

Dirk Willems: One Step Away from Salvation

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ABSTRACT

Philosophies and theologies have interpreted life as an arrow aimed at reaching a goal. Theologies often call it salvation. The idea that human beings are driven by the need for the *beyond* is understandable. This beyond, as we know, emerges in many ways, is subject to transformation, can remain unattainable like the horizon, or, conversely, is open to adjustments and rescaling. The reason for its existence can prove to be changeable. It is fair to ask whether reaching it is truly necessary. How much do we truly desire what we tell ourselves we desire? Perhaps everything would be clearer just a step away from reaching it. Is it a mockery or a more mature revelation?

AN EXEMPLARY INSPIRATION

There are figures handed down by history, yet less known than they deserve. Dirk Willems's merits, in this case, are manifold. He can easily be considered an example of compassion, altruism, forgiveness, and self-destruction. He is quite interesting in terms of inspiration. His testimony cannot be fully defined in words. Therefore, it generates, it evokes, it cannot be exhausted. It belongs to a bloody page of history and the history of religions.

Dirk was originally from Asperen, a charming town in southern Holland built around Lake Hondegat, which remains forever linked to the image of this martyr, who managed to cross it when it was frozen. In the *Old Book of Martyrs Mirror*¹ Some notes introduce him and explain the reasons why he was considered dangerous by the authorities of the County of Holland under the Spanish Empire. He had been accused of heresy by the Catholic Church and the state.

In the mid-16th century, Dirk had joined a kind of Reformation within the Reformation, the Christian movement known as Anabaptism.

THE ANABAPTISTS

Anabaptist Christians believe that baptism is valid when consciously received. Consequently, they practice it in adulthood. Especially in the early days of the movement, the same era in which Willems lived, they did not consider infant baptism valid and rebaptized: for this reason, they were called Anabaptists. Dirk's *Yearbook of Martyrs* mentions this very thing. His name remains inextricably linked to baptism, to the profound belief that it is necessary to understand the sacrament being celebrated.

Before he was twenty, he had been rebaptized in Rotterdam. He subsequently made his home available to others, who requested rebaptism as adults. From the Anabaptist perspective, this was not a repeated baptism, but the only baptism he had received. The condemnation defined these practices as contrary to the holy Christian faith and the decrees of the Royal Majesty.² This justification substantiated the condemnation to the stake recorded in the records on 16 May 1569.

¹Thieleman J. Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, Christian Classic Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids MI, pp. 1380-1381, in *Martyrs Mirror* (last accessed July 20, 2026).

²Ibid., p. 1381.

Over 500 years ago in Zurich, some Reformed Christians, often described as radicals, administered the first re-baptism to adults. The movement's leaders were Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock. The practice contradicted both Catholic and Protestant custom. Therefore, they were condemned by both sides. They were considered dangerous, as they were tenaciously subversive. From a doctrinal standpoint, they opposed baptism without a clear will to receive it. Politically, they advocated the total separation of church and state, and were against oaths and military service. The style of protest was peaceful.³, but it was not enough to quell the violence of the persecutions and death sentences, which were carried out by fire (on the Catholic side) or by drowning (on the Protestant side). The harshness of the violence they suffered pushed the followers into various diasporas, distinguishing them into different branches, but it was not enough to extinguish their ardour.

The sharing of property and the refusal to swear an oath undermined the invisible and fundamental glue of a still deeply feudal and stratified society. They dared to lift the veil on alternative models of communal life. And the fact that the protests were conducted in a placid and silent manner risked making the situation even worse, as it benefited the movement's popularity and appeal.

Over the centuries, Anabaptism has endured, contributing decisively to some battles for human rights, to social achievements of great value, which today risk going unnoticed, such as, for example, conscientious objection.

Many martyrs have marked the path of Anabaptism's growth and affirmation. Dirk Willems remains a central jewel set in the diadem. Let us return to his story.

