

Anabaptist Beginnings



There was a young maiden names Janneken who was arrested in Antwerp. In court she was asked by the bailiff whether she was re-baptized. She said, "I confess one baptism, which must follow faith, and does not pertain to infants, but requires previous amendment of life."

The bailiff asked, "Will you recant?"

She replied, "Although you are now a bailiff, you'll wish you had been a herdsman."

*Thereupon she was sentenced to death, and having commended her spirit to God, was drowned in a tub, together with another woman named Noele. (from *The Martyrs Mirror* by Thieleman J. van Braght)*

These women were two of thousands of martyrs who lost their lives through brutal persecution in 16th and 17th century Europe because of religious convictions. Who were these people who were called the re-baptizers? Where did they come from? Who were their leaders? What did they believe? And what has become of them today?

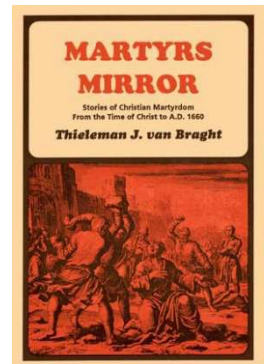
In the autumn of 1517, a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther dared to speak his mind as he nailed his 95 statements or theses of disagreements to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. This act of protest against the Roman Catholic Church sparked a massive religious and political upheaval in Europe. Within months Protestantism began making waves. England, France, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany all experienced the swell of Protestantism. Yet as often happens in a revival of this magnitude, not all protestors agreed with one another, let alone with the tenets of Martin Luther.

Luther's was not the first reformation attempted. Those winds began to blow as early as 1176 when Peter Waldo, a merchant from Lyon, France, attempted to lead his people back to the Scripture. He was followed by other brave men such as John Wycliff, the Oxford University professor known as the Morning Star of the Reformation. Close behind him was another university professor, John Hus, who was tried and put to death in 1415. However, it was after Luther's reformation that the flood gates of reform opened throughout Europe. One such place was in Zurich, Switzerland, where a former Catholic priest turned Swiss reformer named Ulrich Zwingli beheld a different form of revival. An acquaintance of Luther's, Zwingli also preached against the depravity of the Catholic Church claiming that indulgences, the mass, and monasticism were not scriptural. Yet, some young men attending a small Bible class in Zwingli's church disagreed regarding how the reformation should be handled. They insisted on a sharp division with both the Catholic Church and the civil government. (Luther's fight was always with the Catholic Church and never involved the state.) These "Radical Protestants" believed first and foremost that baptism should be saved for adults who were willing to sacrifice their lives to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Unlike Luther and the Catholic Church, these men rejected the doctrine of infant baptism. They also professed that both the church and the civil rulers lacked the authority to determine their faith and fortune so they refused to use the sword in battle and to offer their allegiance to the state. Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel were two of these radicals from whom Zwingli soon distanced himself, fearing they would incite a political uproar. Manz and Grebel were soon joined by a fiery preacher and former Catholic priest named Georg Blaurock. These three men drew the battle line on a cold evening in January, 1525; a battle line that is still clearly etched in church history. On that night, while in a secret meeting, Manz, Grebel, and Blaurock decided to re-baptize one another, an action which today may seem somewhat harmless, but in 16th century Zurich it represented the beginning of a major dispute with both the organized church and the state.

(from the Hutterian Chronicles) "When the reformers were meeting, fear came upon them and they fell to their knees and prayed with all their hearts to the almighty God of heaven. They asked God to have mercy on them for what they were about to do. They were well aware that this could lead to suffering and punishment. After the prayer ended, George Blaurock stood and asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him. As he said this, he knelt down and was baptized by Grebel since there was no pastor in the room. Then the others present asked Grebel in turn to baptize them as well. And so, in the fear of God, these men surrendered themselves to the Lord. Some present were commissioned to teach and to spread the gospel message. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways."

