

WHO ARE THE MENNONITES?

The Mennonites

I. The Origin of the Mennonite Church

The Mennonite Church was established in the era of the Reformation, the period of history between 1517 and 1575 that marked the rise of Protestantism. During the Reformation period some of the countries of Western Europe broke away from Catholicism. Before the time of the Reformation the church of Western Europe was solidly Roman Catholic, with the exception of a few small sects, such as the Waldenses and the Bohemian Brethren, which had maintained their existence despite all persecution. (Church and state were united in all countries. The population of every country was compelled by the government to profess the Roman Catholic creed. The people for the most part simply accepted Romanism as a matter of course, rather than to bear persecution. Starting around the year 1500, all over Europe there was a rebirth of interest in studying the ancient writings, chief among them the Bible. As men began to study for themselves what the Scriptures actually taught, they became amazed at the simplicity and purity of the apostolic church and horrified at the complexity and corruption of the Catholic Church.

Reformers rose up to denounce the Catholic Church and cry out for a return to the Bible. Men like Martin Luther in Germany, Zwingli in Switzerland, Calvin in France, Knox in Scotland, and many others, rose up to contend for reformation of the Catholic Church.

Besides the leading reformers who wanted merely at first to reform and purify the Catholic Church from within, there were radicals, such as Muntzer and Carlstadt, who did not aim for reform but agitated for bloody revolution to overthrow kings and rulers and confiscate the wealth of the rich to distribute to the poor.

The reformers rejected bloody revolution and called upon the princes and rulers who were favorable to the reformed doctrine to crush the revolutions and defend the reformations against Catholic attackers. The reformers rejected the idolatry and superstitions of the Catholic Church but accepted the state-church system of so-called Christian governments and Christian countries. They broke with the Catholic Church, but the new reformed churches never broke with Constantine and Augustine's teaching of a state-church system. They retained infant baptism; they defended killing all and torture of "heretics"; they rejected the apostolic doctrine of discipleship, nonresistance, and nonconformity.

Because of this compromise of the reformers, there arose, early in the 1520s, groups of sincere Christians who rejected the idea of mere reformation of Catholicism. They aimed for nothing less than the renewal of the apostles' doctrine and fellowship—the restoration of the apostolic church disciplines of born-again members, discipleship for all, nonresistance to evil, and nonconformity to the world. The leaders of the restoration movement were men like Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, Dirck Philips, and later Menno Simons.

II. The Birthplace of the Mennonite Church

The birthplace of the Mennonite Church was Zurich, Switzerland, in the year 1525 although the name Mennonite was not used until later. The City Council of Zurich had made the decision to suppress the small group of believers led by Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, and Felix Manz, because these men had refused to have their children baptized and had insisted that there be a thorough-going restoration of the doctrine of fellowship of the apostolic church in accordance with Zwingli's original promise and conviction. However, Zwingli had betrayed his first vision and handed over to the secular government of the City Council the decision as to how far the reformation should go.

A debate was arranged, with Zwingli and his friends on the one hand, and the brethren opposed to infant baptism on the other hand. The City Council hoped that these believers could be won over by clever argument based on human reason, tradition, and threats of force, but the brethren were unshaken in their Scriptural belief that baptism belongs only to adult believers and that therefore the church must be composed only of born-again members. When the debate failed to move the brethren, the City Council passed cruel decrees forbidding them to meet, to teach, and to have any fellowship together.

Thus our forefathers faced tragic alternatives: They could surrender their vision of establishing a pure New Testament church and compromise with the, state church of the reformers, or they could disobey the City Council and form their own church, withdrawing from the compromising reformers. They chose to obey God rather than man, knowing that they would be subject to persecution and arrest. Meeting for prayer to seek God's guidance and grace on January 21, 1525, they were led to restore the apostolic pattern of the church by forming a brotherhood of believers on the basis of baptism and confession of faith. In that meeting they baptized one another, Conrad Grebel baptizing George Blaurock, and Blaurock baptizing the remainder of the group.

From that historic meeting they went forth with the joyful conviction that they should continue their fellowship, teaching and preaching their faith, summoning men everywhere to break with the world and Worldly churches and become members of the body Christ. The Mennonite Church was founded in a prayer meeting, in a deliberate withdrawal from compromising organization of the popular reformers, and a rejection of the control of the church by the state.

This resulted in their being opposed and persecuted by both the Catholic and Protestant reformers and brought untold suffering into the lives of those who stood for the truth of the Gospel.

By their enemies they were called Anabaptists (rebaptizers) because of their refusal to recognize infant baptism and their insistence on believer's baptism. Their movement was blessed of God and spread throughout Europe, being gladly received by the common people and those courageous leaders who desired to obey God and be true to the original pattern of the apostolic church.

III. The Name Mennonite

In 1536, a priest in Holland, named Menno Simons (1. 1496, d. 1561) renounced Catholicism and united with the Anabaptists by Believer's Baptism. At this time there was much confusion among the brethren in northern Europe because some revolutionaries had misled a minority of the Anabaptists into the violent Munster revolt. Menno Simons was powerfully used of the Lord to gather together and to establish the nonresistant, peaceful Anabaptists, organizing many congregations and by his many and skillful writings, defending the faith against the corrupt Catholicism, the compromising Protestantism of the reformers, and the violent fanaticism of, the revolutionaries.

So influential was the work of this man of God that those who followed his faith in Holland were called Mennonites. Gradually, later this name was also given to the brethren in Switzerland, France, Germany, and elsewhere.

IV. Severe Persecutions

These Christian believers were hated and persecuted by both the Catholic and Protestant reformers—drowned, burned at, the stake, beheaded, strangled, imprisoned, exiled. In the course of a few short years, thousands of these earnest believers perished. Their faith could not be exterminated, for they were the true inheritors and representatives of the apostolic faith, a suffering, cross-bearing church, but never a church that persecuted others, or took part in war, or followed the folly of the world or its fashions.

