THE REFORMATION—Lesson 24

THE ANABAPTISTS #8

Prayer
Scripture: I Corinthians 3:10-23
Hymn: 504 "The Church's One Foundation"

THE Mennonites

INTRODUCTION: The Muenster episode discredited Anabaptism. During the ten years of their existence before Muenster the Anabaptists had lived under frightful provocation without real moral offense. Their condemnation of infant baptism, their insistence on the baptism of adult believers, and their emphasis on a purified church had provoked Catholics, Lutherans and Zwinglians to condemn them to death. The enemies of the Anabaptists found a legal basis for the death penalty in the Code of Justinian where death was decreed for Donatists as disturbers of the peace. The Donatists had called for a pure church separated from the world and had insisted on the complete separation of church and state. The fanatics of the lunatic fringe in Muenster so besmirched the name "Anabaptist" that until modern times historians did little more than recount the aberrations of Muenster and ascribe them to the whole movement.

The Anabaptists did survive Muenster. For twenty-five laborious years Menno Simons visited scattered Anabaptist remnants, gathering and uniting them in a simple brotherly association. He purged their minds of the apocalyptic fancies of the prophets and led them to repudiate all the Muenster vagaries: polygamy, revolution, communism, and date-setting for the return of the Lord. He led them back to the original Anabaptist plea for the restoration of the simple New Testament church, separated from the world, living in simplicity, sobriety, poverty, meekness, and long-suffering. Menno Simons and his people called for complete separation of church and state with complete religious freedom for the individual and group. He preached against all violence and oaths. The flesh with all its lusts and desires must be crucified, putting an end to all unclear thoughts, unbecoming words and actions. There must be no luxuries, no adornment with gold, silver, pearls, silk, velvet and costly finery. The Christian must live simply, work hard, and bear faithful witness to Christ.

Even as early as 1536 Menno Simons was diligently gathering and organizing the quieter Anabaptists. Anabaptism in the lowlands of Holland and Germany can be divided into three periods: before Menno, under Menno, and after Menno.

THE BACKGROUND OF MENNO SIMONS: Menno was born in 1496 in the village of Witmarsum in West Frisia, the son of a dairy farmer named Simon. He studied in a monastery, learning to read and write Latin and to read some Greek. He became familiar with the church fathers. He was not trained systematically in the Bible but learned portions of it through the Roman liturgy. He was ordained in March 1524 when he was twenty-eight years old and was assigned to the parish of Pingjum near Witmarsum, where he served for seven years, second in the rank of three priests. He lived the usual life of a parish priest of that time, spending free hours in playing cards, drinking and in frivolities of all sorts.

As early as 1525 he began having doubts about transubstantiation. Failing to get any help from fellow priests he turned to the study of the New Testament. He began reading Luther. He did not accept Luther's doctrine of the Eucharist but Luther did convince him that he had the right to depart from the teachings of men to follow Scripture.

In 1529 he read the writings of Theobald Billicanus of Noordlingen and became acquainted with Cyprian on adult baptism. He was deeply impressed in 1531 when he learned of the heroic death of Sicke Peersk...
in nearby Leeuwarden for being "rebaptized." Menno searched the New Testament for support for infant baptism and finding none, turned to the church fathers. In the fathers he discovered the idea that baptism cleansed from original sin. He compared this with Scripture that the blood of Christ cleanses from all sin. Menno turned to the Protestant Reformers and found them contradictory. He found Luther teaching that infants have faith by godparental proxy; Bucer held that infant baptism was a pledge of Christian nature; Zwingli and Bullinger taught that in the New Covenant baptism was the equivalent of circumcision in the Old Covenant. He was aware of Melchiorite Anabaptists but did not take them seriously.

