**Anabaptists: The “Radical” Reformers**

Many were discontented with the failure of Luther and Zwingli to go further in a thorough biblical restoration of the New Testament Church. So, there was a separation between “radical” (liberal) and “classical” (conservative) reformers. The debates in the City Council at Zurich, Switzerland (1523-5) are the catalyst of this separation. Zwingli was committed to a state church while radicals sought a church of gathered believers, or a “church of the great commission”. Infant baptism was also one of the more obvious dividing lines. When the radicals are banished from Zurich, they institute believer baptism. Not only are all new Christians baptized, but those radicals that had been baptized as infants are rebaptized. Thus, their opponents referred to them as “Anabaptists” (rebaptizers), a name which the radicals rejected since they saw infant baptism as no baptism at all.

The first leaders of the movement were, like past leaders, well educated. They made a straightforward appeal to the common man. This, and their evangelistic fervor, gained them a wide following. Spreading through Switzerland, southern Germany, and along the Rhine River, they had their greatest success in Holland. But for several decades to follow, the group suffered severe persecution and suppression. Governing authorities considered drowning a particularly appropriate, if ironic, punishment. All of the early leaders died young after brief ministries. So, the movement became one of laymen, without educated leadership. They withdrew from civic and public interests and turned their religion inward, being fearful and bitter toward government, and understandably so.

In the second half of the 16th century the movement began to re-emerge and reorganize under the leadership of Jakob Hutter (Hutterites) and Menno Simons (Mennonites), forming communistic communities. The following discusses the history of those who followed Menno Simons.

Menno Simons (1496-1561) was destined by his parents to service in the Catholic Church. He was educated at a monastery in northern Holland. At 28 he was ordained and spent 12 years as a parish priest. He was 30 before he first opened a Bible. Doubts began to arise in his mind over the Lord’s Supper, and martyrdom of the Anabaptists made an impression on him. He formally broke from Catholicism in 1536. Touched by the sufferings of the Anabaptists, and seeing them as sheep without a shepherd, he accepted their invitation to lead. Almost constantly hunted by authorities, he still succeeded in setting those now called “Mennonites” on their course of life.

The Bible was at the very heart of the movement. Scripture was the sole authority in religion. “…take earnest heed to preach only the divine Word without fear…to reject, hate, and curse, all devices, words, customs, and opinions of man, including thine own…whatever we are not taught by clear passages or examples must be regarded as forbidden.”

There had been a falling away of the original purity of the Church with the state church of Constantine and the practice of infant baptism. Therefore, Anabaptists did not seek to reform the existing church, but to restore one that had been lost. The Church is a voluntary association of gathered believers. Anabaptists are against any form of compulsion in religion. “One cannot and should not compel anyone to accept the faith, for faith is a free gift from God. The church of Christ endures persecution but does not persecute.”

Religion was highly personal and not vicarious. In other words, neither condemnation nor salvation can be inherited. “Baptism shall be administered to all who are taught repentance and a change of life, and truly believe in forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ, and are willing to walk in newness of life…” Baptism was by sprinkling which was the accepted practice in Western Europe. The purpose of baptism was not clearly stated. Sometimes it was related to the remission of sins, but it was more often seen a sign.

The rule for Communion was that one must be of the brethren, and it must be observed in simplicity – no special bread, cup, or garments. The memorial and covenant aspects of the Supper are emphasized.

Excommunication or “the ban” was rigorously enforced. Extreme ethical emphasis and the effort to have a church made up only of the pure are a major cause of division within the Anabaptists. Today in the U.S. the Amish are a stricter division, practicing “the ban” more strictly, and the Mennonites are less extreme.

Many Anabaptists deny that a Christian should be a government official, carry a weapon, or take an oath. This stance is certainly tied to their history with government persecution.