

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 56 & 57*

### Anabaptists, Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren

We have studied Luther and his spiritual revolution waged against the Church and government of his day. While Luther was fighting for justification by faith in Germany, another movement to the south was struggling against the religious and governmental powers as well. The scene: Switzerland and Bavaria; the time: 1520's; the cause: Biblical Christianity. Here, however, the adversary to free religious expression was equally Protestant as it was Catholic.

As with Luther, the stage was set for things to happen in the area of human thought and belief. The advent of the printing press made writing more available. The ready availability of writing made literacy more important and useful. Increased literacy brought on the greater sharing of ideas, and western civilization found itself in the midst of a renaissance of learning. The dark ages were moving rapidly into history as civilization moved forward. Understandably, this energy for learning and change affected every arena of public and personal life, and religion was in no way excluded. The effect of putting the Bible in mass distribution and giving people the education to read and understand it was huge. More and more people would read the Bible and question the doctrines and practices the church authorities taught.

It was no coincidence that this same renaissance brought on exploration as countries and adventurers set out to find new trade routes and treasures. The discovery of the New World brought a measure of discomfort in the intellect and in faith. People were recognizing that the world was greater than previously thought. It was not flat, nor did the sun revolve around it. These teachings had been core scientific thoughts of the church, but fact was proving church teaching wrong.

In the midst of these changes, Luther starts an open rebellion against a number of church practices and core church teachings. But it was not Luther or his movement alone that challenged the Church and affiliated power structures. In Zurich, Switzerland, things were changing as well.

Luther nailed his theses to the Wittenberg church in 1517. By 1522, Ulrich Zwingli (studied in Lesson 52) had taken the entire city of Zurich into a reformation position. Zwingli started a Bible-based revolution of thought that quickly surpassed his ability to control it. Zwingli's approach combined preaching his reformation message from the pulpit, with teaching students, and with public debate. Zwingli's fresh approach carried great appeal and a number of students

came to Zurich to learn at Zwingli's feet. Ultimately, several students would challenge Zwingli himself to take the Biblical lessons to their full extreme, rather than muting certain messages out of public or political expediency. Zwingli the Reformer was not open to such reformation!

These students and others of like mind challenged Zwingli and other reformers on multiple issues. These students had been working for several years with their Greek New Testaments, and while they did not have ready reference materials (and certainly could not "Google" any searches), they were reading the Scriptures and compiling the passages that related to the subjects at hand.

In October 1523, there was a public debate on doctrine issues with Zwingli and a number of his students participating. At those debates, the main issue was whether the Mass should continue as practiced or be curtailed into an observance of the Lord's Supper. Zwingli and his students generally agreed upon the abolition of the Mass, but the City Council did not go along with them. Zwingli was content to let the city council's decision stand as the normative practice, but the students were aghast over anyone standing against what they saw as clear Biblical truth. Here, the fissures between Zwingli and certain students began. Shortly, those cracks would expand into impassable canyons.

In the next two years, the students distanced themselves on even more issues. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back came on the issue of infant baptism. The students' study of the New Testament led them to a firm conviction that New Testament baptism came after one's recognition of moral guilt and a need for the redemptive work of Christ. They reasoned that there could be no legitimate baptism until someone reached an age where they understood and repented of their true moral guilt before God. At first, this was a subject for debate and theory, but on January 21, 1525, theory became practice.

At the home of Felix Manz, about a dozen men gathered together. An apparent eyewitness account found in the *Hutterite Chronicle* gives the details:<sup>1</sup>

And it came to pass that they were together until fear began to come over them... Thereupon they began to bow their knees to the Most High God in heaven and called upon him as the Knower of hearts, implored him to enable them to do his divine will and to manifest his mercy toward them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our translation is from Williams and Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Westminster John Knox Press 2006) at 33-34. Another translation with good background material is William R. Estep's well-known book, *The Anabaptist Story an Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (3d Edition, 1996: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.). Estep credits this account to A. J. F. Zieglschmid, *Die älteste Chronik der Hutterischen Bruder* (New York: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1943).

