

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

LECTURE 22 - RADICAL REFORMERS: (b) MENNONITES AND OTHERS

We'll start with a prayer from the period to be studied.

We thank you, Lord God and Father, Creator of heaven and earth, for all your good gifts which we have received from you, and receive daily through Jesus Christ, your dearly beloved Son, our Lord.

We are weak, but we strongly desire to live as faithful Christians in this world. Please Lord, as a loving parent, bind us to your will, so that we will remain faithful as long as we live. Take pity on us with compassion, just as you did to the prodigal son, to Mary Magdalene, to the centurion, to the thief on the cross, to Zacchaeus, and to everyone else who has come to you, seeking your grace. Feed our souls with heavenly bread, your holy Word, and give us living water, the Holy Spirit, who can lead us into all truth. This we pray, O holy Father, for your great name's sake.
Amen. Menno Simons

The rest of this page is an outline of this Lecture.

1. MENNONITES

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Menno Simons – early years
- 1.3 Scripture or Church - or both?
- 1.4 Contact with Anabaptists
- 1.5 Menno Simons appointed an elder/bishop
- 1.6 Eighteen years on the move
- 1.7 Menno Simons' later years, influence and memorial
- 1.8 Mennonites today

TOPIC – AMISH, THEN AND NOW

2. HUTTERITES

3. SCHWENKELDERS – ‘Reformation by the Middle Way’

4. LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE RADICAL REFORMERS

In preparation, read Cairns, 297 (brief) and 299-300; Olson, 423-428 (a full account); Lion, 404-6 (brief); Lane, 152-3; Hanks, *Great Events*, 191.

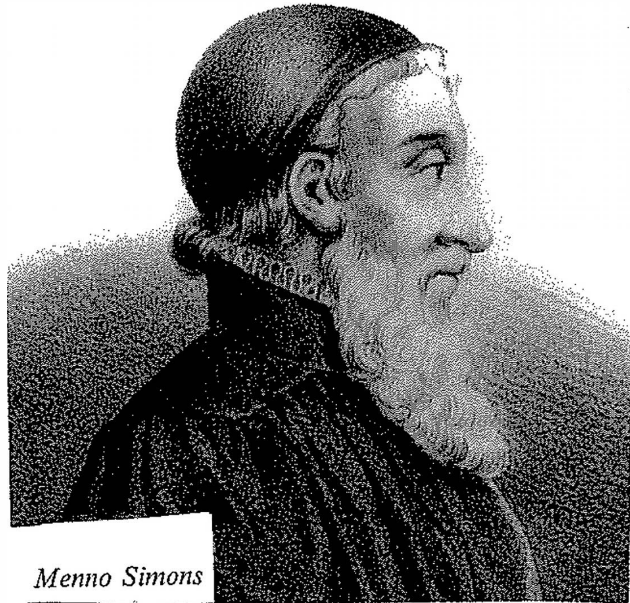
Why devote a Lecture to these four little-known Radical Reformers? For two reasons:

- (1) They fill in a small but important part of our overall picture of the Reformation. As we saw in Lecture 21, Anabaptists were persecuted almost to extinction. What happened next to those who:
 - (a) rejected a close Church/State relationship as unbiblical, and
 - (b) believed that baptism was for believers, not for everyone in infancy?
- (2) To be aware that the successors of these four groups still carry on their distinctive practices today, so that if we hear about them, we can slot them into the overall picture of the Reformation and its significance.

1. MENNONITES (Olson, 423-428; Lion, 404-5; Hanks, *Great Events*, 191)

1.1 Introduction

The main successors to the Anabaptists in the modern world are known as Mennonites, after their founder Menno Simons. Almost single-handedly, he held together the scattered and demoralised Anabaptists after the disaster of Münster and provided a credible alternative to the State Churches founded by Luther and Zwingli. Today there are over a million members of the Mennonite Church, in sixty countries around the world, about half of them in the United States and Canada.



