Was Christopher Sauer a Dunker?

TWO-HUNDRED and twenty-five years ago Christopher Sauer (1695–1758) published the first Bible in a European language in North America and thereby assured his place in history. The American Bible Society recently recognized his achievement, calling him a "one-man Bible Society" because of his interest in providing at low prices well-printed Bibles without notes or commentary.[1] As is generally known, his concern for making the scriptures widely available was but one facet of his many charitable activities, which earned for him the title "Good Samaritan of Germantown."[2]

Sauer's philanthropic bent had a religious foundation best expressed in his motto: "For the glory of God and my neighbor's good." His faith determined his business policies as well as his personal relationships, more than once occasioning clashes with the authorities of his day.

Although his religious motivation is universally acknowledged, his religious affiliation has been disputed. In a recent history, he was called a "Universalist Quaker."[3] Most writers refer to him as a Dunker, or member of the German Baptist Brethren, since 1908 officially known as the Church of the Brethren.

The authoritative sketch in the *Dictionary of American Biography* states that "He was one of the leaders of the German Baptist Brethren."[4] The late Harold S. Bender, dean of Mennonite church historians, called him a "noted Dunker."[5] According to a widely-used

[1] "Christopher Saur: One-man Bible Society of Germantown (1694–1758)," *Bible Society Record*, CXIII (July-August, 1968), 692. The Germantown printer spelled his name variously: Sauer, Saur, Sower, even Sowr. Except for quotations, the name will be here spelled "Sauer" as the most consistent and most accurate version.

[2] Felix Reichmann, comp., *Christopher Sower Sr. (1694–1758), Printer in Germantown: An Annotated Bibliography* (Philadelphia, 1943), 9.

[3] Clinton Lee Scott, *The Universalist Church of America, A Short History* (Boston, 1957), 7.

[4] George H. Genzmer, "Sower, Christopher," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVII, 415–416.

[5] Harold S. Bender, "Saur, Christopher," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 434–435.

history of the American churches, written by Clifton E. Olmstead, "The most prominent Dunker in the colonial period was Christopher Sauer, who published the first German newspaper in America."[6] Olmstead was perhaps reflecting the statement in the earlier standard work by William Warren Sweet: "The most important Dunker leader in the colonial period was Christopher Saur, who was the first German printer in America and the first to edit and print a German newspaper."[7]

A book just published on the colonial schoolmaster Christopher Dock mentions the problem of Sauer's religious connection as an example of the Pietists who "never formally joined any denomination, but simply lived, served, and worshipped with the Christians among whom they lived. They saw no need to join a human institution when they knew within themselves the reality of the new birth and lived a life of discipleship to Christ, whose earthly body is the true church regardless of human labels and distinctions." The author, Gerald C. Studer, calls attention to the six "documentary reasons for believing that the elder Sower was a Dunker" listed in 1899 by Martin G. Brumbaugh.[8]

Brumbaugh's discussion is still the most extensive treatment in print devoted to the question of Sauer's denominational link.[9] The pioneer Brethren historian began by criticizing those who "assert boldly and unqualifiedly" that Sauer was a member of the Brethren church. "They are all mistaken, and have been led to this statement, no doubt, by confusing father and son, or through ignorance of the fact that there were *three* Sowers named Christopher, who were prominently identified with the activities of the early [Brethren] church." All three—father, son, and grandson—were printers.[10]

After presenting his material, Brumbaugh summarizes: "These six facts are submitted at length to answer the oft asked question, Was the first Sower a Dunker? The reader may draw his own con-

6 Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1960), 132.

7 William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York, 1950), 104.

8 Gerald C. Studer, *Christopher Dock: Colonial Schoolmaster* (Scottdale, Pa., 1967), 18-19, 31. The phrase is Brumbaugh's.

9 Martin G. Brumbaugh, *A History of the German Baptist Brethren in Europe and America* (Elgin, Ill., 1899), 349-352. The book was reprinted in 1907 and 1961.

10 See among other references, Edward W. Hocker, *The Sower Printing House of Colonial Times* (Norristown, Pa., 1948).

clusion." The following will analyze Brumbaugh's discussion and then present further evidence bearing on the same question.

Brumbaugh's first point was: "Kapp says, 'He [Sauer] emigrated with a number of Schwarzenau Dunkers, his companions in opinion.' " Kapp was earlier quoted by the author as an "eminent authority in Germany who crossed the Atlantic to study his theme in two continents."[11] The statement in question is a partial quotation from an article published in 1878.[12] Kapp does not support his assertion with documentation; hence, this could hardly be called a documentary proof. In fact, the major Dunker migrations came both before (1719) and after (1729) Sauer's journey. Many different dissenting groups found refuge in Schwarzenau besides the Brethren, so that migration from that place is no proof of Brethren membership. Kapp's opinion must therefore be considered a questionable secondary source.