For flesh and blood and human forwardness did not drive them, since they well knew what they would have to suffer on account of it.

After the prayer, George Cajacob arose and asked Conrad [Grebel] to baptize him for the sake of God with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained deacon to perform such work... Therewith began the separation from the world and its evil works.

Following this, the other men in attendance were each baptized as well. These men began the Anabaptist (which literally means “re-baptized”) movement,<sup>2</sup> seeking to set up a church designed simply off the New Testament, without regard to the traditions of the church over the centuries.

In a country like America with a history of free worship, these actions on their own do not convey their significance. Religion was the core of government in both function and ideology. By teaching and practicing a religious practice contrary to that dictated and governed by the government, these men were committing legal treason. Infant baptism was the rite that put citizens on the tax roles. It established their place of responsibility, if not actual citizenship. The church had authority over morality, which included what we today consider criminal conduct (stealing, cheating, etc.), hand in hand with the governing authorities. So, the times made an action of rebellion against religious authority one of rebellion against government and the state as well.

How did the Protestant government of Zurich and the surrounding Swiss cantons respond to this renegade rebaptism movement? We should point out that this movement differed from Luther’s and Zwingli’s in a significant way. Luther and Zwingli sought to bring what they perceived to be needed reform into the church (hence the term, “reformation movement”). This movement we now call the Anabaptist Movement was not looking to reform the church. Rather, they wanted to start from the ground up and form a church that was modeled simply off the New Testament; one that they perceived would imitate that first early church we read of in the New Testament. Church history, the early church councils, and

---

<sup>2</sup> The Anabaptist movement is part of a reforming that took place in the 1500’s in addition to that of Luther. There were actually several aspects to the reformation beyond the Anabaptists. Within the Catholic Church, there was an “Evangelical Humanism” that sought to use reason and scripture to arrive at direction for the church and humanity (Erasmus was an example of this). There was also a “Spiritualist” movement that stressed the actions of the Holy Spirit at building the church of the future and end times. Together some scholars term these movements the “left wing of the Reformation” or the “Fourth Reformation.” In this class, we will focus on the Anabaptist tradition.

church tradition had no real place in the approach of these men. Such tradition and history was only useful in the sense that it might illuminate the New Testament.

The Swiss reformation movement at the time was not very receptive to the Anabaptists! In fact, the reformation church considered the movement treasonous.<sup>3</sup> The governing authorities, and even Zwingli himself, sought out those who were practicing and teaching this new belief system and basically sought to exterminate them. At first, this amounted to disputations (public debates). When that failed to quash the movement, the authorities arrested and imprisoned the leaders and teachers. When that failed, the ruling parties made the practices a crime punishable by death.<sup>4</sup>

Even the threat of death, however, did not stop the convicted from practicing and teaching. What started out as a dozen or so men in one house quickly spread. These were people excited about their faith and the Scriptures, and they were going door to door teaching the common people. Hundreds and ultimately thousands were being re-baptized. Even the executions seemed to feed the movement more than they stopped it. People were amazed and touched to see others so willingly give their lives for their faith.

## **MARTYRDOM<sup>5</sup>**

In 1529, the Second Diet of Speiers (as we learned with Luther, the “Diet” was a mega-assembly of the region’s ruling bodies) issued a decree against the Anabaptists that greatly accelerated the executions which were already occurring. Persecution in some areas was so severe that entire regions of Anabaptists were killed or forced to move. Some fled to other countries, hoping to find some freedom. The executions themselves, however, also served to increase the conversions as people were impressed to see those who believed so greatly in God

---

<sup>3</sup> While the early Anabaptist leaders would reference and quote Luther, it was sometimes to support but also often to negate Luther’s positions. The Anabaptists did cite for support the writings of Wyclif and Hus (See Lessons 48 and 49).

