Bio Menno Simons

"For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." This quote, taken from 1 Corinthians chapter three, verse eleven, appeared in every publication written by Menno Simons. To him, this verse summed up the whole movement that he led. There is no source or authority for the Christian Church than Jesus Christ, and the book that tells of Him, the Bible. Menno Simons, led by this conviction, made a significant contribution to the growing movement of Anabaptism, and to the Protestant Reformation. The other great reformers, like Martin Luther and Huldreich Zwingli, had addressed the lofty doctrines of salvation and the sacraments. The contribution of Menno Simons centered primarily on the doctrine of the Church, or ecclesiology; and to that end, his writings were his strength. They have been published more often than any other Anabaptist leader, and works examining his life outnumber those of the other Anabaptist leaders (Krahn 583).

To study Menno Simon’s influences both from and upon the Reformation, the whole of his life should be examined. Special attention will be given his theological significance, but the other areas of his rather exciting life will be noted.

Menno Simons was born in the small village of Witmarsum in the Dutch Province of Friesland some time in the year 1496. The exact date is unknown. It is conjectured that Menno’s parents were dairy farmers. The only fact available concerning his parents is that his father’s name was Simon, thus Menno’s last name, Simons. Nothing else is known about the background or childhood of Menno Simons. He lived in obvious obscurity until the time he entered the priesthood at the age of 28. Menno knew Latin, and a little Greek. He was familiar with the Latin Church Fathers from his studies, but he did not read the Bible until his second year as a priest, though he would have been acquainted with it through the Roman missal. His training for the priesthood probably occurred in a monastery in Friesland or a nearby province, such as the Aduard monastery near Groningen. This too is uncertain. Menno revealed very little about his life prior to his serving as a priest. Wherever he may have studied, in 1524, Menno Simons was ordained into the priesthood at Utrecht. He assumed the duties of the vicar in the parish church at Pingjum, which was a couple of miles west of his hometown of Witmarsum (Krahn 577). It is possible that his parents were now living there in Pingjum (Smith 85).

Menno described his life with the other priests there in Pingjum in his *Reply to Gellius Faber*, "The two young men…and I spent our time emptily in playing [cards] together, drinking, and in diversions as, alas, is the fashion and usage of such useless people" (668). He led an easy, carefree life. He did not take his priestly responsibilities too seriously. But the one thing that differentiated him from his colleagues was an open mind and sensitive conscience (Smith 85). It was also during this time, Menno had his first contact with the Anabaptists.

Anabaptism originated in Switzerland. There the debate over infant baptism versus adult rebaptism was dividing the Reformers early in 1525. On January 17, a debate took place and as a result, Zwingli and the city council decreed that infant baptism was to be the practice and adult rebaptism was unacceptable (Loewen 86). Then, on January 21, during a Bible study gathering in the house of Felix Manz, the first known adult rebaptism occurred. It was here that George Blaurock, considered to be something of a radical, asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him. Grebel agreed, baptizing him right there by pouring water upon the head of Blaurock (Loewen 83). Thus began the Anabaptist movement.

The man most noted for spreading Anabaptism in the Netherlands was Melchior Hofmann. He had become a follower of Martin Luther, and traveled as a lay preacher in the 1520s. In Strasbourg, he met the Anabaptists and was baptized by them in 1530. Following this, he soon introduced the believer’s baptism to East Friesland, where the Sacramentist movement had been working amongst the people. The Sacramentists stressed the symbolic interpretation of communion, championed by Zwingli in Switzerland (Krahn 578). In addition, Hofmann stressed prophetic visions and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. These aspects of his preaching were picked up by more radical elements of the Dutch Anabaptists after his imprisonment in Strasbourg in May 1533. Hofmann died there in prison in 1543 (Loewen 104).

Jan Matthijs, Jan van Leyden, and others similar to them became the leaders of the movement. With the assistance of intense persecution, these men were able to take the relatively peaceful Anabaptists and shape them into a militant religious group who believed they were the Old Testament nation of Israel. Hofmann had proclaimed that the millennial reign of Christ would begin in Strasbourg. These men determined to establish the New Jerusalem at Munster during 1534 and 1535 (Krahn 578).