DIRK WILLEMS

I was actually baptized as an adult, after publicly professing my faith in the Lord Jesus. And yes, I allowed adults to be baptized in my home. I taught that Christians do not carry weapons and do not take oaths. And no, I will not renounce my faith, for I have resolved to obey the Lord Jesus' commands as faithfully as I can.⁴

Dirk responded more or less this way to the guards sent by the Duke of Alba, governor of the province of the Netherlands. His property was confiscated, and he was imprisoned in Asperen Castle. When winter arrived, he noticed that the lake had frozen. He interpreted it as a sign, a providential aid. He boldly embraced that circumstance as his last, tantalizing opportunity for salvation. He fashioned a rope by knotting his sheets together. The months of hardship resulting from his imprisonment had lightened his burden. At that moment, his emaciated body also aided his escape. The more easily he could lower himself to the ground, the greater the chance that even the ice would allow him to cross the lake unscathed. During a December night, it truly seemed as if the Lord had freed him from his enemies. Willems had succeeded in his intent; in just a few steps, he had accomplished his very personal exodus. Like a new Moses to himself, however, he never truly saw the promised land.

Behind him, the prison guard ordered him to stop. When the fugitive continued running, the guard moved behind him. It was then that the ice gave way, and the man in uniform began to fall into the icy waters.

Dirk hadn't turned around when the guard ordered him to desist from his attempt to escape. It was another warning that stopped his release.

Help! At this request, Dirk turned around. In a few moments, he changed his mind. He effectively set aside what had seemed to be the primary purpose of his actions. He retraced his steps. He held out his hand to his enemy and helped him out of the water. This is how Dirk Willems is universally depicted, in the act of pulling the prison guard out of the icy water, who, otherwise, would have drowned shortly thereafter.

The guard knew full well that he owed his survival to Dirk, but, warned by the Burgomaster, who insisted he respect the arrest warrant, he captured the fugitive. In the months that followed, conditions only worsened. Dirk

³The pacifist style was almost always accepted. There were some exceptions, such as the Münster Commune (1534-1535).

⁴Cf. Anita Mathias, *The story of Dirk Willems. The man who died to save his enemy*, Benediction Classics, Oxford 2019, pp. 1-2.

was locked in a tiny cell, high up in the tower. He was subjected to torture, but he did not renounce his faith. On May 16, 1569, his sentence was carried out, and he slowly died at the stake on a windy day, which, to his disadvantage, prolonged his torment. He died a martyr's death, invoking the name of the Lord Jesus dozens of times.

LOVE, EROS AND HEROISM

Radical witnesses attract everyone by the firmness of their choice, which has the flavor of authenticity. They are so captivating that they are contagious. Willems's story interweaves several unique aspects. He is certainly characterized by the strength and firmness of a witness; he does not retreat in the face of persecution, he is not the victim of threats, he proclaims his position before the authorities. Then, at a certain point, he seizes the opportunity to free himself from the anguish and injustice that seeks to deprive him of everything, even to the point of taking his very life. He frees himself, crossing the icy waters of the lake remarkably unscathed. He could say he has made it. Yet he turns and walks back. This gesture has often been commented on as a faithful interpretation of the Christian principle of love for one's enemy. Is this really true? Should we emphasize one aspect of the story, one that concerns the other more than himself personally? Whatever impulse moved him at that moment proved stronger than the instinct for survival.

The spirit of the Beatitudes, the evangelical recommendation of radical love poured out even on one's enemies, certainly played an important role. It's also fair to take a step back and reflect on the gradual, constant, profound work that may have forged a second skin within him, to which even the instinct for self-preservation, at least apparently, yielded.

Dirk Willem offers a brilliant and fascinating example, but he sings a tune that seems to have little to do with our times, so self-centered, so less susceptible to being shaped by an ideal force, be it faith, love, self-giving, compassion. Dirk devoted himself completely and to the very end to the driving idea of his life, the Christian faith, and he demonstrated this to the point of diminishing, of completely vanishing himself to allow it to grow and manifest itself fully. This idea was not instrumental to something else; for him, it was good in and of itself. He let himself be shaped by it, like clay in the hands of a potter.

DIRK'S DYNAMICS

From the outside, Dirk Willems's existential journey appears to be the pivotal scene of his nighttime escape from prison, a totally unjust and absurd situation, given the sensibilities and mindsets shaped by 21st-century human rights. And in this poignant scene, which unsurprisingly happens quite quickly, Dirk makes three significant movements: he runs away, he turns around, and he turns back. Each of these movements contains a dense narrative about him.