<sup>4</sup> Some in the Anabaptist movement sought help from Luther and others in Germany. We know of letters written to Luther, but we do not have those letters today. We do have Luther’s comments to others that reflect his position as to the Anabaptists. While Luther did not agree with their disdain for tradition, Luther was not a supporter of death. Luther told people to let people choose their faith here and God will let them spend eternity in Hell if they choose wrong. Luther believed that was punishment enough.

<sup>5</sup> For this section, I have taken the liberty of using extensive parts of a paper Dale Hearn prepared. Thank you Dale!

that they would willingly lay down their lives for him. One example of a martyrdom is the death of Michael Sattler.

Sattler was a Benedictine monk at St. Peters, a monastery in Southern Germany. His study of Paul's letters led him to concern over hypocrisy and vice of some of his fellow monks. Somewhere in the midst of this dissatisfaction, Sattler became associated with the Anabaptists. He left his monastery and went to nearby Switzerland where he met the Anabaptist "founders," Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock. Soon, these founders and Sattler were arrested and turned over to the Zurich authorities, one being Ulrich Zwingli. These arrests were early enough in the movement where Zwingli tried his persuasive powers (rather than torture and death) to stop the Anabaptist beliefs. Zwingli set up a "debate" on the key issues, but the one Anabaptist most qualified to debate was not allowed to participate.<sup>6</sup> That left Zwingli debating publicly against uneducated peasants. The peasants got trounced! Having won the debate on the issues, Zwingli and the council brought charges of re-baptizing and improper conduct against those arrested. Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock were sentenced to the tower on bread and water and mush for "as long as it pleases God and seems good to my lords..." On that same day, Sattler and two other foreigners were banished, ordered to pay court costs, and take an oath not to return.

Sometime between May 1525 and August 1526, Michael Sattler was baptized, probably by a fellow German named Reublin, in the Black Forest. He lived in various parts of Germany where he won a number of converts and wrote 5 Anabaptist tracts.

Meanwhile, back in Zurich, the imprisonment of Manz and others did not effectuate their recanting. Ultimately, the punishments moved to the final solution of death. On January 15, 1527, Felix Manz was executed by drowning. Grebel had also been martyred. Blaurock had moved to other parts and there was a vacuum of leadership. Into this hole stepped Sattler

Sattler showed incredible courage merely in returning under a banishment that would likely cost him his life. Sattler understood he was probably on a short time fuse, but he saw that the Anabaptists were in a crisis and needed to regroup. Sattler wrote 7 articles called the Schleitheim Confession that was intended as a manual

---

<sup>6</sup> The major intellectually trained Anabaptist of the time was Baltesar Hubmaier, who is discussed later in the paper. Hubmaier would have made for a strong opponent with his great familiarity not only with Scripture, but also with the Latin, Greek and Hebrew of the original languages.

for the church, as opposed to a doctrinal statement.<sup>7</sup> The statement gives us good insight into the core practices of the Anabaptists at this point:

1. "*Believers baptism*" was performed, only after repentance and a confession of faith. This is considered anti-pedobaptism (a big theological term that means "against infant baptism"). Because an infant or young person does not have an understanding of good and evil or the true nature of repentance, this baptism was of adults.
2. Members who slipped and fell into error were to be warned twice in private. If they persisted in the sin, then they would get a warning in front of the congregation. This was followed by either repentance or banishment from the group.
3. Only fellow believers who were baptized as adults were allowed to attend the Lord's Supper.
4. Each member pledged to separate himself from the evil in the world. Similarly, each pledged himself a pacifist rejecting the use of violence.
5. The church leaders, called "shepherds," must have good character and be competent to preach.
6. Each advocated a separation of the church from the government. As a body of believers, they generally withdrew from the world, which they regarded as a corrupting influence. They would not hold public office or engage in civic affairs.
7. Members were not to give oaths. Their word is to be sufficient. (Hence, our usage of the word "pledged" in number 4 above!).