About this time Menno was promoted to the office of priest in his home church at Witmarsum. He later wrote that his joy in the promotion came from covetousness and the desire for a great name. He charged that his preaching was hypocritical and without spirituality or love. He was a frivolous babbler. Though he was outwardly moral he was not satisfied with his spiritual state. Emissaries of Muenster came to Witmarsum and Menno quickly concluded that they possessed zeal without knowledge. He began to try to stem the tide of fanaticism. The excesses of Muenster led him to write a tract against John Beukels of Leiden in April/June 1535. He gained quite a reputation as a defender of the faith against the Muenстерites.

MENNO'S BREAK WITH CATHOLICISM: His break with Catholicism came out of his horror and repulsion provoked by the excesses and blasphemies of Muenster, especially the death of his brother Peter. His brother had been carried away by the propaganda of the Muenster leaders. He became gatekeeper of the Muensterite queen. He was one of the three hundred who under John van Geelen attacked and captured the Old Cloister at Bolsward on April 17, 1534. When Menno learned that his brother had been killed in the battle he felt constrained to do all he could to combat the foolishness of Muenster. The prophets were false prophets. The people were sheep in need of a shepherd. He prayed to God to forgive him of his delay and of his unclean, carnal life and hypocritical preaching and false worship. The misled fanatics had a devotion to truth as they understood it that put to shame his love of security, position, and luxury. His conscience so tormented him that he pronounced his worldly reputation, his unchristian abominations, his masses, infant baptism, and his easy life, and took up the poverty and heavy cross of Christ. He resolved to preach the Holy Word in its purity.

For nine months he tried to use his Witmarsum pulpit to preach evangelical reform. He decided he could no longer continue his connection with the Roman "Babel." On January 30, 1536 he laid down his priestly office and vanished from the public eye. He first sought seclusion on the estate of Ulrich van Dornum at Oldersum on the Ems, south of Emden, where Carlstadt and Hofmann had found protection in 1529. He received instruction from Obbe Philips who rebaptized him. He attributed his break with Catholicism and his rebaptism to much reading and pondering of the Scriptures. It came at a time when hatred of Anabaptism was at its height and the edicts against Anabaptists were ruthlessly enforced. He exchanged the security of a Catholic rectory for the peril of open roads. Menno's sense of sin did not come from a life of sexual promiscuity but from a conviction that he was guilty of false pride, the love of ease and security, and a timidity that caused him to shrink from the unpleasant. He began gathering the scattered and hiding Anabaptists in Witmarsum, Leeuwarden, Groeningen and Oldersum, finally settling down near Groeningen.

EARLY ANABAPTIST WORK IN HOLLAND: A small group of seven or eight Anabaptists sought him out and begged him to use the talents God had given him and to become their shepherd. The brotherhood convinced him that the call came from God to become their pastor. They urged him to
receive "ordination;" he was ordained in Groeningen by Obbe Philips, the recognized leader in gathering nonresistant, biblical Anabaptists. The same year, 1536, Menno took a wife named Gertrude who travelled and worked faithfull with him and bore him children.

By October 1536 his defection from Catholicism and his affiliation with the Anabaptists was well known to the authorities. On October 24, 1536, Herman and Gerrit Jans were arrested and charged with having given lodging to Mr. Menno Simons, recently parish priest at Witmarsum, who was reported to have received the covenant of the Anabaptists. For twenty-five years Menno, his wife, and his children eluded the arresting officers, hiding in out-of-the-way places, but trembling every time a dog barked.

On January 21, 1539 Anabaptists were ordered out of the province of Groeningen. Menno fled to the Dutch province of Friesland and resumed his ministry. He stayed in the home of a God-fearing man named Tjard Reinders. Reinders was arrested, broken on the wheel and executed. In 1541 the authorities in Leeuwarden deserted of ever eradicating Anabaptism until Menno was destroyed. They put a price of five hundred gold guilders on his head and offered full pardon to any Anabaptist who would deliver Menno to their hands. The emperor, Charles V, put a price of a hundred gold guilders on his head. All persons were forbidden to give him food or shelter. Anyone baptized by him was immediately arrested.