THE ESCAPE

Looking back at the climactic episode in Dirk Willems's story, the first movement, the one focused on escape, seems superfluous. Having voluntarily returned, after having succeeded in his initial attempt to abandon captivity, he suggests that it was acceptable. Dirk appears like the wise masters of antiquity, who live by their own balance. And they turn to their own interiority rather than outward. And this is especially evident in extreme conditions, such as his. However, since real life does not proceed by analysis, but rather by immediacy, it is likely that, when he hatched and perfected the plan to escape, that represented the fundamental goal. Even worn down by the hardships of imprisonment, Dirk has the energy to face his personal exodus. He does not cultivate the cult of martyrdom as an end in itself, but seeks a return to ordinary life. He bears witness to his faith not by passively submitting to suffering, but by reacting to it. From slavery, he yearns for freedom, calculates its risks, faces them, and overcomes them. In essence, his escape fully achieves its goal; indeed, he could have turned around and mocked his jailer. Amidst hearty laughter, he would have regained the life that had been unjustly taken from him. He might even have seen the hand of God there. There was a precedent: the Hebrews reached

the promised land, passing unharmed through the waters of the Red Sea. Unlike them, however, the Egyptian guards were overwhelmed by the waters.⁵The places of salvation are not the same for everyone.

THE TURNING POINT

The central theme serves as a glue between the extremes and sustains them. The turning point brings to light Dirk's fundamental attitude, allowing us to fully understand him. He shows himself attentive, he lends an ear. Even in an extreme and highly personal moment, such as that of escape, he tends more toward others than toward himself. The gesture, in this case, is entirely to his detriment; it is clearly anti-economic. This assessment, however, does not touch his conscience at all. Persecuted and condemned because of a Christian way of life different from that of the majority, this believer retains within himself faith, not only in the divine, but, far more surprisingly, in the human. In other words, he is condemned, but not condemned. He does not allow himself to be imprisoned by indifference; he remains free within himself. His attitude is in linear continuity with the core of his faith, which led him to prison. Dirk is consistent. Such an action, however, is not the fruit of mere rationality. To think so would be to belittle him. The turning point, which can also be interpreted as a conversion, is nourished by a broader vision, not limited to the logic of coherence. It translates a sense of infinity. And it concretizes it in action.

THE RETURN

It is an erotic impulse that brings Dirk back to his feet. He is moved by eros, which Plato⁶It describes the soul's impulse to reach the sky, to gradually retrace reality until it reunites with the superior quality that substantiates it. Righteous action is a form of expression of beauty; to perform it is to become an authentic witness to it, to advance to the next level. Platonic eros takes over everything: desire, reason, strength. Attraction, drive, and fulfillment are unmistakable attributes of eros, especially when combined with a condition in which the opposite action would have guaranteed Willems's freedom and very survival. It's difficult to imagine too many evaluations in a few moments. Instinct takes over. In this case, what prevailed was an instinct sensitive to the universal, to beauty, to everything that takes place entirely on another plane, which existence in any case cannot fence off. That gratuitous action, iconically depicted by the saving hand extended to the enemy, is a sprout of the seed of good, which had already been planted and cultivated in Dirk.

Dirk embodies an example and becomes one with it. He remains a milestone in the history of faith and beyond. His gesture speaks, inspires discussion, and simultaneously leaves a sense of doubt, creating a void that remains untouched by words.

The fruit of his actions is anything but conformist, it is pure originality, that which has been able to grasp and welcome the unexpected, transforming it into unplanned diversity, the legitimate and recognizable daughter of pure love, which does not reproduce itself, but generates something else from itself and recognizes it for what it is.

Looking at the scene, even from a distance of hundreds of years, knowing very little about it, one is captivated by the same alluring force of Eros that drove Willems to act as he did. One is struck by the extraordinary nature of the gesture, its particularity, its uniqueness. And, however much one wants or can explain it, understand it, one senses a force that transcends, a character that cannot be reduced. It creates space for observation, for listening. And it arouses curiosity: the curiosity to push forward into the unknown, to delve into understanding how human action surpasses predictions, expectations, and, who knows, how it might perhaps unleash positive and unthinkable developments on the mere level of mere history.

⁵Cf. Exodus 14, 21-30.

⁶Cf. especially the Symposium and the Phaedrus.