While Sattler was meeting with others to discuss these points, the authorities discovered the meeting and arrested them. While imprisoned, Sattler would not recant. We have one of his prison letters where he wrote, "And let no man take away from you the foundation which is laid by the letter of holy Scriptures, and sealed with the blood of Christ and many witnesses of Jesus....."<sup>8</sup>

The original plan of the Austrian authorities was to drown him immediately. They called it "a third baptism." The authorities brought multiple charges against him including:

- Acting contrary to the decree of the emperor.
- Teaching and believing that the blood of Christ was not present in the Eucharist.
- Teaching that infant baptism was not promotive of salvation.

---

<sup>7</sup> Much like the *Didache*, which we studied in Lesson 3.

<sup>8</sup> Estep at 67.

- Rejecting the sacrament of unction (which means anointing for healing or consecration).
- Despising Mary, the mother of Jesus, and condemning the saints.
- Refusing to swear before a magistrate.
- Starting a new custom by putting the Eucharistic bread and wine on a plate and eating and drinking it.
- Marrying as a monk in spite of his oath.
- Saying that if the Turks invaded, the citizenry should not fight. (This was big -- the Austrians were understandably concerned about a Turkish invasion).

Sattler made a strong public defense on the charges. For example, on the charge of refusing to take an oath, Sattler pointed out the command of Jesus in Matthew 5:34 which says, “Do not swear at all.” Sattler admitted to his marriage but defended it because marriage was created by God. As for the Turks, Sattler pointed to the Scripture “Thou shall not kill.” An eyewitness of the two day court hearing says, “May God grant us also to testify of him so bravely and patiently.”

Michael Sattler was convicted on all counts. The punishment began with torturing. Following that, a good bit of his tongue was cut out. Enough of his tongue was left to allow him some speech which he used to publicly pray for his executioners. Sattler was then tied to a ladder and pushed into the fire. It is recorded that he prayed, “Almighty eternal God, Thou art the way and the truth: because I have not been shown to be in error; I will with thy help to this day testify to the truth and seal it with my blood.”<sup>9</sup> Three others were executed at the same time. The authorities were not able to get Sattler’s wife to recant, so eight days later she was drowned. While there were many executions of Anabaptists, this one had far-reaching effects. News of the execution spread throughout Europe.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE ANABAPTISTS’ BELIEFS**

Because the believers were seeking the New Testament as their rule of faith, there were many different views and incarnations of beliefs in the communities.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Gustav Bossert “*Michael Sattler’s Trial and Martyrdom in 1527*, translation by Elizabeth Bender, MQR 25 (July 1951) at 214.

<sup>10</sup> Some Anabaptists did not believe in the Trinity in an orthodox sense, and some followed the Old Testament much more than others (this included a group of Anabaptists that were polygamous), etc. This class is focusing on the more common Anabaptists whose views have lasted through the centuries and still find expression today.

While it is impossible to give a complete listing of all beliefs shared, there are a number of common beliefs that rise to the surface.<sup>11</sup>

The Anabaptists believed that the true church was made up of committed believers who had a faith in Christ as the savior of mankind. This was different from the prevailing belief at the time that one was a member of church most often simply because their parents had them baptized into that church when an infant. The church was composed of those who had repented of their sins and *then* undergone baptism, rather than simply having been baptized into a local parish.