Thus it came about that the bright and shining faith of the Anabaptist forefathers has been carried on for more than four hundred years by their descendants, today called Mennonites. During this long period of time, the light was at times dimmed, only to revive again as brightly as ever when men returned to the perfect pattern of the church of the New Testament.

V. Coming to America

An impressive martyr roll (see the Martyrs Mirror at www.anabaptistvision.org) was created; it might have been much larger had it not been for the sudden haven offered in the American Colony of William Penn. When the peace loving Penn came through Holland and Germany, on his preaching tours, the Mennonites were his warmest friends; and when he kindly offered them a home in the extensive tract, of land in America (Pennsylvania), which the king of England had just granted to him, many of them eagerly accepted the invitation. What were fear of starvation, dangers of frontier life, and hardships in conquering the forests compared with the harrowing trials and horrible persecutions that they, had suffered for centuries

The first settlers (thirteen families in all) reached America on October 6, 1683. A few days after their arrival, fourteen divisions of land were measured off, and they proceeded to the cave of Pastorius to draw lots for their homes. Work was begun immediately, digging cellars and erecting huts. Within a year after their landing, a small village, Germantown, was securely established, and new settlers were coming constantly. Up to 1700, most of the settlers came from Holland and Germany..

The colony suffered great hardships and privations during the first year of its existence. So poor were the settlers that, the town was nicknamed "Armentown" (Poortown). There were houses to build, fields to clear, land to cultivate, children to feed and clothe, and other expenses to meet.. The settlers were poor to start with, and the crops were not abundant. But industry and perseverance with contentment and faith in God finally triumphed over every difficulty, and it was not many years before a flourishing colony was found in and about Germantown. The first minister was William Ritenhouse, who came from New Amsterdam in 1688. The religious services were conducted in private houses or in the open air until 1708, when a log house was erected for public worship. This house was also used as a schoolhouse in which Christopher Dock, the noted teacher, (thought by many to be a Mennonite) taught for a number of years. It was rebuilt in 1770, and is today the oldest meeting house in America.

When the news of Penn's liberal offer to the persecuted Mennonites of Europe, to seek a refuge in his American colony, reached the ears of the brethren in Switzerland, many of them set their faces toward the land where they were told "the Mennonites would be prosperous and happy."

In 1709, Hans Meylin, Hans Herr, and others emigrated from Europe, and settled north of Pequea Creek, in what is now Lancaster County. So favorably were these people impressed with the new location that they sent back one of their number to bring to America the part of their families whom they had left behind. For a time this colony grew very rapidly. "It is said that between 1709 and 1735, over five hundred families emigrated from Switzerland and the Palatinate and settled in Lancaster County."

After the settlement in Lancaster County, there was no new permanent Mennonite settlement of Europeans in America for more than a century. After the first influx of immigrants, which extended over nearly a half century, the tide somewhat abated; and those who did come, as a rule, made their homes in Pennsylvania, Canada, Maryland, Ohio, and Virginia were begun, not by immigrants from Europe, but by members from some established American settlement.

From 1810 to 1830 a considerable number of Mennonites left Switzerland for America. Despairing of getting religious freedom in their native country, they bade a sad farewell to home and friends and set their faces toward America. They were a quiet, God fearing people and were conscientious, pious, sober, devout, simple in manner, plain in dress, entirely nonresistant, and devoted to the cause of God and the church. Rugged in mind and body, industrious and economic in their habits, they soon had a flourishing congregation in Wayne County, Ohio. From this point Mennonite immigrants from (Germany, Switzerland, Russia, and elsewhere, spread over Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, farther west, and into Canada. Thanks to the blessing of God and their Biblical insistence upon nonresistance, their colonial settlements were comparatively peaceful and prosperous.

V1. Mennonites Today

Mennonites historically believed that the Bible taught a way of life, that evidenced itself in every area of one's living: speech, dress, business, social purity, recreation, education, and nonparticipation in politics and warfare.

Today most of the descendants of the early Anabaptists have deviated broadly from the stand of their forefathers. Most Mennonite, Amish, Brethren, Brethren in Christ, Baptist, and related churches have drifted from the pure apostolic vision of their forefathers. Few of these decaying organizations today retain the missionary zeal for every member evangelism. Few of them have a powerful enough testimony and consistent discipline to keep worldliness out of the church. Most of them have accepted or tolerated some or all of the following: fashionable attire, cosmetics, cut hair,

jewelry, the unequal yoke with unbelievers in business and with false teachings in liberal, ecumenical religion, the radio and television (those sewer pipelines pouring the filth of the world into the home), the use of tobacco and strong drink, the participation in racial and national pride and prejudice, military service, fighting, killing, divorce and remarriage, bed courtship, and the play spirit.

The above words clearly indicate that many descendants of the Anabaptists have now deviated sharply from the Bible truths for which many of their forefathers gave their lives.

Some of these groups have moved in the direction of a church-centered religion rather than Christ-centered, either considering the requiring of certain standards of practice nonessential; or requiring more restrictive standards of outward practices, yet including in their life style some of the aforementioned sinful practices. There are many different branches and many different beliefs and practices among them.

***The above information is taken from the booklet "The Mennonites" by Rod & Staff Publishers, Kentucky, USA.*

Mennonites are today to be found in many countries around the world, including many African nations, Philippines, Japan, India and others. It is our vision to see the raising up of such a biblical fellowship church in Australia.

In our Summary of Beliefs are explained briefly some of the distinctive Bible teachings to which Mennonites (and other Christians) of the past adhered and which faithful Bible-believing Mennonite congregations of today still believe and practice.