18</sup>

It is stated here that it is through Christ that the will of the Father, *i.e.*, the Decalogue, is put into our hearts. Thus the centrality of Christ as the motivating force for the keeping of the Sabbath for the New Testament Christian is emphasized. The Sabbath is kept because Christ is working in the believer's heart.

5. The Sabbath [commandment] is one of the big commandments; therefore one should keep it. <sup>19</sup>

This is an interesting argument based apparently on the length of the Sabbath commandment in comparison with the other nine. It indicates the sincere concern with which Fischer looks upon the Sabbath of the Decalogue. <sup>20</sup>

6. Through faith we establish the law, Romans 3; therefore also the Sabbath. <sup>21</sup>

This seems to be a condensation of a much longer exposition of the relationship of "faith" and "works" by Fischer in which he concluded with Paul's thought that true faith does not destroy, but rather establishes the law (Rom 3: 31).

7. The first and oldest fathers [patriarchs] have kept the commandments of God, before Moses. Therefore, they had also to keep the external Sabbath, otherwise they would not have kept the Ten Commandments of God. . . . For this reason one should keep the Sabbath visibly [*eusserlich*] in Christendom according to the law. <sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> It is probable that this argument was the answer to a challenge of Crautwald's first treatise in rebuttal of Glait's book, *Buchlenn vom Sabbath*.

<sup>21</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 41.

This argument expresses the Old Testament thought that the Sabbath was kept even before Moses by the patriarchs, *i.e.*, it was kept before Sinai, before Yahweh made his covenant with his people. It appears that Fischer is showing that the Sabbath, and for that matter the Decalogue, is not a Mosaic institution, and that, inasmuch as it was kept before Moses, it must likewise be kept after Moses, *i.e.*, in the Christian era.

8. James declares, "If someone says he keeps the whole law but fails in one point he has become guilty of breaking all of it; he has become a transgressor of the law." Pray tell, can or may the Sabbath be an exception? <sup>23</sup>

Fischer's argument here turns on the selection of that part of the "law" which is convenient, only to ignore the claims of the rest. He again and again points to the unity of the Decalogue and the obligation to keep the whole law. The basic question of complete loyalty to God's will depends upon the believer's keeping the "whole law." How then, Fischer asks, can the Sabbath commandment as one of the Ten Commandments be an "exception"?

9. Paul repeats the law, but the law includes the Sabbath, which is generally understood; and when the other apostles refer to one or two of the commandments they refer to the tables, the covenant of God. <sup>24</sup>

Paul and the other apostles in their reference to some commandments endorse the tablets of stone upon which God wrote his covenant with his own finger. Again the argument turns on the idea that the law was not abolished by the apostles, but rather sanctioned. <sup>25</sup>

10. Paul and the apostles held meetings on the Sabbath. <sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Fischer may have sought to point out that as the founders of the Jewish economy, the patriarchs, already kept the law, so the builders of New Testament Christianity, the apostles, moved on the same ground, namely the tables of God's covenant.

<sup>26</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

This meager summary of a presumably much longer argument seems to be a reference to the narratives of Acts which report many instances of such meetings on the Sabbath. <sup>27</sup>

11. The Scriptures speak so often about the Sabbath; if I would have as many texts and passages about Sunday as there are about Sabbath, I would keep Sunday instead of Sabbath. <sup>28</sup>

The abundance of Scriptural evidence for Sabbath is brought to the forefront while at the same time a lack of texts supporting Sunday worship is stressed. <sup>29</sup>

12. We believe with the Jews that there is but one God [Dt 6: 4], and salvation has come to us from them, and yet we are not Jews, why should we not keep the Sabbath with them? <sup>30</sup>

Here Fischer appears to be refuting a charge of relapse into Judaism <sup>31</sup> by stressing that although Christians do have other beliefs in common with Jews, they are not Jews. Therefore, what is hindering Christians from keeping the Sabbath on the same day as the Jews?

13. Christ, the apostles, and all early fathers [of the church] have kept holy the Sabbath day. <sup>32</sup>

This is the beginning of a series of arguments from the history of the Christian church. It manifests an acquaintance with church history which Fischer's university training would have afforded him.

14. Pope Victor and Emperor Constantine are the first ones who ordered that Sunday should be kept, it is also issued in the Decretal; but God instituted and ordered the [keeping of the] Sabbath. <sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Acts 13: 14, 42, 44; 16: 13; 17: 2; 18: 4.

<sup>28</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> In the rebuttals of Schwenckfeld and of Crautwald no support for Sunday worship is sought from such texts as Acts 20: 7; 1 Cor 16: 2; Rev 1: 10 which traditionally have been used for proof of Sunday worship in the New Testament.

<sup>30</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> This is not an uncommon charge. See *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar ed.), XLII, 520; Desiderius Erasmus, "Amabili ecclesiae concordia," *Opera omnia*, V, cols. 505, 506.

<sup>32</sup> Crautwald, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Man and God are put on opposite sides: men, like Victor and Constantine, commanded Sunday as the day of worship, while God has commanded worship on the Sabbath. This point of proof depends on the vital and decisive question of man's allegiance to God or to men.

15. All assemblies of Christians were held on Sabbath for many years after Christ's time. <sup>34</sup>

Again an acquaintance with the history of the early church is reflected here, although the assertion cannot be documented.

The final point enumerated by Crautwald is more an exhortation and accentuation of the everlasting character of the Decalogue:

16. The commandments of God stand and remain forever, Ecclesiastes 12; Baruch 4. Even if all letters would burn up, as the Jews lost the tables long ago, the Ten Commandments remain until the end of the world, because they are the everlasting commandments. <sup>35</sup>

Crautwald's reply furnishes the following important information regarding Fischer's Sabbatarian teaching: (1) The Sabbath must be kept because it is one of the Ten Commandments. (2) The patriarchs before Moses, Moses himself, the prophets, and the apostles kept the Sabbath. (3) The New Testament teaches the Decalogue, and thus the Sabbath, and stresses the importance of keeping it. (4) Christ, the apostles, and the early fathers of the church kept the Sabbath holy. (5) Paul and the apostles held meetings on the Sabbath. (6) The Christians after Christ's time assembled for many years on the Sabbath. (7) Men, Pope Victor and Emperor Constantine, ordered the keeping of Sunday, but God instituted and commanded the keeping of the Sabbath. (8) Those who do not keep the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments are transgressors of the law. (9) On grounds of faith the Christian upholds the law, including the Sabbath. (10)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The Decalogue will remain until the end of the world; it is eternal and binding.

Because of the nature of the sources a comparison of the Sabbatarian teachings of Glait and Fischer is most difficult. It is certain, however, that both leaders of Sabbatarian Anabaptism based their teachings on the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformers. It is, therefore, not surprising that this Reformation approach provided them with a powerful basis of argumentation and that their proclamation of Sabbatarianism met with considerable success. Both men regarded the Old and New Testaments as inseparable and indivisible. In this view they were far in advance of their time. Biblical scholars have in recent decades more and more recognized this inherent unity. There is close proximity of thought and presentation in the teachings of Glait and Fischer. This may be expected of propagators who associated together, uniting their efforts in common missionary activity, and who through circumstances were forced to defend together their Sabbatarianism.