

“Mennists to Society” // Faith Exploration for Everyone - part 1
Wildwood Mennonite Church // Joe Heikman
April 14, 2024

Good morning! My name is Joe, my pronouns are “he” and “him”, and I’m pretty sure that I would not be a pastor if that haircut was still mandatory for clergy. 😊



This is a painting of Martin Luther, in the year 1517. He is depicted here nailing his famous “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther was a professor of moral theology and he had a few issues with the Catholic Church. 95, to be precise.

And in those days the way to start an academic beef was to nail your statement to the door of the church for everyone to read.

If this happened today, it would have been an extended thread on Twitter, and then he would have started a podcast [maybe called “I Got 95 Problems But This Dress Ain’t One.”]

Nobody is sure that Luther actually did nail his paper to the door, but that really was a common practice in the academic world of the day, so it might be more than legend.

The important thing, in any case, is that Martin Luther saw serious problems in the practice and theology of the Catholic Church, he went public with his complaints, and they went viral and started a revolution that very much did change the world.

In those days, the Roman Catholic Church was *the* center of power in the European world. There was one Church, one hierarchy of priests, monks and nuns that controlled the one way to God. There were lots of countries with their own political leaders, even some relatively independent cities, loosely held together in the “Holy Roman Empire.” But the church dominated education, international relations, large amounts of land, and tons of money. Plus, everybody wanted to go to heaven, and the only way to Heaven was through the blessing of the Church. Even for kings, even for the emperor.



The church had most of the power. And as we know, power corrupts.

One example of this was the selling of “indulgences.” Basically, the Church taught that when someone died, their soul went to purgatory, even Christians. If you confess your sins, you would be forgiven and go to heaven... but first you’d have to go through a little bit of punishment in purgatory, work off those sins that you hadn’t entirely paid for in life.



But, if your relatives on earth loved you enough, they could get you a reduced sentence in purgatory, by petitioning for the indulgence, the kindness of the Pope. Which the church was happy to grant, for a small fee.

How much would you pay to ease Grandma’s pain in the afterlife?

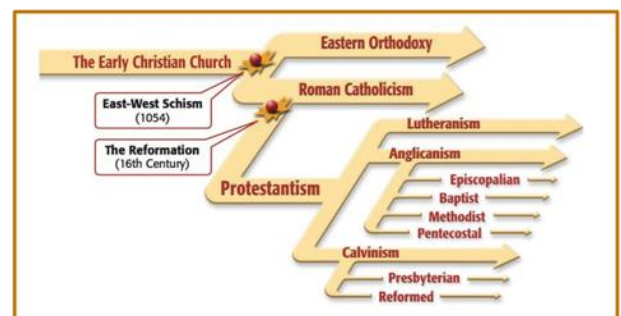
Yeah, that’s a pretty good scheme. And that’s what Luther was railing against in his Ninety Five Theses, among other things. Corruption in the Church, abuse of power, taking advantage of those who did not know any better for financial gain.

Luther was taking a big risk by calling out corruption, and he was arrested and faced a religious trial for his rebellion. When he refused to reverse his positions, the pope excommunicated him. Long story short, Luther found a sympathetic German king with a big enough army to protect Luther and start a new church.



And the movement spread from there, as other religious leaders started their own movements against the Catholic Church, and other political leaders saw the Church’s power faltering and made their own grabs for political power.

The Protestant Reformation, we call it. A century of religious and social upheaval across Europe.



The roots of our Mennonite Church come from this era, though we don’t claim Martin Luther as part of our heritage directly. Largely because, soon enough, Luther and his followers became very invested in trying to kill the Anabaptists. That was pretty much the only thing that the Catholics and Lutherans agreed on in those days, that the Mennonites needed to be snuffed out.

So I’m not a big fan of Luther, and I’m not singing his praises this morning.

But that spirit of Protest, of Reform, that is who we are. We are people who hammer our convictions onto public billboards. We are people who stand up for justice, who believe in change. We are people who call out the powers-that-be in their corruption. We are people who hear “that’s just the way things are” and respond “*but what if it wasn’t? What if there’s a better way? And what if we are the ones to make it happen?*”

Over the next couple of months, we’re going to be talking about the basics of Anabaptism, the heart of our faith as Mennonite Christians.



This isn’t going to be new information for many of us, but some of us are new. Not all of us grew up with these stories and values; I’ve been a Mennonite for 20+ years, and I’m still learning about where we’ve come from and what it means to be Mennonite. There are many others in our congregation who come from different faith backgrounds, and there are plenty of us who hold that Mennonite identity with open hands.