It wasn't long before others joined the re-baptizers, soon to be called the **ana-** (Greek for "again") **baptists** (also known as the Swiss Brethren.) Feeling threatened by the movement, the Catholic Church, the Protestants, and the state declared "war" on the newly formed sect. Within months the first Anabaptist was arrested and burned at the stake. Eventually Felix Manz was publicly drowned in the Zurich River and Georg Blaurock was also burned at the stake. The once secret movement grew by scores as new sympathizers joined. Instead of destroying the crusade, the persecutions simply helped it spread to other territories. Soon Anabaptist sympathizers sprang up in Moravia, Germany and the Netherlands.

In time the reformers took on many different doctrines and views since there never was one man who led the charge. Some Anabaptists were anarchists while others were considered mystics or pacifists. Yet one thing was certain, they were all hated by the authorities as can be seen in the slaughter that took place in the ensuing years. Special "hunters" were commissioned to seek out and arrest the radicals. The martyrs went to their deaths willingly by torture, drowning, branding, dismemberment, and burning alive. Today many Amish homes display the 1100 page book titled *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* or simply *The Martyrs Mirror* which contains the last words of thousands of the martyrs. As the persecution continued, Anabaptists found refuge in Austria, France, the Netherlands, Poland and eventually Russia and North America. The Radical Reformation was spreading over a continent of unrest and instability.



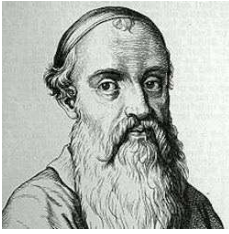
Jakob Hutter

The Birth of the Hutterites (Austria)

By 1527 Moravia (Austria) became a sanctuary for the Anabaptist "heretics." Soon there arose a dispute among the Anabaptists regarding the bearing of arms, payment of taxes, and government protection. One group named the "Stabler" ("People of the staff" because they believed in carrying a staff instead of a sword), moved to the Moravian town of Austerlitz. After being forced from that town, they gathered on the outskirts where a large sheet was laid upon the ground and everyone was asked to place all their belongings onto the sheet. From that time forth they would share everything with one another, just as the early Christians did in Acts 2. This communal form of living impressed a visiting Anabaptist preacher named Jakob Hutter. Before long, Hutter was chosen as leader over this group of believers. However, in less than a year Hutter was captured in Innsbruck, Austria, and burned alive. Hutter defined the Hutterite movement, known especially for its communal living. Later the details of this movement were written down by Peter Riedemann while in prison in 1542. Riedemann eventually escaped prison and became a leader in the Hutterite effort. (More details will follow in session two.)

The Birth of the Mennonites (Netherlands)

By 1530 Anabaptism took hold in the Netherlands under the guidance of Melchior Hoffman, a man who believed that the end of the world would come within a few years, and that Christ would reign over his New Jerusalem on earth. Hoffman's legacy continued under the leadership of Jan Mathijs an Amsterdam preacher



Menno Simons

who moved to Munster, Germany. Here he and his followers threatened the people with three options: join the Anabaptists, leave the city, or be killed. He then held the city hostage for over a year until there was a revolt by the ousted Catholics in 1535.

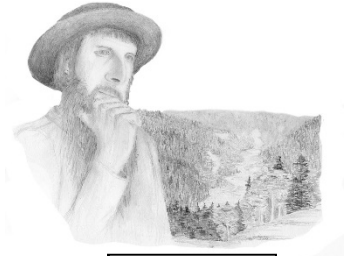
There soon arose a great need for a moderate Anabaptist leader to take the reins. Menno Simons was just the man. This former Dutch Catholic priest had a sympathetic heart for the Anabaptist movement. He became a powerful leader who carried a big price on his head. By 1545 the followers of Menno Simons were known as the Mennists or Mennonites, and they soon had a stronghold in Holland and Northern Germany. (More details will follow next session.)