Menno Simons was not unaffected by the Reformation around him. It is obvious that he was familiar with their doctrine because one day during his first year as a parish priest, Menno had a disturbing thought. It was while he was performing the Mass that he realized that the small piece of bread could not become the literal flesh of Christ, as he had been taught. He quickly dismissed the idea as a doubt from Satan, but the concept recurred in his mind over and over again. He tried prayer, confession, and sighing to ward off this thought, but the conviction grew. He finally, after almost two years of struggling with this issue, went to the one source that could answer his question – the New Testament. This was a book that he had never read before for fear of it corrupting his Catholic faith as it had Luther and Zwingli. He found his answer though, the Bible taught that the bread was not the body of Christ. This brought him great relief (Smith 86). It also proved to him that the symbolic interpretation of the Lord’s Supper taken by the Sacramentists was correct.

The issue of baptism was not an issue for Menno Simons until 1531. It was on March 20, when in the city of Leeuwarden a tailor by the name of Sicke Freerks Snijder was executed for his belief in a rebaptism (Bender 7). This was a strange doctrine to Menno. But as he eventually did with the Lord’s Supper, he turned to the New Testament for guidance. Surprisingly, he found no reference to infant baptism. He then turned to his superior at Pingjum, who was forced to admit that there was no scriptural source for infant baptism. Now Menno was aware that many of the other Reformers practiced infant baptism, so he turned to them for enlightenment. With Luther, Zwingli, and Bullinger, he found that each had there own reasons for infant baptism, but none of them were from the Bible (Smith 86-87). Menno became convinced that the Roman Catholic Church errored in two of the Sacraments, communion and baptism. But instead of breaking away, Menno chose to accept a promotion to his home parish at Witmarsum in 1531.

In Witmarsum, a small group of Anabaptists were present as early as 1532. Menno began dialogue with the leaders of the Munster movement early in 1534. He apparently had some skill as a speaker and writer, which he put to use in denouncing the radical movement that was sweeping Munster. The first tract that Menno wrote was a polemic against Jan van Leyden, the Anabaptist leader in Munster and self-proclaimed King David of the New Jerusalem. Menno wrote in *The Blasphemy of John of Leiden*, "Greater antichrist there cannot rise than he who poses as the David of promise" (37). He began to build a reputation as a champion of the faith against the heretics of the Reformation (Smith 87). This dismayed Menno Simons. He points out his wrong in his *Reply to Gellius Faber*, "I myself still did that which I knew was not right" (670).

The movement in Munster was becoming increasingly violent, and the Catholic authorities stepped in to end the situation. On April 7, 1535, an armed defense at Olde-Klooster near Bolsward was slaughtered. Among the dead was Menno’s own brother, Peter Simons. By July 25, 1535, the New Jerusalem at Munster was brought down. Few survived the ordeal (Krahn 578). For Menno, who had growing Anabaptist convictions, who had been exposed to the writings of Martin Luther and others, the massacre at Munster was the breaking point. He wrote in his *Reply to Gellius Faber*,

Pondering these things my conscience tormented me so that I could no longer endure it. I thought to myself – I, miserable man, what am I doing? If I continue in this way, and do not live agreeably to the Word of the Lord, according to the knowledge of the truth which I obtained; if I do not censure to the best of my little talent the hypocrisy, the impenitent, carnal life, the erroneous baptism, the Lord’s Supper in the false service of God which the learned ones teach; if I through bodily fear do not lay bare the foundations of the truth, nor use all my powers to direct the wandering flock who would gladly do their duty if they knew it, to the true pastures of Christ – oh, how shall their shed blood, shed in the midst of transgression rise against me at the judgment of the Almighty and pronounce sentence against my poor, miserable soul (670).

For seemingly the first time, Menno realized the seriousness of his beliefs and the repercussions others were facing because of them while he stayed comfortable in the Catholic Church, living a lie. As his views became known, his life was in danger. So in January 1536, Menno Simons broke with the Roman Catholic Church to join the Anabaptist movement. His baptism is unknown, but probably soon after his departure from Witmarsum. The authorities sought him out so much so that for the next eight years he could not stay for more than a few months in any one place (Krahn 579).

Menno became known as a capable leader among the Anabaptist. On one day, he was approached to consider becoming an elder, a position on level with a bishop in the Anabaptist church. He acknowledged his humble talents, but his conviction for leading the misguided was stronger, so he accepted the position. Menno Simons began a vigorous career of preaching, teaching, and writing. He was also married to his wife, Geertruydt, at some point during his eight years of traveling (Krahn 580). Menno eventually was able to bring his family to shelter in the vicinity of Oldesloe in Germany. Here a sympathizer of the Anabaptists, Bartholomeus von Ahlefeldt, was gathering the oppressed Reformers on his estate, called Wustenfelde (Krahn 581). Menno lived here till his death on January 31, 1561. He was buried in his garden, but the exact location was destroyed during the Thirty Years’ War (Krahn 582).