We get an early glimpse into the beliefs of these people through debate points set out by an early leader named Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier. Dr. Hubmaier was actually the protégé of John Eck a dozen years before Hubmaier embraced the Anabaptist movement. This was the same Eck with the butcher's voice that became Luther's most vociferous opponent in both debate and before the Diet at Worms. Hubmaier is recorded as writing of Eck, "A rare theologian, skilled in law and wisdom, he often sows the good seed among the people. A knotty logician, a master of sentences, whatever mathematician or astronomer teaches, all that orator, historian, or poet knows – I'll be hanged if this single man does not know it all!" Hubmaier wrote this several years *before* Luther's nailing of the theses. Also before the arising of the reformation movement or the Anabaptist movement, Eck wrote of Hubmaier, "It is wonderful to say with what circumspection and eagerness he acquired the doctrines of philosophy, how he hung upon the lips of his teacher and zealously wrote down the lectures – a diligent reader, an unwearied hearer and an industrious repetitor of other hearers. So he obtained the Master's degree with the greatest honour."<sup>12</sup> One cannot help but wonder what Eck thought of Hubmaier ten years later when Hubmaier is fighting for beliefs that would ultimately cost him his life as a martyr.

---

<sup>11</sup> These beliefs vary so widely that scholars differ on how to group the Anabaptists for comparison purposes. One of the more recent sortings (Williams and Mergel) results in three groups: the "Revolutionary," the "Contemplative," and the "Evangelical Anabaptists." The "Revolutionary" were those who used the Old Testament to justify setting up an earthly kingdom seeking to rebuild an earthly Jerusalem in Northern Europe. The "Contemplative" focused and taught mostly about the "inner Christ" which they believed was common to all mankind and merely in need of rekindling into a flame. The "Evangelical" are those represented in the pages of this lesson. For them, the Old Testament was little more than written for a specific place and time (or perhaps to be interpreted allegorically). The New Testament was seen to replace the Old. So, for example, in the Old Testament death was a proper sentence for certain wrongs committed by the Jews living in community. The New Testament was seen as replacing the "sword" (i.e. a death sentence) with the "ban" (i.e., removing from fellowship and banning a transgressor from the community).

<sup>12</sup> Estep at 78.



Hubmaier's debate points included:

1. Faith alone makes us holy before God.
2. This faith is the acknowledgement of the mercy of God, which he has shown us in the offering of his only begotten son. This excludes all sham Christians, who have nothing more than an historical faith in God.
3. Such faith cannot remain passive but must break out to God in thanksgiving and to mankind in all kinds of works of brotherly love. Hence, all vain religious acts, such as candles, palm branches, and holy water will be rejected.
4. Those works alone are good which God has commanded us and those alone are evil that he has forbidden. Hence fall away fish, flesh, Cowls, and tonsures.
5. The mass is not a sacrifice but a remembrance of the death of Christ. Therefore, it is not an offering for the dead or for the living. Hence fall to the ground weekly, monthly, and yearly masses for the dead.
6. As long as the memorial is observed should the death of the Lord be preached in the language of the people. Hence, all private masses fall together in a heap.
7. As every Christian believes for himself and is baptized, so each individual should see and judge by the Scriptures if he is rightly provided food and drink [the Lord's Supper] by his pastor.
8. The members of the church are obliged to support with adequate food and clothing those who teach them the word of God purely, clearly, and sincerely. Hence fall to the ground courtiers, pensioners, incorporators, absentees, repeaters of false legends, and dream babblers.
9. To promise chastity in the strength of men is nothing than to promise to fly over the sea without wings."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to these debate points, the movement generally adhered to pacifism from the New Testament teaching of turning the other cheek. Obedience to civil authorities, except in matters of faith, was taught. Using icons and images of faith were disdained as violating the biblical rule against graven images. The New Testament (not the Old and not tradition) was considered the guide for daily living. Adherents would not take oaths, in respect to Christ' command to never swear on oath but simply let "yes" be yes and "no" no. The community quickly sought to separate itself socially from the evil in society. Furthermore, those members who were considered wayward were excluded from the community.

---

<sup>13</sup> These are renumbered, but taken from Estep p. 82-3.