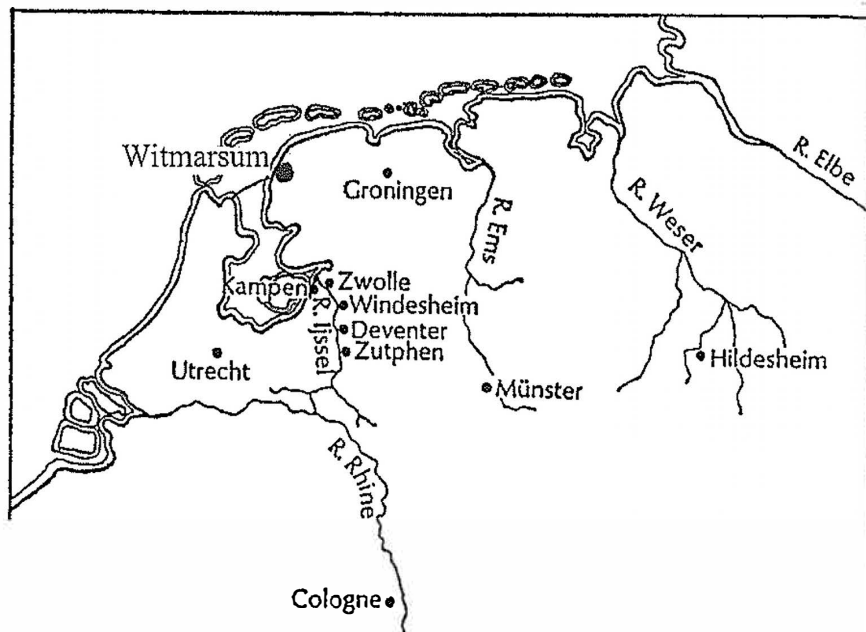
Menno Simons

Menno Simons didn't set out to found a new Church, but he organised and led the scattered Anabaptist groups throughout Northern Europe so well that many adopted his name, and called themselves Mennonites. He re-established the original peaceful Anabaptist concept - deploring the actions of the hotheads in Münster. We should note, however, that other Anabaptist groups survived elsewhere in Europe, still called by their original name.

1.2 Menno Simons - early years

He was born in 1496 in the town of Witmarsum (see the map) in the Netherlands. Little is known about his childhood and home. His parents were probably dairy farmers. His father's first name was Simon, hence the son's name 'son of', Menno Simons(zoon).

He may have received early training in a nearby monastery, but he took his time to decide on a career and he was 28 before he was consecrated as a priest at Utrecht (on the map). For twelve years he served as a parish priest, the first seven in another town and then five more in his father's town of Witmarsum.



1.3 Scripture or Church - or both?

Before long - we don't know why - he began to doubt the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, that during the Mass the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ. As a typical priest of his time, he had never read the Bible itself but took everything from the Missal (a word derived from 'Mass', a book containing the texts used in the Catholic Mass throughout the year). He had accepted its teaching that the Church was infallible. He then turned to the Bible for the first time couldn't find any evidence for transubstantiation. He concluded that the Biblical view of the Lord's Supper was symbolic, and that the Catholic teaching about it was untenable. He was torn between two authorities, the Bible and the Church - which of these two authorities would win? He wanted to be loyal to both, but found help by reading the writings of Luther, which taught that the Scriptures should have first place; gradually Scripture became his authority and the source of his sermons. He became known as an 'evangelical preacher', but he stayed in his post within the Church. He said later that in those days 'the world loved him and he the world'.

In 1531, five years after his transubstantiation doubts, Menno began to doubt another cornerstone of the Catholic Church, the doctrine of infant baptism. He was amazed to hear about the martyrdom of an Anabaptist nearby - a tailor, a laymen, executed for having himself rebaptized. 'It sounded very strange to me to hear of a second baptism. I examined the Scriptures diligently and pondered them earnestly but could find no report of infant baptism.' In other words, Menno turned again to the Scriptures, searching for a biblical foundation for the practice of infant baptism; he became convinced that believers' baptism was the true Christian practice. He then turned to the early Fathers, and concluded that they did not teach infant baptism - but again he did nothing about it, for five more years.

1.4 Contact with Anabaptists

While he was still undecided, some Anabaptists in the Netherlands, hearing what was happening in the city of Münster, decided that they too would like to establish the kingdom of God on earth. A group of about three hundred tried to take over a monastery in the Netherlands. In the subsequent siege, most were killed or captured and executed in April 1535. Among the casualties was Peter Simons, Menno's brother, who had become an Anabaptist, and several members of Menno's congregation.

This was the turning point in Menno's life - he was challenged by the sincerity of the Anabaptists. His conscience smote him for his hypocritical life of outward conformity to Rome, when he did not in his heart accept either transubstantiation or infant baptism. He realized he had to choose between the authority of the Church and that of Scripture. After much agony of spirit, he experienced conversion in early 1536:

My heart trembled within me. I prayed to God with sighs and tears that he would give to me, a sorrowing sinner, the gift of his grace, create within me a clean heart, and graciously through the merits of the crimson blood of Christ forgive my unclean walk and frivolous easy life and bestow upon me wisdom, Spirit, courage, and a manly spirit so that I might preach his exalted and adorable name and holy Word in purity, and make known his truth to his glory.

