THE REFORMATION--Lesson 22

The Anabaptists #6

Prayer
Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-17
Hymn: 375 "Fight the Good Fight"

THE BACKGROUND OF ANABAPTISM IN THE NETHERLANDS:

Toward the end of the Middle Ages the Brethren of the Common Life with their emphasis on holy living and education added to rising criticism of and dissatisfaction with the medieval church. Humanism, with Erasmus as its most famous representative, further opened the eyes of many to the shortcomings of the church. The efforts of the Catholic emperor to destroy Protestantism in the Netherlands limited the growth of Lutheran and Zwinglian forces. The Inquisition aroused great patriotic zeal and determination to resist the Catholic Hapsburg administration in every possible way.

One expression of this resistance was the Sacramentarian Movement that swept the Netherlands between 1524 and 1530. It called into question the doctrine of Transubstantiation and built on Hoen's doctrine that had attracted Zwingli that the Supper was only a memorial. John Pistorius of Woerden, a priest who rejected the Mass, visited Luther, married, and became a baker, was burned at the stake at The Hague on September 15, 1525. The Sacramentist movement continued to grow. A young widow, Wendelmoet Claesdochter of Monnikendam, was strangled and burned after telling the inquisitors that their sacrament was bread and flour and their God was the devil. She had also declared that their crucifix was a wooden god and had urged them to throw it into the fire to warm themselves. Many of the Sacramentists were humanists. The humanistic Sacramentist, Henry Rol of Grave, published two tracts: his "The Key of the Mystery of the Supper" was published in East Frisian before 1532. He also published "A True Consideration How the Blessed Body of Christ Is Different from Our Unworthy Body." A glass painter, David Joris, led Iconoclastic disturbances, attacked an image of Mary, and was scourged, a hole was bored in his tongue, and he was banished for three years. The baker, John Mathijs, received the same punishment for Sacramentist Iconoclasm. Many of the Sacramentists later became Anabaptists.

A slater of Antwerp called Loy gained a considerable following with his doctrine that every man possesses the Holy Spirit, which is his own reason, that there is no hell, and that every man will enjoy eternal life. The Loists were also called Libertines. Loy was burned by the Inquisition along with many of his followers. Loists were also gathered into the Anabaptists.

NETHERLANDISH MECHLORITES:

A Sacramentist, eschatological Anabaptism arose rather suddenly in the Netherlands in 1530 led by Melchior Hofmann. Hofmann, a furrier by trade, was born in Hall, Swabia, in 1495. He became an enthusiastic disciple of Luther who gave him support in his early career. By 1523 Hofmann was a zealous evangelical preacher in North Germany. He had little education but had a remarkable knowledge of the text of Scripture. With powerful eloquence he spread Lutheran views. He aroused intense opposition and frequently caused riots. He made a great impression but never stayed long anywhere. In 1523 he was banished from Wolmar in Livonia. In 1524 he was in Dorpat; in 1526 in Sweden; in 1527 in Luebeck; then in Kiel where he made a great impression as preacher in the church before he was expelled by the ruler. He had a fruitful ministry in Denmark. In East Friesland he met Carlstadt and got involved in a controversy between
the followers of Luther and Zwingli over the Supper. Hofmann gave his support to the Zwinglians and began to spread their view with great power and eloquence. His interest began shifting to chiliasm. His preaching was filled with extravagant typological use of the Old Testament and wild eschatological speculation.

Luther in a letter warned that Hofmann ought to be silenced and declared that he was neither competent nor called to preach. By 1530 Hofmann had left the Lutheran camp and when he came to Strassburg in 1530 he openly joined the Zwinglians. In Strassburg he quickly came in contact with the Anabaptists, and by April, 1530, he had been baptized into the Anabaptist brotherhood. He found the Anabaptists a congenial fellowship with no questions raised about his credentials. Two months after his baptism on a preaching tour that took him to Emden, he so impressed the authorities that he was given permission to use one of the churches of the city. His success was phenomenal. He baptized three hundred persons drawn from all ranks and classes. His success so aroused the clergy that he was forced out of Emden, but he left a disciple, John Volkerszoon (Trijmaker) as pastor of his newly formed congregation. Hofmann went back to Strassburg where he had left his wife and child. He enjoyed great success on an evangelistic tour up the Rhine. He wrote one of his most influential works, a pamphlet entitled "The Ordinance of God", setting forth his views on baptism.