I’m okay with that, and I hope this series will bring all of us some opportunities to say “yes, that’s me!” And also “I...don’t know about that part.” Maybe not so much. I hope we will be reminded of some important things that we hold in common. And I think we will also see how we hold things differently.

Again, our roots come from this story of protest, of thinking critically about the faith and stories and structures that we’ve been handed. That goes way beyond Martin Luther, too--Jesus was a reformer. Christianity began as a protest movement. And the prophetic tradition goes all the way back through our Scriptures of Jewish origins as well.

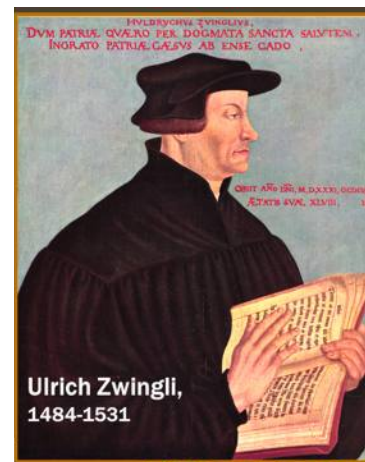
So. Bring your hammers to church for the next while--metaphorically speaking! :) This stuff of faith can change the world.

What is an Anabaptist? Today I’ve got three more stories from the 1500s to help us begin to answer that question.

The simple meaning of the word Anabaptist means “re-baptizer.”

As I said, Martin Luther’s rebellion spread quickly in the late teens and early 20s. And lots of religious folks were already thinking along those lines themselves.

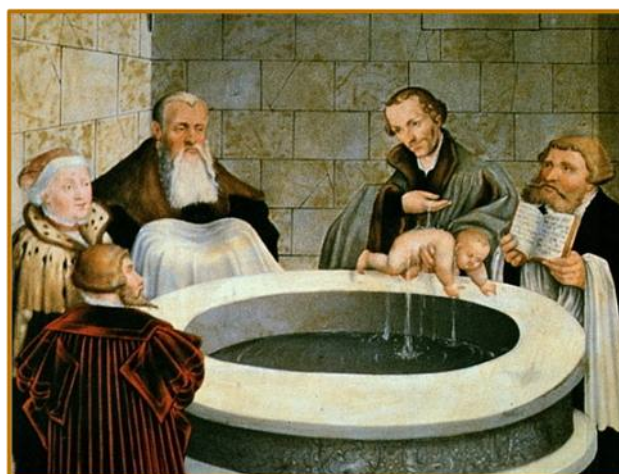
One of these reformers was a priest named Ulrich Zwingli, in Zurich, Switzerland. Among other things, Zwingli challenged traditional views about tithing, the mass, and the practice of infant baptism. His preaching attracted a group of students around him, and they studied the scriptures together, encouraging each other to go further and further from traditional Catholic teachings.



Now, Zurich was kind of an independent city, an economic center governed by a city council. Ulrich Zwingli held fairly radical views and he had many followers, but he hesitated to make major changes himself. He thought that change should come from the city council, which made political sense because they represented the people as a whole, and if the Roman Church decided to react against Zwingli, the city as a whole would bear that responsibility.

But when the council was slow to make changes, a bunch of Zwingli's friends called him out for not moving fast enough. They believed that the Spirit of God should make the decisions, that the Bible was the final authority, not a city council.

The issue came to a head around infant baptism. In those days, remember, one church, one way to God. And there was no separation of church and state--the state, whether a king or a city council, owed its allegiance to God.



And so you didn't join a church, you were born into a parish, that was part of a kingdom or a city, that was part of the church. When you had a child, that child was baptized as a member of the church and a citizen of the state.

But these reformers were drawing out the tension between church and state--who held the real authority? When Zwingli said the city council should make the decisions--the state--the reformers said, fine, then maybe we're not part of the state. We owe our allegiance to God, first.

And so these radicals started teaching their followers to not baptize their babies. Which would make them non-citizens. And eventually, non-taxpayers. *This cannot stand.*

So the Zurich council ruled that anyone who refused to baptize their infants would be expelled and excommunicated.

In response, a group of the radicals met on January 21, 1525, and held their own, adult, re-baptisms. Knowing full well that this would result in their exile and excommunication, they baptized each other.

And that is what happened. These “Swiss Brethren” as they and their followers became known, Anabaptists, were exiled, pursued, captured, beaten, condemned and executed by Catholics and Protestants alike.

George Blaurock, Felix Manz, and Conrad Grebel fled Zurich but continued teaching Anabaptism in the region and were arrested six months later. They all escaped from prison, but Grebel was in poor health and died of the plague not long after. The following year, Felix Manz was again arrested and this time he was executed, by drowning, the first Anabaptist martyr. Two years after that, George Blaurock was burned at the stake.