Menno's heartfelt conversion, involving conscious repentance and trust in Jesus Christ, followed by a filling of the Holy Spirit, became the paradigm for the early Anabaptist theology of salvation.

On 30 January 1536, Menno made a public statement about his new commitment to Christ, which put his life in danger, so he left his home that night, to start an underground life. For a year he found shelter in the province of Groningen in North Holland (see the map on page 2), where he became an underground evangelist - he 'sought out the pious' and found 'some who were zealous and maintained the truth'. In addition, he studied the Scriptures and wrote pamphlets to strengthen those in need of spiritual help and who were in danger of losing their evangelical faith.

1.5 Menno Simons appointed an elder/bishop

He was baptised, in late 1536 or early 1537, but we have no details. The Anabaptists saw him as a capable and devoted leader, so a year after his public declaration, they approached him and he described - he was a prolific writer - how 'some seven or eight persons came to me who were of one heart and one soul with me. They were beyond reproach as far as one can judge in doctrine and life, separated from the world after the witness of Scriptures'. They asked Menno to become an elder or bishop for the scattered Anabaptists. He was hestiant, but agreed to pray about it and he then reluctantly agreed. He said that his talents were limited but he realized the need among the Anabaptists, who were 'harmless sheep which have no shepherd'.

1.6 Eighteen years on the move

From then on Menno dedicated his life to preaching the gospel and shepherding the brethren; he became the leader of peaceful Anabaptists in the Netherlands and North-western Germany. Pronounced a heretic by the State, his life was in constant danger, hounded by the authorities, so he was always on the move to keep one step ahead of his enemies. He married, after leaving the Catholic Church, and had three children, but eight years later, in 1544, he wrote that he 'could not find in all the countries a cabin or hut in which my poor wife and our little children could be put up in safety for a year or even half a year'.

The State offered a reward of two thousand guilders for Menno's head. Any who gave him food or shelter, read any of his books or even spoke with him, paid for their kindness with their lives. We have the names of people who were executed for having sheltered Menno, one who had had him to stay for only one night in his house. The location of those who were martyred for this reason is instructive, because it shows how widely the movement spread and how widely Menno travelled - one martyr was as far away as Danzig, away to the East, now Gdansk in Poland. In 1543-4 he travelled extensively throughout East Friesland in the Netherlands and in 1544-6 in Germany, especially the Rhineland.

He travelled by night, to preach and baptize, and was on the run for eighteen years before he found a secure place, as we'll see in a moment. For all these years, he couldn't set up a permanent home, so it's unlikely that his family accompanied him on these trips, which had to be of a short duration, or he would have been tracked down. He was very successful also in Cologne, on the Rhine, but again his host there was executed after Menno left.

Menno's wife died before him and during his last years was severely crippled - as shown in this picture.



