

Martin Klassen, *History of the Defenceless Anabaptist Churches From the Times of the Apostles to the Present*. Trans. Walter Klassen. Saskatoon, SK: Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society, 2013. Pp. 233. Softcover, \$20.00.

On the eve of Pentecost, 1874, Martin Klassen penned a post-script to the manuscript which had occupied much of his recent energy. A new conscription law, published by the imperial Russian government at the New Year, made certain what much of the Russian Mennonite population had feared. Exemption from military service was unlikely to continue. For Klassen, this action was not “the will of an arbitrary government,” but was happening, as he had just predicted, “according to the express, wise and gracious governance of God” (225). The Mennonite population had been resting on their Charter of Privileges and depending on it for security, now God’s judgment was at hand.

Walter Klassen’s translation into English of Martin Klassen’s book, first published in German in 1873, offers readers an interpretation of church history that was crafted to address the growing crisis over military service for nineteenth-century Mennonites in Russia and Prussia. Martin Klassen, a schoolteacher, set out to write a history that was part apologetic and part admonition. Working from limited source material he sought to locate Anabaptist commitments in the larger story of Christian history. In essence, he argued that all who had embraced believer’s baptism and had refused to bear arms were true Anabaptists, and thus true followers of Christ. While highlighting the contribution of Menno Simons and the radical wing of the sixteenth century protestant reformation, he viewed this not as a new movement in church history but as a continuing thread of faithfulness that could be traced from apostolic times to the present. In doing so, he sought to give weight and theological grounding to the practice of nonresistance. This was not, in his view, simply an oddity of Mennonite culture but was a true expression of Christian faithfulness.

If Martin Klassen's interpretation of church history is limited by his source material, primarily the work of Gottfried Arnold, several other historians of that period and the familiar *Martyrs Mirror*, it still serves as a valuable document of nineteenth-century thought. Klassen, like others, read the events of his day as confirmation that they were living in the last days. He was concerned that Mennonites were following a pattern of apostasy that had plagued the church for centuries. Whenever Christians traded in God's defense for the state's defense, they became vulnerable to the demands of the state which often run contrary to Christian principles and call down God's judgment.

Klassen's book is organized in three sections. The first deals with the early church to the time of Constantine with special focus on the early martyrs, the second traces the decline of the church until the time of Peter Waldo, and the third section develops the story of Waldo and the "true Waldensians" as prelude to the various reformation movements that culminate in "proper Anabaptists." Whether those he identifies as "true Waldensians" or even Anabaptists (proper or otherwise) would claim those designations for themselves could be argued. Klassen is eager to identify and claim any movement that guarded purity of the church through baptism or the practice of church discipline, even if they were sometimes misguided in their efforts. This interpretive lens is what becomes valuable in Klassen's book rather than its usefulness as a recounting of history.

Walter Klassen has done an admirable work of translation. The text flows easily and his notes throughout are helpful, especially as they illuminate his understanding of Martin Klassen's intent or correct factual errors that were part of the original work. There are typographical errors but not so frequent as to distract from the work. The Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society is to be commended for bringing Klassen's book to a new audience. His plea to refrain from the error of choosing defense of the state over the defense of God continues to be relevant, as does his characterization of the danger of replacing true Christian faith with "bourgeois morality" (222).

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