LAST YEARS IN HOLLAND AND EARLY WORK IN GERMANY: For two years Menno worked around Amsterdam. Late in 1543 he left Holland for the more tolerant climate of North Germany, where he would spend the last eighteen years of his life. Two years were spent around Cologne. From 1546 to 1561 he worked in Holstein and on the Baltic seacoast.

Batenburgers: Persecution was not the only problem of the Anabaptists. After the fall of Muenster John of Batenburg became the leader of the "sword-minded" Anabaptists known as Batenburgers. John of Batenburg was the illegitimate son of the noble house of Batenburg. Before becoming an Anabaptist he had been mayor of Steenvijk in Overijssel. He was one of the leading spirits in the assault on the Old Cloister in 1535. The Batenburgers believed that all who did not join them had to be killed. They plundered churches, practised polygamy, held goods in common, and held that divorce was obligatory for anyone whose spouse refused to join the group. John became their new Elijah as they waited for the belligerent second advent of the Lord. While they waited they gave up adult baptism and attended Catholic services to escape detection and persecution. Menno preached against them. John was captured at Vilvoorde near Brussels in December 1537. Although he declared himself opposed to violence and polygamy and revealed the names of many Anabaptists, the magistrates were unconvinced and executed him in 1538.

Joris and Davidian Spiritualists: Also a source of embarrassment and trouble for Menno was David Joris. Joris, a glass painter in Delft, became a leader of a group of Sacramentists, and on Assumption Day in 1528 led an iconoclastic riot in which an image of Mary was destroyed. He was banished after a scourging and after a hole was bored in his tongue. In September 1533 he received Anabaptist baptism from Obbe Philips. Joris became a leading painter, poet and hymn writer among the Anabaptists. He rejected the violence and polygamy of Muenster but his theme was the imminent coming of the Lord. He developed a loyal following. One of his followers and a wealthy supporter, Anneken Jansdochter, sent him a letter in which she declared that he was a prophet of God with fan in hand to winnow and prepare a people for the Lord. He claimed that for a week after receiving her letter he was in an ecstasy. He began to claim that he was the third David. His following became so great that the authorities put a price on his head in 1538 and in 1539 began arresting his followers. Anneken Jans was arrested when she was heard singing an Anabaptist song. She was convicted
of heresy. On her way to execution she asked for someone to adopt her infant son for whom she had provided a substantial endowment. The boy grew up to be a brewer and mayor of Rotterdam. He married the daughter of the Armenian statesman and martyr, Oldenbarnevelt. Joris eluded the authorities, fleeing from city to city.

MENNO'S WRITINGS: During his last years in Holland Menno published three of his most important books: Christian Baptism, 1539; Foundation of Christian Doctrine, 1540; the True Christian Faith, 1541. The Foundation of Christian Doctrine became the most influential book among Anabaptists. It was first published in the dialect of Friesland. A revised edition was published in 1554. It was translated and published in Dutch in 1558 and in German in 1575 and then in English.

Earlier works of Menno were The Spiritual Resurrection, 1536; Meditation on the Twenty-fifth Psalm, 1537 (an autobiographical work); The New Birth, 1537.

MENNO REPLACES OBE PHILIPS: In 1540 Obbe Philips left the Anabaptists and joined a Spiritualist group after a long period of brooding and depression. The tragedy of Muenster had weighed heavily upon him. He was deeply troubled that his ordination had come from the Muenster prophets. He could not shake doubts about the validity of his own ordination and the ordination he had conferred on Menno Simons and his own brother, Dirk Philips. There was also the weight of the continuing fierce misrepresentation of and persecution of all Anabaptists.