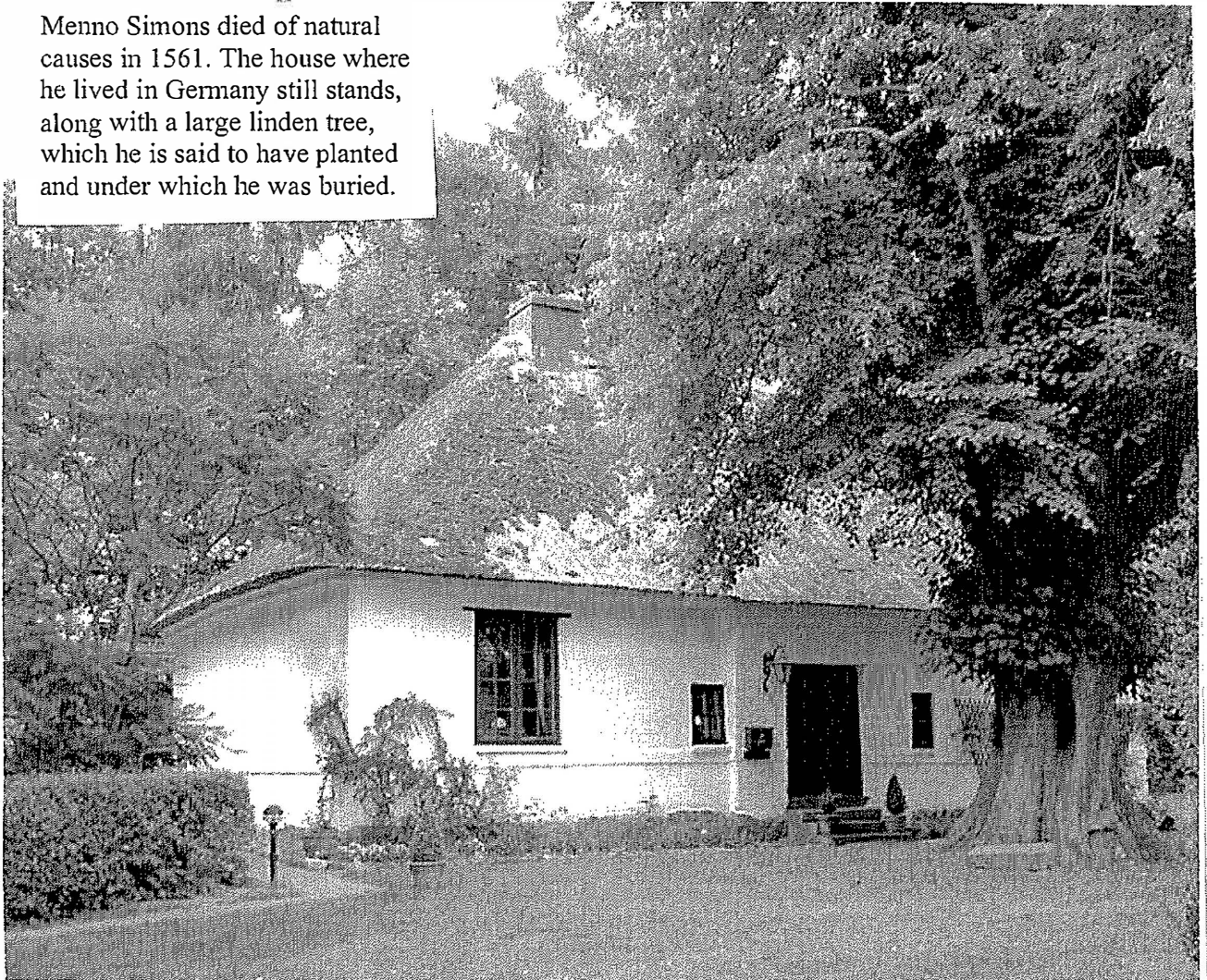
Menno Simons, pictured with his crutch (he had trouble walking in his later years) holding a Bible open to 1 Corinthians 3:11: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

1.7 Later years, influence, death and memorial

In 1554, Menno's fortunes changed. A baron, who had begun sheltering oppressed Anabaptists on his large estate near Lubeck in North Germany, offered him protection. His printer began to print his books, and he wrote several new books. He was one of the few Anabaptist leaders to write extensively. His *Complete Works* contains more than a thousand large pages.

He died on 31 January 1561, 25 years after leaving the Catholic Church. One of the reasons for his importance was his longevity - not many survived for anything like so long - life expectancy after being identified as an Anabaptist leader averaged 18 months.

Menno Simons died of natural causes in 1561. The house where he lived in Germany still stands, along with a large linden tree, which he is said to have planted and under which he was buried.



Menno had single-handedly led the Anabaptists out of their violent fantasies into a devotional movement, rebuilding the shattered Anabaptist community and it is fitting that the original Anabaptists are best remembered today as Mennonites.