One of the more interesting beliefs found in an early writing (and not accepted by all Anabaptists of the period) is found in a letter written by Conrad Grebel in 1524. In the letter, Grebel is admonishing others for translating the mass into German and adding German hymns! (Grebel wonders if this was an effort to do as Luther had done!) Grebel takes his readers to task and argues that they should forbid singing in church. Grebel says the New Testament does not teach singing. “And “whatever we are not taught by clear passages or examples must be regarded as forbidden.” Grebel uses as his verses Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 where Paul instructs the church to “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Grebel makes the point that Paul tells the church to *speak* the songs, not sing them. When Paul speaks of singing, he says to *do it* “*in your heart*,” not out loud!<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the doctrine of baptism was the defining issue for the movement. As explained by Hubmaier,

Baptism in water is not what cleanses the soul, but the “yes” of a good conscience toward God, given inwardly by faith. Therefore the baptism in water is called a baptism in remission of sins, that is, for the pardon of sins. Not that through it or by it sins are forgiven, but by virtue of the inward “yes” of the heart, which a man outwardly testifies to on submitting to water baptism, saying that he believes and is sure in his heart that his sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ.

Where baptism in water does not exist, there is no church, no brother, no sister, no fraternal discipline, exclusion or restoration. I speak here of the visible Church as Christ said (Matt. 18). For there must be some outward sign of testimony by which brothers and sisters can know one another, though faith be in the heart alone. By receiving baptism, the candidate testifies that... he has submitted himself to his brothers and sisters...that is, to the Church.<sup>15</sup>

As the movement took shape, the outward distinction remained baptism, but the real core issue was civil authority. What was the authority for faith and practice, the decisions of the ruling powers, or the individual’s understanding of Scripture?

---

<sup>14</sup> Grebel’s letter to Thomas Muntzer, September 5, 1524, translation from Williams and Mergal at 75.

<sup>15</sup> Estep at 89.

## WHERE ARE THE ANABAPTISTS TODAY?

Today there are four main groups of Anabaptists:<sup>16</sup> (1) the Hutterites, (2) the Mennonites, (3) the Amish, and (4) the Brethren.

### THE HUTTERITES

The Hutterites have some of the earliest lineage of modern Anabaptists. They take their name from their leader Jacob Hutter. These Anabaptists came out of Switzerland and fled the persecution of the 1520's going into Moravia (the part that is now modern Austria). They worshipped freely for a very brief period of time, but within a few years, persecution rained down in Moravia as well. In 1535, Hutter was captured and tortured. After refusing to recant, brandy was poured over Hutter and he was set on fire, dying a martyr's death.

According to *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, over 2,000 Hutterites were martyred for their faith. Remarkably, they survived, moving to Russia in the 1700's and then on to America in the 1870's. In World War I, the Hutterites claimed status as conscientious objectors and were persecuted for it. A good number fled to Canada to escape the persecution. About 75% of the Hutterite colonies are now in Canada. Those still in the U.S. are principally in South Dakota and Montana. There are a total of about 45,000 Hutterites.<sup>17</sup>

From the inception, Hutterites practiced communal living, with a sharing of all property and possessions.<sup>18</sup> The three core principles of the Hutterite community are (1) sharing material goods (seen as the highest form of Christian love, truly treating your neighbor as yourself); (2) surrendering self-will for harmony of the community; and (3) separating from the evil in the world.<sup>19</sup>

These folks live in isolated farms of typically 5,000 to 10,000 acres. They keep livestock and grow their farm crops. They also are known to operate outside businesses, but they keep contact with the secular world to a minimum. They still

---

<sup>16</sup> Yes, they have the name *Anabaptists*, but they are not to be confused with normative "Baptist" churches which most scholars recognize came from a different branch of Protestantism.

<sup>17</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, *Who are the Anabaptists?* (Herald Press 2003), at 11.

<sup>18</sup> Admittedly, it took a few years for the Hutterites to get their communal living into a working form, but for most purposes, they have always been a communal community, modeling life after the church of early Acts that "held all things in common" (Acts 2:44).

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, the philosopher credited with a "new approach" of thinking and reading history (abdicating "thesis/antithesis" in favor of "synthesis") was a Hutterite reader! Hegel was the major philosophical influence on Karl Marx, the father of political socialism.

practice believer's baptism, with the most common age for those baptized being between 18 and 25.