The second point listed by Brumbaugh has been most often cited as evidence of Sauer's adherence to the Brethren. This is the story of his baptism by Conrad Beissel into the Conestoga branch of the Brethren, before Beissel led his followers off to form the Ephrata Community. It is based on the account by Michael Eckerlin included with the published Ephrata chronicle. After relating Eckerlin's early experiences, Brumbaugh quotes the significant sentence: "After that I worked for Christopher Sower, who brought me to a meeting of the new congregation, at which I was strenthened in my good resolve to such a degree, by the words of the Superintendent (Beissel), that on Whitsuntide of the year 1728, I was incorporated in this new congregation by holy baptism, *together with my master* and another brother, Jacob Gass, by name" (emphasis supplied by Brumbaugh).[13]

In fact, the context of this quotation reveals that the "master" referred to by Eckerlin was *not* Sauer. Preceding sentences read: "Meanwhile I bound myself out to a master who also had a drawing to the good." In April, 1727, this master and Eckerlin were advised to move to Conestoga, which they did. "Then we inquired about the

11 Brumbaugh, 345–346.

12 Friedrich Kapp, "Der deutschamerikanische Buchdruck und Buchhandel im vorigen Jahrhundert," *Archiv für Geschichte des Deutschen Buchhandels* (Leipzig, 1878), I, 56–79.

13 J. Max Hark, trans., *Chronicon Ephratense; A History of the Community of Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata, Lancaster County, Penna., by "Lamech and Agrippa"* (Lancaster, Pa., 1889), 41–42, quoted in part in Brumbaugh, 349–350.

new congregation and its Superintendent, but heard of nothing but whoredom and lewdness, which were said to prevail there. I said to my master, however, that I would not believe this, as I had a different impression of them. After that we worked for Christopher Saur, who brought us to a meeting of the congregation. . . ." The quotation then continues as given by Brumbaugh.

Two facts are to be noted. The first is that the master is not Sauer, for he introduced both the master and Eckerlin to the Beissel-led congregation. The second is that in Brumbaugh's use of the quotation, the original "we" and "us" have been altered to "I" and "me". This is corroborated by the parallel account provided in the Henry Sangmeister diary, which quotes portions of the unpublished Ephrata chronicle from which the printed version was taken. In this account the master is identified as Henry Miller. The final sentence of the passage reads: "The next year I went once again with Brother H. Miller to the congregation at Ephrata and was baptized, along with Brother H. and Brother Jethro [Jacob Gass]."[14]

Brumbaugh's third point is related to the second. In it he recounts a conversation with Julius F. Sachse, author of the most extensive monograph on Ephrata, during which Sachse "told the writer . . . that Conrad Beissel had baptized the elder Sower." Again, this could not be considered documentary proof. Moreover, Sachse himself changed his position on the matter in the course of his research. He repudiated in volume two of his study what he had said in volume one, basing his shift on the unpublished chronicle narrative quoted above. Sachse concluded: "This explanation of the above ambiguous entry in the Chronicon leaves the denominational status of Christopher Sauer in as much doubt as ever, as there now appears to be no record of the elder Sauer ever having been in full communion with the German Baptist Brethren or Dunkers."[15]

14 [Henry Sangmeister], *Leben and Wandel des in Gottruhenden und seligen Bruders Ezechiel Sangmeister* (Ephrata, Pa., 1825–1827), I, 16. Although doubt has been cast on the authenticity of the Sangmeister account, the information found in it checks with other data. For a critical view, see Felix Reichmann, "Ezechiel Sangmeister's Diary," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (*PMHB*), LXVIII (1944), 292–313.

15 Julius F. Sachse, *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania, 1709–1800: A Critical and Legendary History of the Ephrata Cloister and the Dunkers* (Philadelphia, 1899–1900), I, 135, 313; II, 22-23. Sachse was critical of Brumbaugh, calling him a "soi-disant historian" though not by name (II, 44–45).

In his fourth point, Brumbaugh dwells at length on a letter written by Sauer to friends in Germany, dated November 17, 1738, in which he tells of his plans to begin a printing enterprise. In Brumbaugh's version, Sauer was a participant in a Dunker love feast called to win him as their printer. As the Brethren were known to practice "close communion" (members only permitted to commune), Sauer's presence confirmed his Brethren membership, in Brumbaugh's estimation.