During his career as an elder of the Anabaptist movement, Menno Simons made some significant contributions to this branch of the Reformation. The fact that he took the leadership of a group that was in danger of losing itself under the influence of revolutionary leaders and returned it to it Biblical moorings and transformed the Anabaptists into a peaceful religious body is his crowning achievement. He warded off the unorthodox teachings of Anabaptists like David Jorus and Adam Pastor, and with the assistance of Dirk Philips, constructed a practical foundation of Christian living. Dirk Philips was probably the best theologian of the Menno-led Anabaptists, called *Mennisten*, or Mennonites, with the publication of his writings, *Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, in 1564 (Keeney 18). Menno’s book, *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, published in 1539-40, restored much of the original principles of Anabaptism, restoring a peaceful Christian community that avoided violence. It helped preserve the Mennonites as a distinct group (Keeney 17).

Theologically, Menno Simons was not extremely conversant. His writings tend to emphasize the practice of Christianity rather than the doctrine. This may be partly due to his uneasy and transient life, even when at Wustenfelde, he continued to travel to speak and encourage the believers from the Low Countries in the west to Bohemia and Poland in the east. He promoted lay literacy, which was unheard of at that time (Littell 42). This would aid in personal reading and interpreting of the Bible. He believed that the Holy Spirit would illuminate the texts, therefore glosses and explanations were unnecessary (Littell 11). He also argued for literal, contextual interpretation. He wrote, in *Christian Baptism*, "…It is the nature of all heresies to tear a fragment from the holy Scriptures and thereby defend their adopted worship. They do not regard that which is written before or after, by which we may ascertain the right meaning…." (268).

Concerning the Church, Menno saw orthodoxy not in propositional truth, but in the fruitful lives of Christians (Littell 30). He was against a professional clergy, because he believed love and the compulsion of the Holy Spirit should be one’s motivation, not a salary (Littell 32). This also tied in to his insistence on open discussion, which was radical for an age of persecution and suppression (Littell 64). The natural development from this is the belief in Free Will, as opposed to Predestination, as Calvin set forth.

Menno saw only two sacraments, as did the other Reformers. But baptism was much different. It was the Anabaptist’s adult baptism. This was considered a threat to Christian civilization, to raise a society divided into baptized Christians and non-baptized unbelievers (Loewen 86). In addition, Menno believed that the Church is to be separate from the State. This was born out of his desire for a restitution of the New Testament Church, which was free from the State. This, unintentionally, led to a purer religion and a better mode of government (Littell 63).

The most controversial church practice that Menno endorsed was the ban. It essentially was the excommunication of believers who, for whatever reason, are living in sin, and not as a Christian should. Now, other Reformers held to this form of church discipline to one degree or other. But a major debate arose within the Anabaptists over this. Menno sided with a stricter interpretation of the ban. It was not resolved at his death, and continued to divide the Mennonites for another century (Krahn 581).

After the death of Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, the Mennonites began to fragment. By 1566, the Calvinist Reformed Church absorbed the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands (Keeney 18). This is significant in regard to modern Evangelical Protestantism. The character of the conservative Protestant sects, especially in America, is a blend of Calvinism and Anabaptism. Much of the theology of John Calvin, with some contributions by Martin Luther, is united with the Church practice of Menno Simons and the Anabaptists. For example, adult baptism is the norm in Protestant churches outside of the Lutherans and Anglican/Episcopals. Even a combination of predestination and free will beliefs is held in some Evangelical circles.

As for the Mennonites themselves, they spread out from their Dutch and German homelands, usually driven out by persecution. They settled in the Dutch and British colonies in North America, especially Canada and the future United States of America. Other major settlements were made in Russia and Prussia. While identifying themselves as Mennonites today, the Dutch church historians prefer the name, *Doopsgezinden*, which means "baptism-inclined." They tend to shun the identification with Menno because they disagree with some of his teachings (Keeney 15).

Menno Simons led a determined and courageous life in the face of persecution from the Roman Catholic Church and the other Reformers. He was molded by the Anabaptist movement into a leader that has left some lasting imprints on the modern world. The ideals of separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, voluntary church membership, democratic church government, and Christian peace are his legacy. He may not be a giant of history like Martin Luther or John Calvin, but he was a key part of the supporting cast in the drama of the Reformation.

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