

## The Interrogation: Elisabeth Dirks, 1549

*Background:* Elisabeth Dirks was born into an aristocratic family in East Friesland, Netherlands, in the early 16th century. She was educated in a convent school where she learned to read Dutch and Latin, and came to own a Latin New Testament. She joined an Anabaptist group in Leeuwarden [*lay-oo-var-den*] and was appointed to serve it as the first known Anabaptist deaconess. Elisabeth was arrested on January 15, 1549. Leeuwarden City officials were trying to discover the connections that made up the network of Anabaptist subversives. The officers found a Latin Testament in Elisabeth's house.

*Requirements:* Six (or seven) persons, at least one female to be Elisabeth. The interrogator role could be split into two between the two interrogation sessions.

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**Policeman:** We've got her! We've got the teacher. *(to Elisabeth)* Where is your husband, Menno Simons, the teacher?

**Narrator:** Elisabeth remained silent. The following day two policemen took her to prison. She was called up before the city council.

**Interrogator:** Elisabeth Dirks, I ask you solemnly to take the oath for testimony.

**Elisabeth:** We ought not to swear an oath, but our words should be "Yes, yes" and "No, no."

**Interrogator:** Elisabeth Dirks, do you have a husband?

**Elisabeth:** The truth is, I have no husband.

**Interrogator:** We say that you are a teacher and that you seduce many. We have been told this, and we want to know who your friends are.

**Elisabeth:** My God has commanded me to love my Lord and my God, and to honor my parents so I will not tell you who my parents are. What I suffer for the name of Christ is a reproach to my friends.

**Interrogator:** All right, we will leave this subject alone, but we want to know who you have taught.

**Elisabeth:** Oh, no, my lords, leave me in peace about this too. Interrogate me about my faith which I will gladly tell you about.

**Interrogator:** We shall make you so afraid that you will tell us what we ask.

**Elisabeth:** I hope through the grace of God that he will keep my tongue so that I shall not become a traitor and deliver my brothers to death.

**Interrogator:** What persons were present when you were baptized?

**Elisabeth:** Christ said, “Ask those that were present or who heard it.” See John 18:21.

**Interrogator:** Now we perceive that you are a teacher for you compare yourself to Christ.

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, far be it from me; for I do not esteem myself above even the rubbish which is swept out from the house of the Lord.

**Interrogator:** What do you believe concerning the house of God? Do you not regard our church as the house of God?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, for it is written: “*You* are the temple of the living God; as God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them.” See 2 Corinthians 6:16.

**Interrogator:** What do you believe concerning our Mass?

**Elisabeth:** My lords, of your Mass I think nothing at all, but I highly esteem all that accords with the Word of God.

**Interrogator:** What are your views with regard to the most awesome Holy Sacrament?

**Elisabeth:** I have never in my life read in the holy Scriptures of a holy sacrament, but of the Lord’s Supper. Let me show you from the Scriptures ....

**Interrogator:** Be silent, for the devil speaks through your mouth.

**Elisabeth:** My lords, this is a small matter because the servant is not better than her lord.

**Interrogator:** You speak from a spirit of pride.

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, I speak with frankness.

**Interrogator:** What did the Lord say when he gave his disciples the Supper?

**Elisabeth:** What did he give them, flesh or bread?

**Interrogator:** He gave them bread.

**Elisabeth:** Didn’t the Lord remain sitting there? How then could they eat the flesh of the Lord?

**Interrogator:** What are your views concerning infant baptism, seeing that you have been rebaptized?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, I have not been rebaptized. I have been baptized once upon my faith. It is written that baptism belongs to believers.

**Interrogator:** Are our children damned then because they are baptized?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords. God forbid that I should judge the children.

**Interrogator:** Do you not seek your salvation in baptism?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, all the water in the sea could not save me, but salvation is in Christ, and he has commanded me to love God my Lord above all things and my neighbor as myself.

**Interrogator:** Have the priests power to forgive sins?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords. How can I believe this? Christ is the only priest through whom sins are forgiven. See Hebrews 7:21.

**Interrogator:** You say that you believe everything that accords with the holy Scriptures. Do you not believe the words of James?

**Elisabeth:** Yes, my lords. Why should I not believe them?

**Interrogator:** Doesn't he say in James 5:14: "Go to the elder of the church that he may anoint you and pray over you?"

**Elisabeth:** Yes, my lords, but do you mean to say that you belong to this church?

**Interrogator:** Are you claiming that the Holy Ghost has saved you already so that you need neither confession nor sacrament?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords. I acknowledge that I have transgressed the ordinance of the Pope which the Emperor has confirmed by decrees. But prove to me that I have transgressed in any article against my Lord and my God, and I will cry woe over me, miserable being.

**Narrator:** That was the end of the first session. Later, Elizabeth was again brought before the council and led into the torture chamber. Hans the executioner was present. The officials warned her, "We have so far dealt with you in kindness, but if you will not confess, we will resort to severity." The Procurator General then spoke:

**Procurator General:** Master Hans, seize her.

**Hans:** Oh, no, my lords; she will voluntarily confess.

**Narrator:** But she would not voluntarily confess, and so he applied the thumbscrews to her thumbs and forefingers so that the blood squirted out at the nails.

**Elisabeth:** Oh, I cannot endure it any longer.

**Interrogator:** Confess, and we will relieve your pain.

**Elisabeth:** Help me, O Lord, your poor handmaiden! For you are a helper in time of need.

**Interrogator:** Confess, and we will relieve your pain. We told you to confess, not to cry to God the Lord!

**Narrator:** But she steadfastly adhered to God her Lord, and the Lord took away her pain so that she said to the lords:

**Elisabeth:** Ask me anything, and I shall answer you for I no longer feel the least pain in my flesh as I did before.

**Interrogator:** Will you not yet confess?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords.

**Narrator:** They then applied the screws to her shins, one on each shin.

**Elisabeth:** O, my lords, do not put me to shame; a man has never touched my bare body.

**Procurator General:** Miss Elisabeth, we shall not treat you dishonorably.

**Narrator:** She then fainted. They said to one another: “Perhaps she is dead.” But waking up, she said:

**Elisabeth:** I am alive. I am not dead.

**Narrator:** They then took off all the screws and pleaded with her.

**Elisabeth:** Why do you plead with me like this? This is the way to deal with children.

**Narrator:** So they obtained not one word from her that was detrimental to her brothers and sisters in the Lord or to any other person.

**Interrogator:** Will you revoke all that you have previously confessed here?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords, but I will seal it with my death.

**Interrogator:** We will try you no more. Will you voluntarily tell us who baptized you?

**Elisabeth:** No, my lords; I have told you that I will not confess this.

**Narrator:** Sentence was then passed on Elisabeth on March 27, 1549. She was condemned to death. After five and a half months of imprisonment, she was drowned in a bag on May 29, 1549, and thus she offered up her body to God.

Source: *Martyrs Mirror*, 481-482. Comment: C.J. Dyck, “Elisabeth and Hadewijk of Friesland,” in C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds. *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*. Studies in Women and Religion/Études sur les femmes et la religion 3. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996, 359-364.

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