
Donald Martin

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By Donald Martin
Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference

The title of the book explains the book. First, Dale A. Burkholder, the author, takes the reader on a tour to the Emmental Valley in Switzerland. Then you find the story of Christian Burkholder’s life. Lastly, you are introduced to Christian’s writings. I appreciated Dale’s acknowledgement in his preface that “we do not know” everything. Many hours have gone into the research and documentation of this book. The inclusive genealogy of the Christian Burkholder family will be highly appreciated by the Burkholders and other genealogical buffs.

The first four chapters are about the Burkholder family, but can be applied to anyone who has an Anabaptist heritage, or is interested in Swiss Anabaptist history. I was impressed when I opened the book and met a two-page map of Switzerland where you can find the Cantons of Bern and Zurich, which were the centres of Swiss Anabaptism. Many with Anabaptist roots trace their origin to the Emmental Valley, and for them, the background of the Burkholder family reveals the culture and landscape of their own family’s roots. The numerous pictures, photocopied documents, footnotes, and maps all add clarity to the book. The inclusive genealogy of the Christian Burkholder family will be highly appreciated by the Burkholders and other genealogical buffs.

The record of the Burkholders’ voyage to Pennsylvania reveals that sailing was not without trials. However, their experience was not unique. Death at sea was not uncommon and all those who sailed had a vision like the Burkholder company. They trusted in God because few of those destitute, rejected, despised Anabaptists had means or hope of returning to Europe. It was a commitment, that today we cannot grasp or even try to understand. The Burkholder company lost some, if not all of, their few earthly possessions with the sinking of the accompanying ship, but by faith they continued towards their future home. Those outside the Burkholder family can visualize what their forefathers endured and appreciate the choices made by those gone before us.

Chapter six describes events and a landscape somewhat familiar to me. I have crossed that covered bridge numerous times, not knowing I was so close to the Burkholder homestead, and have visited the Muddy Creek Farm Library several times. Furthermore, Christ is Full of Love and Power revived some memories of worshipping in the Old Order Groffdale Meetinghouse. Lancaster County is Lancaster County, with its valleys and mountain ridges. The pictures in this book and the knowledge that I gained from reading John Ruth’s The Earth is the Lord’s and Maintaining the Right Fellowship gave me some understanding of the setting of Christian’s life. I can give Dale credit for how he respectfully covered Christian’s life in Lancaster County and how he gently dealt with the French/Indian War and the trials of the American Revolutionary War. The book Conscience in Crisis, which Dale also referred to, gives a more detailed picture of those difficult years. To be ordained bishop during those war years was a real test of faith for Christian Burkholder.

Dale’s work will be very fascinating for a researcher with an appetite for old and rare documents. The account of Christian’s Martyr Book is very revealing of his dedicated life to God. His travels to Franconia, the way he conducted his financial dealings, and his devotion to the work of the church are all covered throughout Christ is Full of Love and Power. “Neighbors in Canada” highlights Dale’s meticulous research. He makes reference to Conestoga Creek’s namesake in Can-
ada being the Conestogo River. He maintained the correct Canadian spelling by using the “o”. On the same page, he covers the Canadian Beasley affair according to traditional folklore where money was raised as a community effort to gain clear title for the Canadian brethren. A careful study of the first owners of the German Company Tract reveals that the Erb and Eby extended families bought three-quarters of the tract. It appears likely that the Bricker boys got their in-laws excited to move to Canada. The Eby’s footprint was none other than Bishop Benjamin Eby; whereas, the Erbs are honoured to have John Erb selected by the authorities as the first Justice of Peace for that district.

Christian Burkholder’s legacy is the heart of the story. His involvement in having the Ausbund, the hymnbook of his childhood, printed right after the Revolutionary War is significant and proves he was a man who took his charge as a bishop seriously. What Christian’s footprint was in compiling the Unpartheyisches Gesang-buch, Dale does not clearly state, but it is obvious that the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, whom Christian was part of, had a deeper Anabaptist appreciation compared to their Franconia brethren when they included sixty-eight Ausbund hymns versus the Franconia Conference’s three. The “Forward” of the Unpartheyisches Gesang-buch reveals the inner spirit of Christian, “…love is the only bond of brotherhood; where love is lacking, there is no other bond that is acceptable before God…The singing which is acceptable to the Lord is done in humility…We sincerely implore the blessing and assistance of God through Jesus Christ, Amen! To God and the Lamb alone be the glory.” Christian’s vision was brotherly love, humility, imploring God’s blessing, and giving glory to God. This becomes clear in his greater work, Addresses to Young People.

By briefing through Addresses to Young People’s index, I concluded that Christian understood the traditional Anabaptist faith. Repentance, obedience, righteousness, and surrender, along with love, dominate the themes of Addresses to Young People. When Burkholder holds that faith and love are like two brothers gifted from God, he again gives God the honour for the basic Christian virtues (page 165). That telltale Protestant emphasis on the doctrine of atonement is missing. The word atonement is not found in the index and neither did I see it in the text of Addresses to Young People. For Christian, it was through remorse, repentance, faith, and love that man receives forgiveness for his many sins, for love covers a multitude of sins (page 168). He did not believe in a works-based salvation, but believed that by faith a person receives forgiveness of sins and receives salvation through Christ’s blood (page 163). Details on pages 197 and 202 indicate that Christian had not abandoned the traditional housekeeping understanding of the Swiss Brethren found in Matthew 18: 15-17. Indeed, Addresses to Young People teaches repentance, obedience, love, faith, righteousness, total submission to God, and holding the “order of Matthew 18” in accordance to the Schleitheim Confession. To understand the Anabaptist’s taste of the Word may be a challenge for those who were taught the Scriptures more in tune to Evangelical Christianity.

Dale wrote Christ is Full of Love and Power in such a way that you need only to change the details and it becomes a Bauman, Brubacher, Martin, or Weaver story. Even though he revealed where his home church was, Dale almost hid his personal bias as a Nationwide Mennonite Fellowship member, an impossible task. Being a person with a more Old Order bend, I can respect Dale’s coverage of Christian Burkholder’s life and Christian’s Old Order legacy.

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