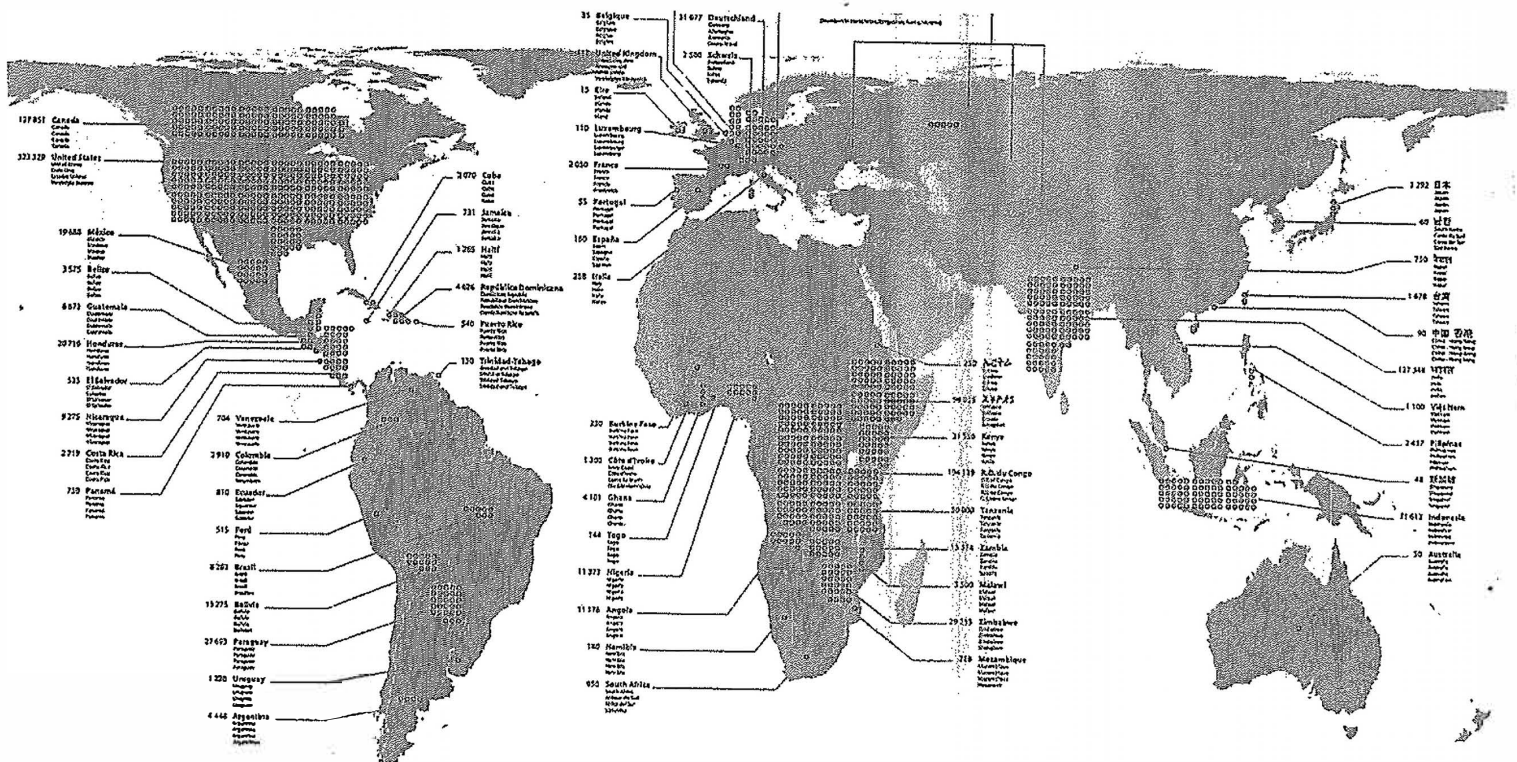
The Mennonites, like the original Anabaptists, aimed at nothing less than the establishment of a true Christian apostolic church. With Paul they were determined to present Christ with his 'bride' (the Church) without spot or wrinkle and, to do this, to keep themselves pure from the world around them and to keep the world out of the church. They did this through church discipline, using the 'ban' - Lecture 21, page 4. For more about that, type: *menno simons excommunication* into Google

1.8 Mennonites today

In the eighteenth century, Mennonites spread to Russia, at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Later, when military conscription was introduced in Russia, and they were persecuted as pacifists; many emigrated to North America, especially in 1873-82 and 1923-30. Today there are over one million members of the Mennonite church, in about 60 countries around the world, about half in the United States and Canada - see the map below. Christ is central to their worship and everyday living. Their behaviour is to follow Christ's example. They consider the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. Membership follows believers' baptism.

Mennonites are still known for their pacifist stand, taken because they believe Jesus taught the way of peace. Many Mennonites today refuse to participate in military service, and some take their belief further by objecting to government military expenditure; a few choose not to pay the percentage of their annual income tax that would go for military purposes. However, their social service has gained Mennonites an honoured place in modern society. They are respected for their strong commitment to social issues, voluntary service to those who have experienced hardship and loss in floods, tornadoes and other disasters.

Membership of Mennonites churches today. Every circle represents 1,000 members. Countries are named first in English, then in French, Spanish and German. You may need a magnifying glass to see the details.



TOPIC - AMISH, THEN AND NOW - was taken at this point in the Lecture; here, it is printed at the end of the Notes for this Lecture.

We have now looked at three of the five groups listed on the chart on page 3 of the last Lecture, copied here for ease of reference. The other two groups still exist today, although small in number, and we'll mention them before considering some lessons to learn from the Radical Reformers.

A further copy of the chart on page 3 of the Notes for Lecture 21.

