

Dutch Anabaptism: From Muenster to Menno

1 Cor. 8:1-6 by Patty Friesen Jan. 28/24

In our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians, knowledge is set over against love. In the Greco-Roman world, knowledge was inevitably linked to status in society but in Paul's communities, knowledge is not more important than love which is inextricably tied to service, to caring for one another. A fundamental issue is engaged here in 1 Corinthians: How does what one believes and knows about God bear on the relatively mundane decisions of everyday life, including how one eats? These are recurring issues in 1 Corinthians because they are fundamental to living the life of faith and to understanding one's place in the world. What we know and believe about God is important also to how we Anabaptists in modern times understand our spiritual heritage.

As I shared last Sunday, the destabilizing Bubonic plague of the 1300s continued to roll in waves into the 1500s created conspiracy theories that blamed witches and Jews and everyone was being burned at the stake. There was great fear of Christianity falling in Europe with Islam at the gates of Vienna and any internal threat to Christianity through spiritual reform by Anabaptism was also met with stake burning. There were apocalyptic expectations that 1500 was the end of the world and Anabaptists were subject to those theories as well.

(slide 1 - Muenster cages). Melchior Hoffman was a Swiss Anabaptist mystic who believed that all that mattered was the inner life and communion with God. He brought Anabaptism to France, Germany and the Netherlands. Hoffman believed that Christ would return to Strasbourg in 1534. A Dutch Anabaptist, Jan Mattijs, predicted the world would also come to an end in 1534 but not in Strasbourg, in Muenster, Germany in 1534 so 3000 Anabaptists converged in Muenster to take over the city and expelled the non-Anabaptists.

Surrounding cities laid siege to Muenster and Mattijs legged it and climbed over the wall and was killed and Jan van Leyden assumed control of Muenster promoting a communal life of shared goods, including shared wives. In 1535 the canton regained control and 3000 Anabaptists were killed and their leaders put in cages hanging off the cathedral. Replicas of the cages are still there today. This is probably Anabaptism's most embarrassing moment but there's more. In Amsterdam in 1534, Anabaptists are running through the streets naked in protest of Catholicism. A group of 300 Anabaptists under the leadership of a Pieter Simons take over a monastery and are killed. As Professor Karl Koop from Canadian Mennonite University says, there is no golden age of Anabaptism. Anabaptism does not have a perfect beginning. It has violent beginnings and attracts end-time nutters.

(Slide 2) In 1536 in Pingjam, Friesland, a priest by the name of Menno Simons, brother to the rebel Pieter Simons, joins the Anabaptists. After the violent death of his brother Pieter, Menno experienced a spiritual and mental crisis. He said he "prayed to God with sighs and tears that God would give to me, a sorrowing sinner, the gift of grace, create within me a clean heart, and graciously through the merits of the crimson blood of Christ, graciously forgive my unclean walk and unprofitable life."

Menno begins writing that non-violence and true repentance of heart and mind lead to a new creation in Christ. The fellowship of the redeemed follow Christ in an outward expression of baptism and imitation of non-violence and in celebrating communion as a memorial meal. Menno Simons becomes the unifying leader of the Dutch Anabaptists and in 1544 Dutch people begin referring to the followers of Menno as Mennists – M-e-n-n-i-s-t, sounding like menaces –

m-e-n-a-c-e-s to Dutch society. Under threat of his life, Menno goes to religiously tolerant Danzig in northern Germany in 1554 with other Anabaptists to a safe haven for religious heretics who are granted military exemption in trade for taxes. He dies peacefully there in 1561.

(True Evangelical Faith slide 3) It is believed that Menno was the Great Unifier of differing branches and saved Anabaptism from going off the rails with crazy mysticism or violent revolt. He rejected violence and created the notion of living out one's faith visibly through mutual aid. Menno is the author of True Evangelical Faith cannot lie sleeping, it clothes the naked, feeds the hungry and comforts the destitute. This statement continues to be the best representation of modern day Anabaptism and continues to shape the work of Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite Central Committee. These True Evangelical Faith plaques were sold at Ten Thousand Villages and has been their guiding motto. This faith in action is Menno's ultimate gift and ongoing challenge to us today.

The downside of Menno Simons is that he created the term "church without spot or blemish" with a high level of emphasis on personal piety and purity. Like the Swiss, he was unrelenting with the Dutch on church discipline and banning those who didn't conform. He caused a history of church splits over. Mennonite historian Troy Osborne has documented the many splits in the early Dutch church and he says groups would ban other groups until there was no one left. Modern day Dutch Anabaptists actually separate themselves from Menno's puritanical ways and do not call themselves Mennonites anymore but call themselves Anabaptists.