The Birth of the Amish (Switzerland/France)

By the late 1600s many persecuted Anabaptists left Switzerland and began farming in the Alsace region of France. In 1693 a rift took place within that body. A recent convert to Anabaptism, began to question certain Anabaptist traditions and teachings. He suggested holding communion twice a year as opposed to the previous held once a year, and reinstating the practice of washing one another's feet during the communion service. However, the reform that was soon to become a stumbling block was his suggested change in the rules of excommunication and shunning (Meidung.) He thought that expelled members should not only be banned from Holy Communion but also shunned in daily life. This doctrine formed a wedge that divided the Swiss Anabaptists from the Alsace Anabaptists. Because the area ministers refused to accept his recommendations, he excommunicated them. A short time later he had misgivings about that act, and reinstated them all. Then he proceeded to excommunicate himself. This man was named Jacob Amman, and the beginning of the Amish church had arrived.

In addition to the communion and shunning practices, dress also became an important issue (perhaps partly due to the fact that Amman was himself a tailor.) The Amish spoke out against fashionable clothing, giving them the nickname of "hook-and-eyers" (no buttons allowed) as compared to the Mennonite "button people." Men were told not to trim their beards as a very strict self-discipline was enforced.

Jacob Amman left no writings which presents the irony of a church body being formed by a man who never wrote anything, and who himself was excommunicated from the church. (More details will follow in future sessions.)



Jacob Amman

The Birth of the Brethren (Germany)

Shortly after the Amish began, a fourth group arose in Germany called the Brethren. Although this group did not trace its roots directly to the Swiss Anabaptists, they still had Anabaptist leanings. In the late 1600s many German Lutheran and Reformed lay members became disenchanted with the lack of spirituality in their churches. In 1708 these so-called Radical Pietists or Separatists called for the complete separation from formal churches. Because they believed in triple immersion, they became known in later years as the German Baptist Brethren, the Dunkards, Tunkards, or simply Dunkers. This group sympathized with the teachings of the Mennonites and eventually wished to be excluded from the other Radical Pietist groups.

Today there are seven major affiliations within the Brethren church, including the Church of Brethren, Fellowship of Grace Brethren, Brethren in Christ and the Brethren Church. About 10% of the Brethren followers still use horse-drawn carriages, dress plain and follow strict traditions.

The Brethren eventually settled in Germantown, Pennsylvania. They celebrated their organization by breaking the ice in a nearby river so six converts could be baptized by dunking them each three times. Today the Brethren are found in most of the fifty states.

It should be mentioned that during the early years of the Anabaptists no particular leader stood out from the rest as did Luther with the Protestants. Most of the leaders in the Anabaptist movement were concerned with

beginning new settlements and protecting theirs and their followers' lives. Consequently little is written by the early leaders. There were, however, certain areas in which they all agreed:

1. *Adult believers' baptism.*
2. *No swearing of oaths.*
3. *Non-resistance – no participation in war.*
4. *Non-conformity to the “world”.*
5. *Living a simple life.*
6. *Obedience to God*

Discussion:

1. **Why did Martin Luther's reformation not wish to go to that extent the Anabaptists who tossed out the office of ministry and church worship?**
2. **What can we learn from the horrible Protestant and Catholic persecutions of the Anabaptists?**
3. **Read Acts 2:44,45; 4:32-35. Where did the Hutterites get their communal practices? Why don't we still follow those practices today?**
4. **One Hutterite has written: “After children learn obedience, they can be taught faith.” What is wrong with that statement?**
5. **The Anabaptists cite 2 Corinthians 10:4; 2 Timothy 2:24; Matthew 5:39 and John 18:36 as reasons for not participating in the armed forces. Respond.**
6. **In the Diet of Speyer in 1529 it was agreed by the Catholics and Protestants that anyone who did not agree with infant baptism – meaning the Anabaptists – could be put to death. How could this have been better dealt with?**