However, there can be no doubt that the love feast described in the 1738 letter was held at Ephrata, well after the schism between the Community and the Brethren had taken place. Moreover, Sauer emphatically rejected the offer to become their printer. In the letter, Sauer explained that he had accepted the invitation to visit Ephrata out of love and respect for his wife, who had left him to follow Beissel:

> To show my love and favor I spent two days with her. She showed herself to be very friendly, and arranged a formal love feast. Nearly 150 invited persons came to it, and I was placed next to the leader C[onrad] B[eissel]. God, however, filled my heart with His love, so that no magical power [*Magia*] could adhere to it. They drew out the breaking of bread until midnight in the hope that the magic would possess me, since they were eager to get a printer, as there is no one in the country who can print in German, in order to make their congregation important and flourish. We parted in love for each other. Just as I did not desire that they should want me to enter their ranks, so I did not care for them to come to me.[16]

As a fifth point, Brumbaugh wrote that the Brethren used the second floor of Sauer's spacious home on Germantown road as a meeting place from 1731 to 1758, the only religious group so favored. He fails to give his authority for this statement, which seems to rest on tradition. Falkenstein, in his detailed history of the Germantown congregation, does not mention this use specifically, simply stating that the Brethren met in private homes until they secured a room for meeting in 1760.[17] If it could be shown that the Brethren in fact

[16] The letter, along with several others from Pennsylvania, was published in the Radical Pietist periodical, *Geistliche Fama*, III, xxv, 74–96. The communications were separately published in a pamphlet, *Abruck einiger wahrhafften Berichte und Brief eines sichern Freundes zu Germantown in Pennsylvania vom 17. Novembr. 1738* . . . (Berleburg, 1739).

[17] George N. Falkenstein, *The German Baptist Brethren or Dunkers* (Lancaster, Pa., 1900), 45, 121–122.

did meet in Sauer's house, that would not in itself be conclusive evidence that Sauer was a member, given his reputation for charitable undertakings. He sheltered many needy immigrants, and might have made space available for religious groups with whom he sympathized. Either way, the point is hard to establish without further documentation.

The final argument brought forward by Brumbaugh involved the undisputed Brethren membership of Sauer's only son, Christopher Sauer II, who became an elder in the Germantown congregation. "Between them there never was a shadow of difference. This son at the early age of sixteen joined a church. What church was he likely to join? His father evidently sanctioned and advised a choice." This line of reasoning may well be true, but it is of course a surmise, not documentary proof.

It can, therefore, be seen that Brumbaugh's six points do not, on closer inspection prove that Sauer was ever a Dunker. Several are clearly in error; others rest on interpretation. They do indicate close connection with the Brethren.

What then was Sauer's religious affiliation? Edward W. Hocker, in his study of Sauer's publishing activity, touches on the problem, concluding: "But, the preponderance of the evidence is that, while his son was long a bishop of the Brethren, the elder Christopher Sower, though intensely religious was not formally attached to any church but was classed with those known as Separatists."[18] The available evidence from contemporary sources indicates that this judgment is correct.

Just after Sauer's arrival in America, he sent back a letter to his acquaintances in Wittgenstein, the county in which Schwarzenau is located. Included in it are descriptions of the religious groups active in Pennsylvania, seen from the viewpoint of an outsider of Separatist persuasion, suspicious of all organized religion:

> The all-too-great abundance to which everyone can easily attain, has, according to my opinion, brought many sincere souls to great spiritual danger. There are still, to be sure, many souls who have a pleasing understanding. Most, however, have barricaded themselves into sects and groups. The Brethren have erected a fence around themselves; they admit and expel, and are jealous and quarrelsome with others.

[18] Hocker, 5.

The Mennonites conduct things somewhat more honorably. . . . The Quaker Society is the largest. There may well be several thousand, but they [also] say, "Here is the temple of the Lord." I have very little knowledge where quiet souls exist, here and there, but God knows well. Whoever wants to be very secluded can remain hidden here his entire life.[19]

This early statement would not in itself be conclusive, as Sauer could have associated himself with one of the groups later on. However, subsequent communications with Europe display the identical Separatist attitude. In the same 1738 letter in which he told about the love feast at Ephrata there is sharp criticism of attempts to organize the German settlers into religious groupings. Sauer's neighbor, John Adam Gruber (1693–1763) was a leader in this movement. When Gruber persisted in his attempts to win Sauer for his religious circle, he was emphatically rebuffed. Sauer described his message of rejection in this way:

This lasted so long until I clearly went out and said, "I heard a very clear voice, which surpassed all other voices. This was teacher enough for me, so that I did not need any other teacher. I had for the present no freedom to help build such a kingdom. In brief, I hereby curse the day when I should decide to help build a congregation, sect and circle or to belong thereto," etc. Thereby the conference was splintered, and I was free of my burden.[20]

The Moravian missionary August Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704–1792) referred to this encounter in his correspondence with friends in Europe. After describing Gruber's attempt to bring the several German religious groups into closer association, he explained that the Separatists would not join with the Germantown Brethren, for the latter placed too much emphasis upon outward things such as baptism and the breaking of bread. Some of the Germantown group did meet with them, however. "The Separatists, especially Gruber, Sauer, Eckstein, have a separate meeting with the awakened Brethren. . . . They attend the public meeting of the Brethren also and speak and pray there too, when they feel called to do so." The upshot of this development was that the "awakened Brethren"

19 Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed., "Two Early Letters from Germantown," *PMHB*, LXXXIV (1960), 219–233; the excerpt is from pages 230–231; it is also published in Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed., *The Brethren in Colonial America* (Elgin, Ill., 1967), 36.