And yet, the movement spread, mostly as a movement of the common people. They had less political cover than Luther’s Reformation, but they continued to follow their convictions and to share them with their neighbours. Many became martyrs, but the Radical Reformation would continue.

That’s *our* origin story. Welcome to the rebellion!

I know, we are people of peace. Most of us prefer to live our faith quietly and politely--and with good reason. We’re getting to that part of the story!

But here at the start, at the heart of Anabaptist faith, is the power of conviction. Better to die than to renounce our values. Better to suffer than to keep quiet. Better to lose everything under the authority of God than to submit to the corruption of politics, economics, society.



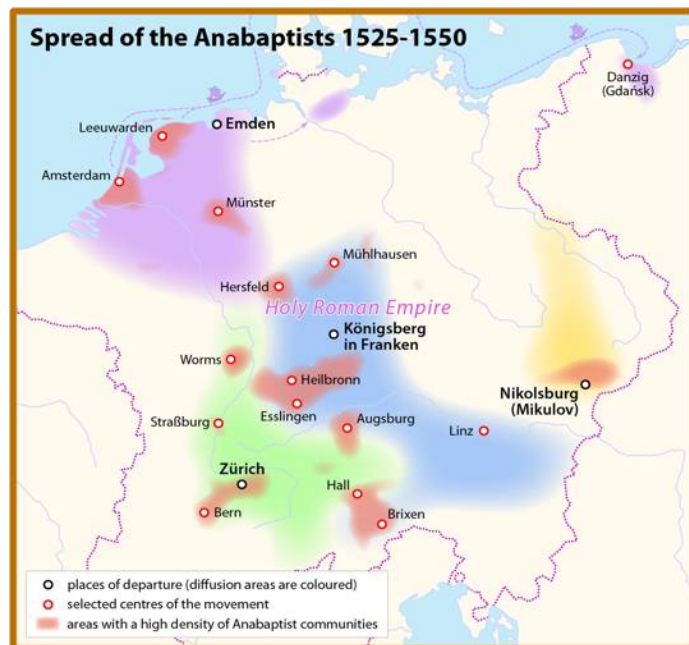
Those are loaded words. Daring and dangerous. And way more complicated than I’m presenting in this moment, for sure. We don’t need to make martyrs of ourselves in order to be faithful.

And, we are people of conviction and action. Practical, yes, but also political, engaged, idealistic. The Radical Reformation, what a story to build a church on.

Now, it’s not all heroes and high ideals. Some of you know where this is going next.

Over the next decade, Anabaptist teachings took hold in communities in Switzerland and southern Germany, where a lot of my Mennonite friends in Pennsylvania and Ontario trace their roots back to. That group in Moravia became our Anabaptist cousins, the Hutterites. And the blue and purple areas in northern Germany and the Netherlands, those groups eventually migrated west, the Russian Mennonites whose ancestors are well represented in this congregation.

But first, a rather spectacular bump in the road, in the northern German city of Münster.



As I've said, the Anabaptist movement faced fierce opposition and violence as it spread across northern Europe. Naturally, that created both fear and fervor. Fear of persecution led to people on the move, in search of a safe haven. And in combination with religious fervor--passion and conviction--left otherwise sensible people vulnerable to extremism and conspiracy.

As Christians have often done in times of difficulty, some of the Anabaptists began to read their own circumstances into the Biblical prophecies of the Revelation. *Surely their personal apocalypse was actually THE Apocalypse! Surely God was going to rescue them directly! Surely the New Jerusalem was on the horizon!*

So when an ambitious Lutheran pastor and several prominent citizens of Munster began talking about Munster as a safe haven for Anabaptists, people started heading that direction. And when they promised equal treatment for everyone, including the equal redistribution of wealth, well, surely *this* was the moment! New Jerusalem in Munster! The Kingdom of God on Earth!



With Anabaptist immigrants streaming into the city, the radicals soon won seats at the elected city council, and kicked out the Lutheran leadership. By early 1534, Munster was an Anabaptist theocracy, with compulsory adult baptism and forced sharing of property.

Within a month, a Catholic army showed up and put the city under siege. Which was expected--of course the New Jerusalem would have to fight off earthly enemies, but God is on *our side*. Fear and fervor.

On Easter Sunday, the Anabaptist leader, self-declared prophet, Jan Matthys led just 12 fighters out of the city to take on the entire army of thousands, believing that God would bring them a miraculous victory. But no. Matthys and his squadron were immediately killed, his head put on a pike.