The departure of Obbe left Menno and Dirk as the leading elders among the Anabaptists. With even greater zeal they devoted themselves to their cause. They made a great team of leaders. Dirk was the scholar and theologian. Menno was the natural shepherd, loved and trusted by his people. Menno's influence was so great that all Anabaptists came to be called Mennonites. In 1544 in a letter of John el Lasco, a Reformed Minister, to Countess Anna of Oldenburg, regent of East Frisia, Lasco pleaded for a more lenient policy toward the Mennonite party.

TROUBLES AMONG THE MENNONITES—THE SPIRITUALISTS: In Germany much of Menno's time was taken up by internal problems that arose among the Mennonites. In the ten years after 1540 the Mennonites in both the Netherlands and in Germany were troubled by evangelical Spiritualist movements on the left and extremely exclusivist Anabaptism on the right.

About 1540 a prosperous mercer, Henry Niclaes, a native of Muenster, came to Emden and became the leader of a Spiritualist movement known as the Familists. He had left Muenster about 1530 and settled in Amsterdam. He was the son of a prosperous merchant and was educated in local Latin schools. Very early he manifest great interest in religion and became troubled that Christ's death had not made greater improvement in men. His Franciscan confessor did not give him much help. He began experiencing visions that led him later to call himself a "begodded man." He married and prospered as a merchant. He read Luther. At twenty-seven the bishop of Muenster had him arrested on suspicion of Lutheran views. He moved to Amsterdam where he met David Joris. He was arrested on suspicion of being a Muenster "habaptist. He moved to Emden where he continued his mercantile operations and where he became more openly active in religion. He signed himself "H.N." which the world thought stood for Henry Niclaes, but which he claimed stood for "homo novus" or "new man." He claimed he had experienced divinization and the call to be the prophet of the gospel of spiritualization through divine love. He gathered a fellowship known as "The Family of Love." He was bishop. Under him were begodded elders. Under the elders were priests. Elders and priests could not own personal property. All were ranked according to degree of enlightenment in love. Followers had to obey their spiritual superiors. Familists considered themselves superior to and more spiritual than Mennonites.
More troublesome to the Mennonites were the Spiritualists called Davidians, led by David Joris. Joris fled from the Netherlands to Germany after his mother was beheaded in Delft and his follower and supporter, Anneken Jansdochter, was martyred in Rotterdam. In 1542 he published his Wonderbook. Soon he was involved in a bitter dispute with Menno Simons who accused him of being a false prophet, the Antichrist, and a deceiver and falsifier. In 1543 Joris led his family and Spiritualist group to Basel, changing his name to John van Bruges. He posed as a man of dignity and substance and a fugitive for the gospel. He spent his time writing, painting, and shepherding his flock. He became allied by marriage with several Basel families. He continued to direct his followers, known as Davidians, in the Netherlands by letters and personal emissaries.

Nicholas Meydert van Blesdijk, an educated follower of Menno, in 1536, deserted Menno for Joris. At a conference in Luebeck in 1546 he defended the Davidians against Menno. He married the eldest daughter of Joris. In Basel Blesdijk became disillusioned with Joris now posing as John of Bruges. He accused his father-in-law of hypocrisy and soft living. Rumors spread and dissension grew among the followers. When van Bruges died in 1556 he was given honorable burial. When the followers banned his secretary, van Schor, from the colony, shocking facts began coming to light. Van Bruges was identified as the infamous Joris. He had kept concubines. The university had his body exhumed and burned along with his writings. Some of his followers were arrested and their homes searched. When the followers publicly recanted and subscribed to the Basel confession the persecution ceased. Spiritualists continued to plague the Mennonites and were a big factor in Menno's use of the ban.