The Radical Reformation

GROUP	CLASSIFICATION	KEY LEADERS	AREAS OF ACTIVITY	DISTINCTIVES
ANABAPTISTS	Biblical	Conrad Grebel Felix Manz Georg Blaurock Ludwig Hätzer Balthasar Hübmaier	Zurich and elsewhere in Switzerland and Holy Roman Empire	Repudiated church-state ties. Church considered voluntary association of committed believers.
HUTTERITES	Communal	Jacob Hutter	Moravia, later Dakotas and Western Canada	Repudiated infant baptism. Practiced strict church discipline. Were pacifists.
SCHWENK-FELDERS	Mystical	Caspar Schwenkfeld Von Ossig	Germany, later Pennsylvania	Some practiced community of goods. Had religious toleration for all.
MENNONITES	Biblical	Menno Simons	Netherlands, later Pennsylvania and elsewhere	Maintained simplicity of dress and lifestyle. Some followed Michael Sattler's <i>Schleitheim Confession</i> .
AMISH	Biblical	Jacob Ammann	Switzerland, later Pennsylvania and elsewhere	Some had mystical tendencies.

2. HUTTERITES

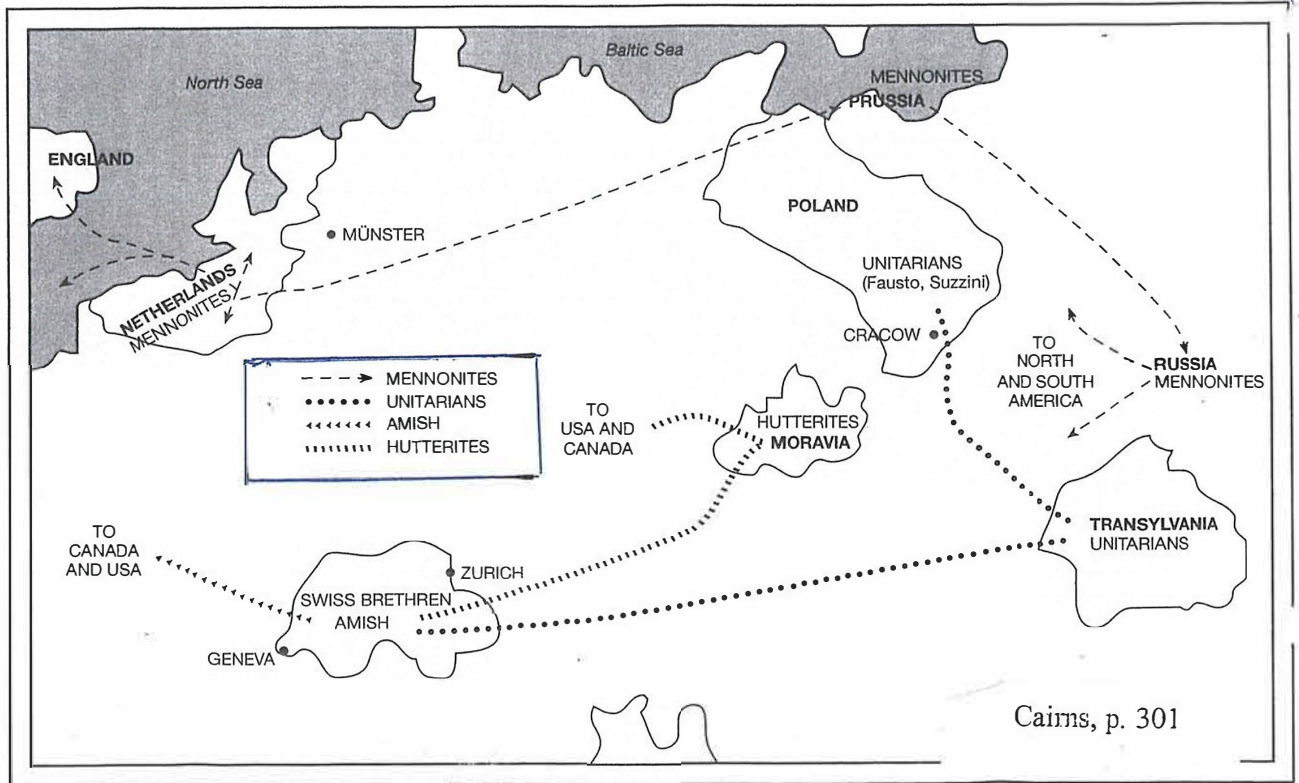
Hutterites are a subgroup of Anabaptists. They originated in the Austrian province of Tyrol in 1529. This was after some of the Anabaptists who had been expelled from Zürich, including George Blaurock (that's the man we met in the last Lecture, the first to