Fear and fervor. Matthys was succeeded by Jan van Leyden, who claimed to be receiving direct visions from heaven. As the siege rolled on, desperation and starvation set in.

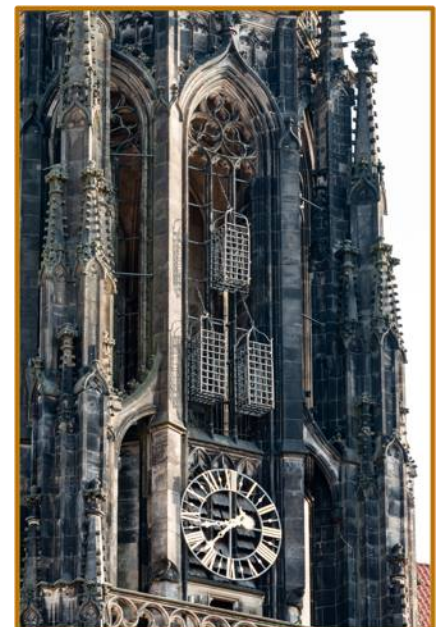
Jan van Leyden declared himself the New King David and gave himself absolute authority in this new City of God. He set up a royal court, wore a kingly costume, executed anyone who opposed him, and made polygamy mandatory, taking sixteen wives for himself.

The siege lasted a year, until a traitor within Munster gave the Catholic army an opening. They swept in and quickly reclaimed the city and captured van Leyden and his supporters. After a brief imprisonment, van Leyden and his two lieutenants were publicly tortured and killed. Their remains were placed into these cages and hung in the steeple of the cathedral. The cages remain there, still.

What a mess! I thought Anabaptists were people of peace, practicality, discipline, even caution. How can this be part of our story?

Well, this really was the proverbial “cautionary tale” of early Anabaptism.

Their pacifist convictions were confirmed by the disaster of attempting to use force against the Catholic church.

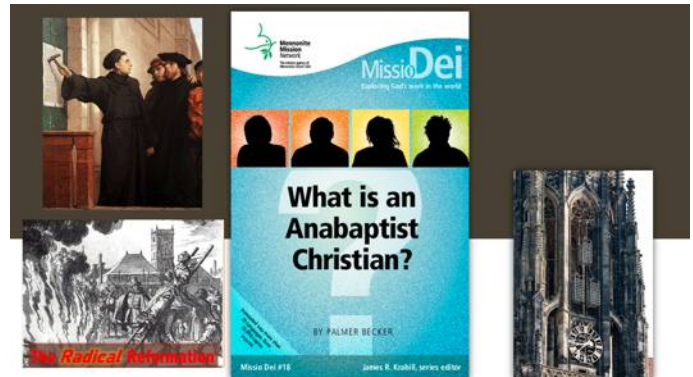


Their belief in what is now called “two kingdom theology,” the separation between the spiritual “kingdom of God” and the political, earthly kingdoms, was reinforced by seeing what happened when the Munsterites failed to separate the two.

And the emphasis on community as central to the interpretation of Scripture and theology was hammered home by the false prophets of Munster.

Never again would Anabaptists allow fear and fervor to elevate a charismatic, corrupt individual into leadership. Well, maybe not never... but that was the idea.

Shared leadership, decentralized power, communal interpretation and bottom-up structures, those were the costly lessons coming out of Munster.



To be fair, the stories of depravity and excess among the Anabaptists of Munster were all written by their enemies, who needed to justify the bloody re-capturing of the city. So maybe things inside the city weren't as extreme as we've been told. But either way, *let's not do that again...*

Munster left a pretty powerful legacy.

And, the disasters of Munster cleared the way and set the tone for the lasting legacy of the northern Anabaptists, in the person of Menno Simons.

We don't know much about Menno's early life, just that he came from a poor family and somehow found his way into training to be a Catholic priest. He began his career as an admittedly mediocre priest for his small hometown parish in Friesland (familiar territory to some of you Friesens, perhaps?).

As Anabaptist teachings started to become popular in the region, Menno started to study the scriptures, and found that much of his Catholic training was at odds with his own readings.



Menno was greatly impacted by his brother Pieter's conversion to Anabaptism, but reluctant to make an official conversion himself. Then Pieter got caught up in the radical revolution of the Munsterites. An Anabaptist “prophet” came to Friesland to rally support for the Munster revolution, and Pieter joined a group of several hundred Anabaptists to take over a Catholic monastery nearby. They were met with extreme retaliation, and over 300 Anabaptists were killed in the fighting or executed after. Pieter Simons among them.

Later that year, the Munster rebellion was crushed, and again, many Anabaptists were killed and the rest were left wondering where to turn.