## **THE MENNONITES**

The Mennonites are the largest of the Anabaptist groups today. They derive their name from Menno Simons, a 28 year old Roman Catholic priest in Utrecht (modern Netherlands) in 1524. Although a priest, Menno had no real knowledge of the Bible. He was troubled by his handling of the Eucharist, and ultimately, decided to turn to Scripture to figure out his guilt and the propriety of his actions.

Menno was unusual in his decision to turn to Scripture for his answers. It was, in his day, a very Protestant thing to do. He went back to Scripture to answer more questions a few years later. Menno had heard of a man being martyred for having a second baptism. Menno had never conceived of a second baptism, so he decided to search the Bible for information on the subject.

After his examination, Menno decided that he could find no Scriptural authority for infant baptism. This brought Menno to next examine the doctrine of original sin, seeking to understand if man was born with inherited sin that needed immediate cleansing in baptism to ensure a heavenly eternity. Ultimately, he decided that Scripture did not teach that infant baptism would forgive anyone of sin.

Menno soon found himself confronted with some Anabaptists who had come into his community doing missionary work. They were teaching adult baptism. Menno took the Anabaptists to task as on the practice. While Menno labeled the Anabaptists as fanatics, he was personally convicted over their lives and devotion. This conviction was stunned when in April 1535, about 300 Anabaptists were martyred (including Menno's brother). Menno was appalled. Menno thoughtfully and prayerfully considered the events and came to a point of personal conviction that required his conversion. Menno continued to preach in his Catholic pulpit for nine months while holding to an Anabaptist's doctrine. Then, in a moment that changed the course of his life and that of millions others over the next centuries, Menno changed his preaching. He renounced his reputation, job, and doctrinal past to embrace his Anabaptist faith.

Menno's defection from the Church resulted in a number of arrests for those who supported him. Menno went into hiding, but immediately started ministering to the various local Anabaptists, shoring up their faith in areas he deemed out of line with Scripture. Menno and the Anabaptists were ordered to leave the region where they were, and ultimately, Emperor Charles V put a bounty of one hundred pieces of gold out for Menno.

Menno continued to preach and write in Holland, mostly around Amsterdam, without being caught. Ultimately, Menno moved to North Germany where, in 1544, his supporters were called “Menists.” Eventually, this term changed into “Mennonites” which is still in use today.

A number of Christian scholars in the Anabaptist movement as well as the Protestant movement and the Catholic Church found fault with Menno over his doctrine on the incarnation of Christ. Menno taught that Christ’ body was created itself by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, taught that Jesus’ physical body was actually generated with Mary, with the Holy Spirit bringing this about without the intervention of a man.

Menno died of illness at the age of 66 in 1561. His followers continued to grow and today comprise the Mennonite Church. Mennonite scholars divide the movement today into three basic groups: (1) Old Order Mennonites; (2) Conservative Mennonites; and, (3) Assimilated Mennonites. Today, there are a total of about 350,000 baptized members of Mennonite churches.

The Old Order Mennonites live lives more closely resembling that of their faith’s origins. This is true in the sense that they generally reject higher education, they use technology on a very limited basis, and they generally stay removed from society living a rural lifestyle. Some still travel by horse and buggy, and many still speak German. Roughly 10 percent of the Mennonite faith is considered “Old Order.”<sup>20</sup>

The Conservative Mennonites are those that are more conservative in practice than the Assimilated Mennonites, but not as conservative as the Old Order Mennonites. These are still largely rural people, but not all farm. They still live relatively separated from the world, although their homes have electricity and telephones. They also have few restrictions on technology for business purposes. They will typically restrict the usage to business, with televisions forbidden and Internet usage restricted.