20 See note 16.

eventually joined the Ephrata movement, and the Separatists remained aloof.[21]

Sauer's affinity for the Brethren, if not membership, is further demonstrated by his defense of them against Henry Antes. Antes (1701–1755), a lay preacher who associated himself with the Moravians, wanted Sauer to print a manuscript favoring the Moravian cause. Sauer refused to do so, because, among other reasons, he considered that Antes dealt overharshly with the Brethren. One of Sauer's arguments was that the Brethren cause had flourished after the Pennsylvania visit of the Moravian leader, Count Zinzendorf, whereas the Moravian movement had not grown rapidly.[22]

In 1747 Sauer printed a tract for the Quakers in the German language. Because a section of it attacked immersion baptism, the Dunkers answered it in print, also using Sauer's press. A third tract was issued the next year by Sauer taking issue with both previous booklets, and upholding a Separatist position. One scholar contends that Sauer himself was the author. At any rate, the views expressed within it are in harmony with his known attitudes on religious affiliation.[23]

Sauer's contemporaries understood his position as that of a Separatist, and often criticized him for it. Because of his distrust of the institutional church, Sauer published news in his periodicals of the troubles caused the Lutherans and Reformed by unworthy preachers, some of whom had been expelled from their parishes in Europe. This editorial initiative earned Sauer the cordial dislike of leaders such as the Lutheran Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. None of these critical contemporaries refer to him as a Dunker.[24]

Sauer's reputation as a Separatist extended to Europe. In 1751, one of his letters describing the Ephrata Community was published in a leading religious journal. An introduction, possibly supplied by one of Sauer's business contacts, depicted him in these words:

21 Durnbaugh, *Brethren*, 274–275.

22 *Ibid.*, 316–319.

23 Vernard Eller, "Friends, Brethren, and Separatists: An Ecumenical Drama in Three Tracts," *Brethren Life and Thought*, VII (1962), 4, 47–56. The tracts are listed in detail in Reichmann, nos, 79, 82, and 100.

24 See Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Christopher Sauer, Pennsylvania-German Printer: His Youth in Germany and Later Relationships with Europe," *PMHB*, LXXXII (1958), 316–340; and Reichmann, 8–9.

"This Mr. Sauer, is, indeed, not one of the [Ephrata] Brethren, but his wife has lived for a long time in the cloister and is still separated from her husband. . . . He is a very ingenious man, a Separatist, who has learned thirty trades without a master."[25]

Evidence that Sauer persisted in this religious stance is found in the correspondence of two of his descendants. A grandson, David Sower, Sr. (1764–1835), wrote to his sister Catherine Sower Harley (1761–1823) about a church conflict which involved him directly. After his election as a minister among the Brethren, David Sower performed a baptism according to the Baptist practice of a single backward immersion, instead of the customary Brethren practice of a triple, forward action. For this innovation, he was expelled from the church. When his sister wrote, admonishing him, he heatedly replied:

> When I ponder over the laws of the Baptist or Dunker Congregations I cannot help saying with Stilling: "Where is all this written, surely not in the Scriptures?" If a person is damned because he don't belong to the Baptists [Brethren], Good God! What becomes of the Soul? Where is my Grandfather and Grandmother? Where are all the holy Martyrs who have died? . . . What becomes of the Quakers, Methodists and hundreds of other sects which don't believe in the baptism of water?[26]

That reference is to his paternal grandfather is indicated by the Brethren membership of his mother's parents.[27]

It therefore seems evident that Christopher Sauer held to his Separatist posture throughout his life. While sympathetic to beliefs held by the Brethren and close to them personally, he never became formally affiliated with them. He is most accurately described as a profoundly religious man who refused to associate himself with any church organization.

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25 The letter is published in Felix Reichmann and Eugene E. Doll, eds., *Ephrata, As Seen By Contemporaries* (Allentown, Pa., 1953), 45–48, and in Durnbaugh, *Brethren*, 118–122.

26 David Sower, Sr., to Catherine Harley, Fayette County, Pa., May 31, 1822. Ms 102, Cassel Collection, Juniata College Library, Huntingdon, Pa.

27 Brumbaugh, 190, 266.