Nowadays Mennonite historians reject the idea of the perfect Anabaptist - that there is no golden era of Anabaptism. There is no essential Anabaptist identity. Mennonite historian Walter Klassen who lives in Saskatoon wrote: Anabaptism: Neither Catholic or Protestant but now Walter would say Anabaptism is both Catholic and Protestant. It got rid of the priests but kept

the priesthood of all believers. It adopted Protestant piety but kept the concern for the poor.

Walter would now say we are more alike than different from Protestants and Catholics. I'd like to invite Walter to come speak to us this year if he is able.

By the 1600s, Anabaptists have settled down and are organizing as a denomination. They have printed their 1562 songbook called the *Ausbund* and other songbooks. They have printed the *Martyrs Mirror* as a remembrance and teaching tool for the faith. They are forming confessions of faith - 100 of them between 1577-1632, over one a year, as they try to work out a distinct, theological identity. They are evolving. The *Dortrecht Confession* of 1632 includes the election of deaconesses. Wealthy women in the church are taking on pastoral care with a welfare system of weekly distribution to the poor. They have printed 150 hymnals by 1880 and have sung over 15,000 hymns. I love it that by 1880 we have 150 hymnals and only 100 confessions of faith. I love it that we are a singing faith. I believe hymnals are a more open expression of faith than written documents. But I'll get into that in 2 Sundays.

By the 17th century - Swiss Anabaptists - Amish, Hutterites and Mennonites are emigrating to Pennsylvania and Ontario in droves where they flourish under religious tolerance. They continue to live separately from the world - not voting and not participating in the military but they are making money hand over fist. In the US the Hersheys make a chocolate factory and the Smuckers a jam factory. By the 1800's they are forming colleges and private high schools, seniors homes and camps to continue to nurture next generations in Anabaptist identity.

Also in Holland in the 1700's, Dutch Mennonites have acculturated and integrated into a tolerant Dutch society. There is no more poverty and persecution. No more naked running through the streets of Amsterdam. Mennonites are established and successful business people. They participate in the Dutch Golden age of global imperial naval power. Mennonites make up

10% of Dutch society but control majority of the whaling, lumber, shipbuilding, textile and agricultural industries. They run printing businesses. Pieter Jans Twisk and Jans Theunisz print the first Dutch version of the Quran! Their acceptance in society leads to their artistic contributions. Joost van de Vondel is a famous Anabaptist playwright, Karel von Mander is a famous painter as is Rembrandt who is believed to be Anabaptist or at least married to one. Rembrandt paints a portrait of the 1662 Cloth Guild called the Syndics commissioned by a Mennonite Volker Janz. Eventually Dutch Anabaptists become so assimilated, they have begun to disappear completely.

In the 1700's other Mennonites have emigrated east from Danzig, Prussia to Ukraine with the invitation of Catherine the Great to drain the swamps in exchange for military exemption. They also experience prosperity in Ukraine - building schools and churches and maintaining a distinct ethnic language and religion different from their Ukrainian Orthodox neighbours. The Russian Revolution and subsequent emigration to the US and Canada is well documented in our church library so I won't go into it. But like our European sisters and brothers, we may become so assimilated, that we do not have a distinct religious identity in North America in the future. Meanwhile Anabaptism is experiencing a revival in Ethiopia and in Indonesia. I'd like to have Jeanette Hansen from Mennonite Witness come speak to us about that sometime.

It helps me to know that Anabaptist did not have a perfect beginning and it continues to evolve over history. I always thought we were the perfect followers of Christ unto our deaths from the beginning and there was no way I could every measure up as a perfect Christian or perfect Mennonite. The beginning of Anabaptism wasn't perfect or magical - just as the beginning of the early church wasn't perfect or magical but full of schism and controversy, full of nutters - naked, sword-wielding, end-time polygamists who are an embarrassment to us now.

Mennonite historians are now writing about Mennonites and our collaboration with Nazis in Germany and Ukraine during the second world war and our history with colonialism in Ukraine and in North America. Now Mennonite historians don't just look to Europeans for Anabaptist identity but to an Anabaptist identity in the Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church and the Indonesian Anabaptists. More female Mennonite historians are including women's perspectives and stories and are challenging our historic peace identity that allowed domestic violence.

What defines Anabaptism today? It is like a recipe. It carries all the same ingredients of Christianity but measured in different proportions. It is not stagnant in time. It is not stuck in 1525 but is fluid and changing, ever evolving and we are a part of that today as we process our history and shape how we want to be today. How will history remember us in 2024? I hope it remembers us as seeking God with our whole hearts and trying to be in tune with the issues of our time – climate change, homelessness and issues of gender equality and speaking prophetically into them even if it made us weird and embarrassing. I hope it remembers us as trying our best despite our faults and schisms.

Let us pray...Faithful God, thank you for those in the past who struggled to find the core of who you are O God and to be faithful to you and good to others. Help us to continue to seek you with our whole hearts and the good of others in each generation. Amen.

Sing Anabaptist hymn...