Hofmann's distinctive and peculiar system developed rapidly. He used an allegorical method in interpreting Scripture; his glowing chiliasm set the beginning of the reign of Christ on earth in the year 1533, with his work as preparatory for Christ's reign; he asserted that the human nature of Christ was not derived from Mary but was a divine creation and hence his flesh was not ordinary flesh; he condemned the taking of oaths and the bearing of arms; he held that governments were necessary and that Christians must be law abiding.

In May of 1530 he returned to East Friesland and began a remarkably successful Anabaptist propaganda. By 1533 he had covered much of the Low Countries and most of the Lutheran and Zwinglian work was swept away so that the majority of the Evangelicals in the Netherlands from this time to 1566 were of the Hofmannite type. Two of his most important converts after Trijmaker were Obbe Philips, a barber-surgeon of Leeuwarden in West Friesia, and the Haarlem baker, John Mathijs. Between 1530 and 1533 in addition to many trips through the Netherlands and Northern Germany he wrote a number of books and tracts in which his allegorical interpretations and chiliasm grew in boldness. Hofmann became convinced that he was an inspired prophet and that he and his disciples were the only ones teaching the truth. The idea began to spread that he was Elijah.

In Emden Trijmaker became known as the new Enoch, second only to Elijah. The Zwinglian preachers forced him out of the city. He moved to Amsterdam where he formed a new Anabaptist congregation. In the fall of 1531 he was arrested. He recanted and revealed the names of fifty of his congregation. In spite of the recantation he and nine of his followers were beheaded at The Hague, December 5, 1531.

Stunned by the death of Trijmaker, Hofmann returned to Strassburg and revised his eschatological calendar. He counseled "standing still" for two years pending the return of a favorable conjuncture of events. During the two years he suspended baptism, suggesting that the Lord would then return and set up his kingdom in Strassburg, bringing an era of peace for the righteous. It was a time of floods, famine, plague, wars and blockades, all of which intensified the eschatological mood. His disciples were most diligent in evangelism and stirred great excitement. The "standing still" seemed to heighten expectations.
Hofmann's suspension of baptism met with resistance from some of his followers. John Mathijs declared that he himself was a prophet sent by the Holy Spirit. He continued rebaptism and ordained twelve apostles against the counsel of Hofmann. John Mathijs declared himself to be the new Enoch and condemned to hell all who did not accept him. Some had claimed that Schwenckfeld was the new Enoch and others were calling Cornelius Polderman the new Enoch. Under the threats of John Mathijs some retired to a room for fasting and prayer, fearing that false prophets were among them. When they came out they accepted John Mathijs as the true Enoch. He divorced his incredulous wife and married a pretty young slip of a girl that he claimed had great knowledge of Scripture.

By 1533 Hofmann was convinced the return of Christ was near at hand as he had predicted. An old Frisian Anabaptist declared that Hofmann was the Elijah of the return of the Lord and that he would be imprisoned half a year before, as Elijah, he would welcome the Lord. Hofmann accepted the prophecy as from the Lord. He believed that he was Elijah and that Strassburg would be the New Jerusalem. He returned to Strassburg and preached with fervor that Christ would rain destruction on the wicked and vindicate the righteous.

The magistrates and Anglican clergy of Strassburg, in spite of the city's tradition of religious toleration, became so disturbed by the mounting tensions caused by Anabaptists and other radicals who had flocked to the city, that they called a municipal synod, held June 3-6, 1533; the leading preachers in the city were individually brought before the synod for private hearings. The municipal synod was preparatory for the territorial synod that followed June 10-11. At the territorial synod the Spiritualist, Schwenckfeld, was ordered out of the city. Nicholas Frey, an Anabaptist follower of Hofmann who had been accused of deserting his wife and eight children, and who had married a widow, with both him and the widow claiming divine revelations in justification of the bigamy, was condemned to be drowned. A heated debate took place between Bucer and Hofmann. Hofmann dared the council to imprison him, predicting that Christ would come before the year was out. The synod accommodated him and sentenced him to life imprisonment and they gave him the most undesirable quarters in the prison.