THE NATURE OF CHRIST: Anabaptists and Mennonites were increasingly torn by doctrinal dissension. One of the storm centers was the nature and deity of Christ. When Menno in the early part of the winter of 1543/44 moved into East Frisia, ruled by the tolerant Countess Anna, he was soon involved in discussion with her minister of religion, John Laski, and one of the issues was the incarnation. Countess Anna's state church was ruled by the Polish nobleman, Laski, who had left Catholicism for the Zwinglian reformation. After troubles with bellicose Batenburgers and Spiritualizing Davidians, he welcomed the more peaceful Menno, hoping to win him over to a Zwinglian position. Menno was invited to participate in a semipublic interview concerning his faith in the capital, Emden, January 28-31, 1544, before Laski and Gellius Faber. Such topics as original sin, incarnation, baptism, sanctification, and the calling of presachers were disputed. Laski was troubled over Menno's views on the incarnation. Menno was required to submit a confession. Menno felt Laski violated confidence when he published the confession with his Rebuttal without warning or permission. Discussion continued until 1546 when Laski accepted Cranmer's invitation to take charge of a Reformed Strangers' Church in London. When Pary came to power in 1553 Laski fled. When his ship was frozen in Wismar harbor Menno's people ministered to him and his party. In 1554 the debate on the incarnation as renewed.

Menno was involved in another discussion of Christology. Adam Pastor, who had been ordained by Menno and Dirk in 1542, began teaching that Christ did not exist before the incarnation and was divine only in the sense that God dwelled in him. Elders of Dutch and north German Anabaptists met in Emden and then in Goch in 1547 in an effort to save Pastor from heresy. Finally he was banned. The unpleasant experience profoundly influenced Menno. Pastor had been a priest before he became an Anabaptist. He had been a true Anabaptist but had fallen into Rationalism. Menno wrote a book, Confession of the Triune God, to counteract the influence of Pastor.
Menno's own views became a storm center among Anabaptists. The Swiss Brethren strongly rejected his views. Menno held that Christ's physical body was a new creation of the Holy Spirit within the body of Mary. Christ did not receive his body from Mary. It was created by the Holy Spirit in Mary. Christ received both human and divine natures from God. Menno was trying to make sure Christ did not inherit a sinful nature without defying Mary. His views came to be known as the doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ.

Early in 1554 Menno was again involved in debate with Laski on the incarnation. As a reply to Laski he published his The Incarnation of Our Lord. Another debate with a Zwinglian, Micron, followed at Wismar, February 6-15. Menno published his Reply to Martin Micron and an Epistle to Martin Micron in 1556—works that grew out of the 1554 debate. Micron gave Calvin the report on Menno that provoked Calvin to publish his Contra Mennonem. Menno had a Debate with Gallius Faber on the incarnation later in 1554 which led him to publish his Reply to Gallius Faber. This work was rich in autobiographical details of Menno's religious pilgrimage and how his ideas had developed.

The debates provoked much discussion among Anabaptists. They also called Anabaptists to the attention of the authorities who were alarmed at the growth of the Anabaptists.

MENNO THE THEOLOGIAN OF THE BAN: Anabaptism became Anababianism. The ban became the most troublesome problem among Anabaptists and the most divisive. From its beginnings Anabaptism had included the plea for a pure church and the excluding of the worldly. During Menno's work in Germany the ban replaced baptism as the main point of emphasis. The ban and readmission became the most striking characteristics of church life. A new generation of "birthright" members had replaced the rebaptized. The only baptism the children of the first generation of Anabaptists had received was Anabaptist baptism. Some of these did not always maintain strict Anabaptist standards of life and doctrine. Agitation for strict discipline increased.

At Wismar in 1554 Menno and seven leading elders including Dirk Philips, Leonard Bouwens and Giles of Achen held a synod. Out of it came the Wismar resolutions on the ban and shunning. Dirk and Bouwens championed strict banning and shunning. Menno was more moderate. Bouwens became the most rigoristic of all the Anabaptists. All social and business dealings with the banned must be shunned. Also the banned must be avoided in marriage—no board or bed with the banned.

The churches in Franeker and Emden split over the ban. The "liberals" became known as "Waterlanders." By 1555 they were holding their own meetings.