A family of sixteenth-century Hutterites, the Anabaptist community in Moravia, from the title page of a book defending the Anabaptists (1589).

ask Conrad Grebel to baptise him at Zürich in 1525), settled in Austria. A local man, Jacob Hutter (1500-1536) became involved with them and converted to their beliefs. When Blaurock was martyred at Innsbruck by the Roman Catholic authorities in 1529, Hutter took his place as leader of the Anabaptists in the Tyrol (hence the name 'Hutterites'). Under his leadership, they developed communal living based on Acts 2:44-45. This distinguishes them from other Anabaptists and Mennonites and Amish. There are more details about them on the next page.

THE RADICAL REFORMATION



The dotted lines for the Hutterites on this map should not originate in Switzerland, because Hutter was born and lived in the Austrian province of Tyrol. When he encountered the Anabaptists who had been expelled from Zürich, he converted to their beliefs. When the authorities in Tyrol persecuted the Anabaptists in 1529, and martyred their leader George Blaurock, Hutter took over leadership of the Anabaptists, as mentioned at the foot of the previous page. When persecution intensified, Hutter moved in 1533 to Moravia, where sympathetic members of the Moravian nobility had allowed various Anabaptist groups to settle. They immediately accepted Hutter as their leader.



Jacob Hutter,
C18 engraving

He persuaded them to adopt his distinctive belief, that the true church must practice Communism, that is, there should be no private property; all goods and assets were to be jointly owned by the congregation. This required setting up communes, which so infuriated the Roman Catholic king that in 1535 he expelled all Anabaptists and put a price on Hutter's head. Hutter courageously went back to the Tyrol, but both he and his wife were captured by the Roman Catholic establishment and executed. Not surprisingly, the others moved on; for a while they found respite in Germany, where they set up prosperous communes, practising common ownership.

In 1553, the Moravian nobility, who had been defeated in battle in 1547 by the king who had expelled the Anabaptists, regained their right to rule over their own territory. They allowed the Hutterites to re-establish communes in Moravia. This was the Hutterites' Golden Period; by 1570 there were over 100 communes with about 30,000 baptised adults, together with children.

These communes were rather like monasteries, except they were composed of families, not celebrates. They were self-supporting through farming, weaving, wagon making, cutlery, leather working, shoemaking, pottery making, pharmacy and watchmaking. They sold their services, especially as carpenters and builders, coppersmiths, tinsmiths and locksmiths, to the outside world to earn money for the commune; because of their reputation as hard and reliable workers, they were in great demand. Some who became surgeons and doctors were so superior in their skills to any others in Europe that the Moravian gentry sent for Hutterite doctors to meet their medical needs.

The communes established kindergartens for children from the age of two, 270 years before the idea became popular in Germany; they gave their children an excellent education in the commune-school, including, of course, Hutterite doctrine and practice; illiteracy was almost unknown in the Hutterite community, whereas a high percentage of the population generally were illiterate.

Most communes consisted of 10 to 20 families, with a population of around 60 to 250. When a commune's population grew near the upper limit and its leadership determined that branching off was economically and spiritually necessary, they purchased new land and built a 'daughter' colony.

The Hutterites' Golden Period in Moravia lasted for over a century from 1553, until Austria took over Moravia and renewed the persecution of dissidents. Hutterites migrated, first to Transylvania and, then, in the early 18th century, to Ukraine. A basic tenet of Hutterian society has always been pacifism. When Russia, which controlled Ukraine, made military service compulsory, four hundred emigrated to North America between 1874 and 1879.

They settled initially in Dakota and then, when restrictions were imposed on them there, they established new communes in Montana, Alberta and Manitoba. When Alberta prohibited them from purchasing more land, they established new communes in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Today, three of every four Hutterite communes are in Canada, mostly in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with almost all of the remainder in South Dakota and Montana, but there are also Hutterite communes in Australia, Nigeria and Japan. The total Hutterite population today is about forty-five thousand.