Cornelius Polderman of Middelburg became Hofmann's deputy. He requested and was granted permission to visit Hofmann. He published two tracts written by Hofmann in the prison, claiming victory over Bucer in the debate. Bucer felt constrained to reply in print. Hofmann recognized Polderman as the new Enoch. Polderman got permission to take Hofmann a copy of the ancient Christian prophet, Shepherd of Hermas, that had been printed by Lefevre in 1513. Polderman was called before the council frequently for questioning. He had smuggled from the prison tracts written by Hofmann and had published them, firing the enthusiasm of the followers. When Hofmann became ill Polderman persuaded the authorities to give him better quarters and better treatment. As reports spread of the growing revolution in Münster, the Strassburg authorities sent a warning to Münster against the fearful consequences of abandoning infant baptism. They took stern measures in Strassburg ordering all to have infants baptized or to leave the territory. Scharnschlager, leader of Marpeck's circle after Marpeck's departure for Moravia in 1532, protested the intolerant actions to no avail. Hofmann declared from prison that the carnage in Münster meant the coming of the Lord was near and that his banner would be carried to the ends of the earth.

Hofmann rapidly became a forgotten man. The Strassburg authorities left him in the prison to rot. He died in the prison in 1543 after ten years as a prisoner.
THE SPLIT IN HOFMANN'S FOLLOWERS:

When Hofmann's imprisonment did not come to an end in six months disillusionment spread among his followers. Division began to appear. Two unscrupulous opportunists, John Mathijs and John of Leyden, thrust themselves as prophets into the leadership of the more frenzied Melchiorites. Visions and revelations multiplied with a growing conviction that the kingdom would have to be established by force and the wicked put to the sword. Obbe Philips became the leader of the more peaceful. He tried to carry out the instructions in the pamphlets that Hofmann sent from his prison, urging passive preparations for the advent of Christ.

Obbe Philips and his brother, Dirk, were the sons of a Dutch priest and his concubine. They received good educations. Obbe was trained for medicine and Dirk was trained in theology by the Franciscans and took orders. He knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German and French. He was schooled in the Church Fathers. He was an able writer and theologian. His Emchiridion on the spiritual restitution of the church was one of the most influential books among sixteenth century Anabaptists. Obbe had been won to the Anabaptist movement by Hofmann. He received baptism from Willem Cuyper and Bartholomew Boekbinder, apostles of John Mathijs, who assured him of the pacific nature of their message. They ordained him and he began preaching and rebaptizing. Eight days later Dirk was baptized by Peter Houtzagher, another of the apostles. Obbe later ordained Dirk in Amsterdam and also Menno Simons in Groningen while on a preaching tour.

While Obbe was absent from his home, Leeuwarden, on a preaching tour, Peter Houtzagher, called for the destruction of all tyrants. When Obbe returned to the city at noon he found the gates locked because of the threat of armed conflict. The stadholder published a list of seducers and deceivers who rebaptized and Obbe's name was on the list. Condemned as an insurrectionist, on February 23, 1534, Obbe fled to Amsterdam. Many Melchiorites fled either to Amsterdam or to Münster.

On March 21, 1534, the apostles who had ordained Obbe led a group of followers bearing swords through Amsterdam carrying placards that proclaimed that the city had been given to the children of God. On March 26 they were executed. Obbe's soul revolted against the turn to force and violence. John Mathijs and a number of his followers were drawn to Münster by the revolutionary developments there. Enough of the violent were left in Amsterdam to declare Jacob van Campen bishop of "New Zion in Amsterdam". A group of his followers, men and women, walked naked and unarmed through the city on February 10, 1535, to proclaim the naked truth to the new Eden. They were beheaded. On the night of May 10, 1534, forty insurrectionists in Amsterdam tried to storm the town hall. When Obbe refused to support the insurrection the split between the pacific and the violent was complete.

As the Münster revolt grew Obbe received letters and recruiting pamphlets from Münster that filled him with anguish. The false prophets were spreading lies and destroying all hope of restoring the apostolic church. Obbe, his brother, Dirk, and their associate, Menno Simons, condemned the wild developments of the militant Anabaptists in Münster and excommunicated the leaders. The three pacifists stood almost alone in the stormy times. The Obbenites, as their followers were called gained a good reputation as a law-abiding and non-revolutionary people.

Obbe came to doubt his own ordination since it was from the false prophets and also the ordination he had given Dirk and Menno Simons. His anguish grew with the brutal crushing of Münster and in 1539/40 he withdrew from the Anabaptists into the Spiritualists and dropped out of sight from history. Dirk and Menno denounced the Münsterites and gave the pacifists able leadership.