At that point, Menno made his choice. His convictions were with the Anabaptist perspective on faith and scripture. But he was *not* a revolutionary. His theology was not in line with the extremists. He was not a charismatic leader let alone a prophet. He did not want leadership at all; he had remained a parish priest for so long only out of desire to care for the common people in his church.

But when Menno looked around the Anabaptists of his region, he saw danger everywhere. They were feared and hated by their Catholic and Lutheran neighbours, because of Munster.

Their leaders were either dead or caught up in the extremes of apocalyptic revolution. The common people, Menno saw, were “poor misguided sheep” without a shepherd.

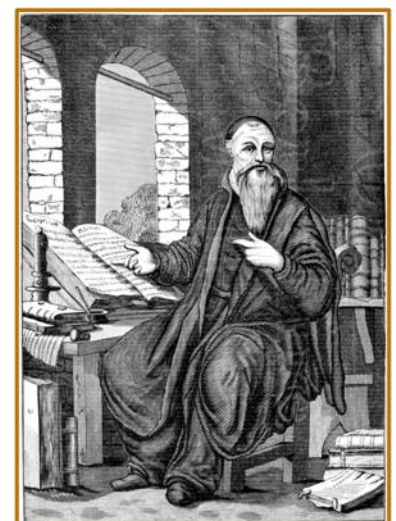
After Munster, several of the remaining Anabaptist leaders who were opposed to the rebellion came to Menno. *We need someone to show us another way.* Will you lead us?

Menno took the call. He left the priesthood, was rebaptized, and began writing and teaching and organizing small groups of Anabaptist believers.

Again, Menno’s conversion invited persecution, and he had to go underground and travel frequently to avoid the authorities. Eventually he moved to a safer region more sympathetic to peaceful Anabaptism in northern Germany, and he lived there as his base of operations and home to his family for the final 25 years of his life.

What did Menno do, exactly? Mostly quiet pastor stuff. Meeting with local church groups. Writing letters. Leading Bible studies. Keeping things calm, encouraging a quiet way of life, building communities. When one of the more extreme Anabaptists would start teaching end times revelation stuff, Menno would write against them, using scripture and theology to offer a peaceful alternative, a Third Way.

Over time, the Anabaptists in northern Germany and the Netherlands became known as Mennists, and then Mennonites.



Historians would say that Menno transformed northern Anabaptism from a radical movement into a sustainable church.

The Mennonites became the “quiet in the land.” They lived simply, in largely self-reliant communities. They kept out of local and national politics, and they moved when the world got too close. To Danzig, to Ukraine, and eventually around the world, to Canada, the prairies, and Saskatoon.

That’s an oversimplification, of course. And we’ll hopefully pick up some of that journey another time.



For today, I just want to highlight the tensions of this early Anabaptist story.

On the one hand, our ancestors really were *Radical!* Their faith changed *everything* for them--politics, family, career, personal safety, home. They were progressives, they were prophets, they read their Bibles, they followed their individual understandings and callings. They risked it all, they gave it all up, for their convictions. And they changed the world, truly.

The idealism of martyrs, the conviction of faith over all.

And yet, they also wanted to live. They wanted a good life for themselves and their children. They didn’t all rush off to join the revolution, and they weren’t all martyrs, they certainly weren’t all gullible and/or delusional.

They wanted to live well, together. While also holding true to those convictions, to their best understanding of the Bible and the way of Jesus.

That's the tension of Anabaptism. To follow Christ in everything, recognizing that the way of Jesus is the way of sacrifice, the way of the Cross. AND, to know that life is also good, that we are meant to live well, together.

The way of Jesus is a way of life, and that means compromise, timing, discernment, give-and-take, sustainability.

How do we know when to protest and when to plant seeds? When to stand up and when to hold together? When to speak out and when to listen up? When to die for our faith, and when to live by it?

That's the tension that we have been handed. Our ancestors walked this path, sometimes very well and sometimes very poorly. May God grant us the wisdom and grace to take up that call, to live well in the time we find ourselves.

In a few minutes, we're going to be celebrating the ritual of communion. As always, this ritual is full of meaning.

Perhaps today these familiar words and sensations call our attention to the long line of ancestors who passed this ritual to us. Without the conviction and courage of our Anabaptist forerunners, the communion table would not be open to us as it is now.

Perhaps today the contrast of bread and juice, body and blood, is a window into this tension that I've been talking about, the tension of life and death, of faith and failing and forgiveness, of grace and elevation.

And as always, communion is an invitation to follow Jesus, to join in the vulnerable beauty of the Way of Christ that calls us, sustains us, and unites us.