The Assimilated Mennonites comprise two-thirds of the movement today. They get their name from their assimilation into society. They are more open to technology, higher education, and contemporary culture. They operate colleges and can easily pass for most anyone, albeit anyone who dresses rather conservatively! Most of these assimilated Mennonites in the U.S. are found in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and California. There are also a large number in Canada and lesser numbers in other countries worldwide.

---

<sup>20</sup> Kraybill at 16.

## **THE AMISH**

The Amish resulted from a division in the Swiss-South German Anabaptists. In the late 1600's, a Swiss Anabaptist leader named Jakob Ammann went into what is today France to escape persecution. Ammann is the father of the Amish branch of the Anabaptists (as well as the Amish namesake.)

There are about 200,000 Amish today (amazing when you consider in 1900 there were only 5,000. They still embrace the core Anabaptists principles of the New Testament as the authority for life and faith, the importance of daily discipleship as well as the hallmark of believer's baptism. Most Amish (as well as most Hutterites and Mennonites) baptize by pouring rather than immersion. The Brethren groups (discussed next) differ in this regard. Most of the Brethren immerse.

In some ways, the Amish are the most well known of the Anabaptist groups. They are separated into four general groupings for understanding their distinctions from one another. They are readily identified by the "three B's:" beards, bonnets, and buggies. In their efforts to live simply and under Biblical authority, most Amish communities have ten well known practices in common: (1) they use horse and buggy for transportation; (2) they shun tractors and use horses or mules for farming; (3) they wear plain clothes; (4) men keep a beard, but not a mustache; (5) women wear a prayer cap (from Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians for women to keep their heads covered while praying); (6) they keep a German or Swiss-German dialect; (7) they worship in homes rather than church buildings; (8) they school only through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade; (9) they do not use public utility electricity; and (10) no computers or televisions!

Beyond those common points are many points of disagreement: Buttons or no buttons; buggy tops in plain grey or black or yellow and white; indoor bathrooms or not?<sup>21</sup>

## **THE BRETHREN**

The final group of Anabaptists today is the Brethren. The adult membership in this Anabaptist branch is over 215,000. This is the one Anabaptist group that, more so than the others, baptizes through immersion.<sup>22</sup> Another peculiarity is the

---

<sup>21</sup> Kraybill at 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Early in the movement, the Brethren were also called, the "Dunkers" or "Dunkards" because of their immersion practice.

agape feast that accompanies communion. Typically, this service will also include washing feet.

The church is famous for saying it has “no creed except the New Testament.” Its roots come from The German Baptist Brethren, formed in Germany in 1708. In this regard, the Brethren are not straight descendants of the Anabaptist movement, but their beliefs were so shaped by Anabaptists, that they are generally included in analysis of Anabaptists today.

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. Be careful to discern the difference between matters of faith and matters of opinion. Matters of faith are worth giving one's life for. Matters of opinion are not worth causing division. Paul tells us that for someone to preach a gospel contrary to that he had delivered to the Galatians was properly cursed (“But if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” Galatians 1:8). But, Paul also tells us, “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables... the man who does not eat must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant?” (Romans 14:1-4).

Consider in this regard 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12: “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” To many Anabaptists (for example, the Amish), this means one thing while to much of the rest of Christendom, it means something else!

2. Reading this history cries out for the blessing Jesus pronounced in Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” In light of that, Christians must struggle with how to apply Matthew 5: 43-47 in the world where we live: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous."

3. As we consider the war waged in the body of Christ over the centuries, we begin to see more and more Paul's point to the Ephesians that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). Satan attacks the church from without, but just as often, from within. It is important that every Christian "put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:13-18).
4. Jesus did preach baptism (Matthew 28:19-20: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..."); and the Apostles did preach baptism (Acts:2:38: "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit;'" Romans 6:3, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"; 1 Peter 3:21-22: "And this water [of Noah's flood] symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.") Christians should not ignore any command of Christ and the Apostles. There is an appropriate debate and discussion over the time, manner, and place of baptism, but there is no question as to its specific teaching as important and appropriate in the believer's life.