In November 1554 the town council of Wismar banned Anabaptists. Menno led his followers to the estate of the nobleman Bartholomaeus von Ahlefeldt at Oldesloe near Hamburg in Holstein. Menno later settled on an estate called Wuestenfelde, that the noble set aside as a refuge for Anabaptists.

South German and Swiss Anabaptists disagreed with the North German views on the ban. They held conferences in Strassburg in 1554, in 1555, and again in 1557 in which they rejected the rigorous position on the ban. These conferences moved Menno to adopt the strict position of Bouwens and to defend it in a new book, Instruction on Excommunication. This led the Waterlanders to formalize their split.

Menno, saddened by the loss of his wife and by the strife among the Anabaptists over the ban, died at the age of 66 on January 31, 1561. Just before his death there had appeared the Martyrs! Mirror, a work that told the story of the trials and martyrdoms of Anabaptists in the Netherlands.
DIRK PHILIPS: At the death of Menno, Dirk Philips became the most influential leader of the Mennonites. He was an able theologian and writer but harsh and unbending in discipline. The struggle with Spiritualism was renewed and the strife over the ban grew more bitter. Dirk banned Bouwens and six other elders in 1565.

Dirk's books became some of the most influential among Anabaptists. The Enchiridion or Handbook of the Christian Soldier was published in 1564. It was a collection of his works up to that date, including his Spiritual Restoration. Later influential works were: Regeneration and the New Creature, The Sending of Teachers and Preachers, and On Christian Matrimony. Dirk died in 1566.

LEONARD BOUWENS: After the death of Dirk, Bouwens returned to the fold and in 1566 became the leader of the Mennonites. He was one of the greatest evangelists of Anabaptist history. During his life he baptized 10,252 people. Between 1568 and his death in 1582 he baptized 3,500.

Bouwens provoked further strife with his harsh measures on the ban. The Waterlanders in 1568 held a conference in which they moved farther away from Mennonites. In time they even gave up the name and features of Anabaptists. They became just "Baptists." Public prayers replaced silent prayers. The Lord's Supper was served at a table. In 1577 they published their own confession in which Anabaptist features were omitted.

John Smyth and his English Separatists were so impressed with the Waterlanders in Holland that they for a time considered uniting with them in 1611.

Mennonites continued to be plagued with controversy and splits. Persecution against them became so fierce that they migrated to Russia and to America.

AMISH: One of the major splits among Mennonites in Europe before the migrations was the split led in 1693 by Jacob Amman who decided Mennonites were not strict enough in banning and shunning. His followers became known as "Amish" and excommunicated other Mennonites. In America Amish have split into several groups: Old Order Amish, also known as House-Amish and Hook-and-Eye Amish; Church-Amish; Automobile Amish or Beachy Amish. By strict isolation from surrounding cultures they attempt to maintain the dress, speech, customs and culture of the old country before the migrations.

MENNONITES IN AMERICA: Mennonites in America have suffered division after division. Christian Funk led a split in 1777 that produced the Funkites. After the Revolution Francis Herr in 1812 formed the Herrites or New Mennonites who have adopted the name, Reformed Mennonites. In 1815 Jacob Stauffer started the Stauffer Mennonites or Pikers. Weaver W. Zimmerman in 1916 formed the Weaver Mennonites. John H. Oberholtzer was excommunicated in 1847 and organized the Oberholtzer group that has taken the name General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ or General Conference Mennonite Church. William W. Gehman established Evangelical Mennonites. Daniel Brenneman in 1871 formed the Brennemans or United Evangelical Mennonite Church. Jacob Wisler, about the middle of the nineteenth century, organized the Wislerites, now known as the Old Order Mennonites. In 1893 David Martin formed the Martinites Who split into Wengers or Wengerites and Homings or Black-Bumper Mennonites. A small group known as Reidenbach Mennonites or Thirty-Fivers split off from the Wengerites.

By their clannish isolation the various groups seek to maintain their peculiar customs and culture. Probably their most serious problem is keeping their young people from joining the modern world.