3. SCHWENKFELDERS – 'Reformation by the Middle Way'



Caspar Schwenkfeld (1490-1561), in this picture, was born in what we know as Poland and belonged to a distinguished aristocratic family; he studied at university and entered the diplomatic service. He then had an 'inner experience', a personal spiritual awakening, and tried to find middle ground between the Lutherans, the Calvinists and the Anabaptists; by the mid C16, thousands followed his 'Reformation by the Middle Way'. The other Reformers were not supportive because Caspar emphasized inner spirituality (personal experience) over organised church life, including baptism and the Lord's supper - he said that he had Christ within him and so why should he join any church or participate in its ceremonies? He said that faith does not come

from hearing the written Word, but from a direct personal indwelling of Christ. Almost everyone other than his own followers turned against the Schwenkfelders (as they were known) and so, persecuted by the State Churches, they emigrated to the New World. There are now only five congregations, with about 2,500 members, all within a fifty-mile radius of Philadelphia.

4. LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE RADICAL REFORMERS

4.1 Simple Christian living

All of the Radical Reformers ‘sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (Matthew 6:33). They believed, and lived out, that Jesus taught our focus should be away from this world - its status and its allurements - and that to seek God’s kingdom was their priority. They believed passionately the salvation inherent in the kingdom of God is of greater value than the world’s riches. Lifestyle is part of Christian witness, and if, in our affluent society, people ask us ‘why?’, it gives us an opening to explain what we believe.

4.2 Challenging Church/State relationship

All of the Radical Reformers protested at the Church working hand-in-glove with the State, particularly when the Church invoked State powers to suppress dissident views. For Christians today, Church/State relationships are relevant for ‘the enforcement of morals’ - to what extent, if at all, should Christians seek to use ‘the Law’ to uphold Christian values in an increasingly secular society? It is an even more crucial issue for Christians living in countries where ‘registered’ churches enjoy State recognition while Christians who believe it is wrong to ‘register’ are driven underground.

4.3 Concern for community welfare can overcome prejudice against belief

The Mennonites are a prime example of this. As noted at page 6, their commitment to pacifism made them targets for persecution, and even in ‘the Land of the Free’ they were imprisoned during the First World War for refusing any form of military service. However, since 1920 they have provided both immediate and long-term responses to hurricanes, floods, and other disasters around the world, alongside long-term international development programs, for which they are highly regarded.

4.4 Intolerance of some in mainstream Churches for others with different views.

4.5 Study history!

We saw in Lecture 1, at page 6, that one of the reasons for studying Church History is to identify, and so to avoid, mistakes which others have made in the past.

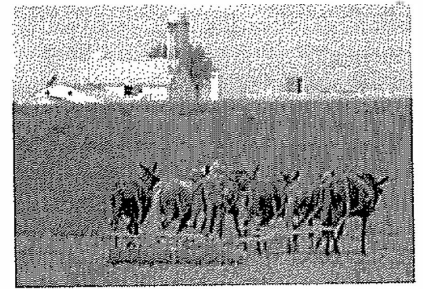
Menno Simons illustrates the danger of neglecting Church History when interpreting the Bible. He held that Jesus Christ ‘did not become flesh *of* Mary, but *in* Mary’. In other words, while affirming that Jesus was truly human, he did not believe that his humanity was taken from Mary - who was only his ‘host mother’. This position had already been rejected as heresy in the second century, and Menno illustrates the adage that those who neglect history are condemned to repeat it. To be fair to him, for most of his ‘converted’ life he was a wanted man, without the opportunity for leisurely study.

There was, however, more to it than that. While like the Reformers, he held that Scripture is the supreme and final norm for all doctrine, he did not follow the Reformers in their deep respect for the writings of the Early Church Fathers, while insisting that they must be tested by Scripture. ‘There have been no new heresies since 451 [a major Council at Chalcedon] - only old heresies under different names’. If Menno had checked his understanding of the humanity of Jesus with what past generations had hammered out, he might have seen where his views were defective. The Mennonite churches have not followed Menno’s teaching about the humanity of Jesus.

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

TOPIC FOR LECTURE 22 - AMISH, THEN AND NOW

Please tell us about the people known as Amish, a subgroup of the Mennonites, a little about their history - why they began in Switzerland in 1693 - why they emigrated to Pennsylvania, about their numbers today, why they best known for simple living, plain dress and a reluctance to adopt many conveniences of modern technology, about how children become members, about how they now organize their local churches and about their worship services, and anything else that you think will interest us.



horse-drawn buggy
ploughing with oxen



AMISH GIRLS - HEIRS TO THE RADICAL REFORMERS

Like many persecuted groups, the Anabaptists survived by migrating to new lands where they could practise their beliefs in relative peace; large numbers settled in North America. The Amish Mennonites are now mostly settled in Pennsylvania. They remain

to this day firm in their conviction that much of modern technology tends to undermine the simple life Christ called them to live. As a result, they refuse to use many modern inventions, and they live in tight communities to sustain their values.