

The Story of the Mennonites

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If one should be traveling through some parts of our farming country in the Middle Western states, or more particularly, through Lancaster Country, Pennsylvania one would pause a moment along the way. In box-like horse-drawn wagons that pass there are bearded men in black broad-brim-hats and their bonneted wives with long full skirts. They look like people from another world; and so they are. They belong to the sect of the Mennonites and because of their plain clothes and rigid adherence to customs of two centuries ago, they are known as the "Plain People."

The Mennonites take their name from Menno Simons a Dutch priest though the views of these people originated in Switzerland during the time of the Reformation. In 1525 some of Zwingli's more radical co-reformers broke with him. They favored a complete break with the Catholic Church; however, infant baptism was the chief bone of contention between the two groups. And so after rejecting infant baptism, which separated them from the Zwingilian party, they inaugurated the movement known as Anabaptism. They introduced the rite of adult baptism upon the confession of faith.

The whole movement was an attempt to reproduce literally as possible the primitive, Apostolic Church in its original purity and simplicity; and restore Christianity once more to a basis of individual responsibility. The Anabaptists insisted that each individual must decide the Bible message for himself. The greatest degree of liberty must be granted the individual conscience in spiritual matters. Religion, pure and undefiled, to the Anabaptist was not merely a set of dogmas, but a life, and it must function in an improved conduct.

The faith of the Swiss Brethren, as they chose to call themselves, spread rapidly, and was subject to persecution from the first. Their fundamental doctrine of the non-resistance, especially, led to trouble with the authorities. The movement spread through the means of persecution, from Switzerland to Germany, Tyrol, Austria, Moravia, The Netherlands, The Southern Baltic, and Russia.

Menno Simons, a priest at Witmarsum, Friesland through a gradual process, became convinced that the Catholic Church taught erroneous views regarding transubstantiation, and infant baptism. From the New Testament he could find no justification for these doctrines. In 1536 he laid down his office, and renounced the Catholic Church. He was baptized by Obbe Philipps and ordained as an elder. Menno's pre-eminence among the leaders of the Anabaptist movement in his day, and his dominating influence among their later followers is no doubt, due more to his literary efforts than to any other cause.

About 1693 a Swiss Mennonite, Jacob Amman, accused the Mennonite Brethren of laxness of discipline, especially in applying the practice of avoidance. This practice required the members of the church to shun or avoid a member under "the ban," so that he might be ashamed of his particular sin. With sympathizers Amman formed a group known as the "Amish." They virtually bent backwards to return to the original articles of faith.

The Mennonites did not favor a specially trained and supported ministry. During the 17th century some of their leaders were trained at the seminary of the Remonstrants. Much in the religious philosophy of the Remonstrants appealed to the Mennonites, especially their common belief in the freedom of the will, and opposition to the idea of predestination.

European wars, with privations and sufferings, and political and religious persecutions sent many Mennonites to America. The first permanent Mennonite colony was that established in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683. They came largely from Northwestern Germany.

Amish colonies were established about 1736. They brought with them all the conservatism from the Old World, holding fast to all of their strict customs and traditions.

Due to heavy immigration, and the fact that the Mennonites were mostly farmers, they began to expand westward. Around 1850 settlements had been established in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, The Dakotas, Idaho, Oregon, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas.

Churches of the Plain People are severely lacking in ornament. Simple, too, are the services—singing without accompaniment, and prayer by members of the congregation. Sermons are not a doctrinal type. The preacher usually begins with the story of the fall of Adam, and continues on through the Bible for several hours. After the preacher has finished, two or three men arise and testify to the truth of what has just been spoken by the preacher, “that in the mouth of one or two witnesses every word may be established.”

There are two principal divisions among the Amish: House Amish (Old Order) and Church Amish (New Order). The former hold religious services in large barns in the summer and in homes in the winter time; the latter have church buildings, and also use automobiles and electricity in their homes. Old Order Amish are still very much afraid of worldliness. Still forbidden by them are: buttons, store clothes, hats for women, pictures, bathtubs, automobiles, radios, telephones, Sunday schools, four-part singing, high school attendance, etc.

In recent years, the Mennonites have adopted a more progressive program of church activities, but have remained conservative in maintaining traditional religious and social practices and customs. There has been a tendency toward higher education, and today there are several colleges and junior colleges maintained by the Mennonites.

It is an interesting fact that the Mennonites in America have survived longer than those in Europe. In all of Europe, Mennonites gradually lost their distinctiveness when they gave up their traditional principles of conscience against war, and against religious oppression. In Germany today former Mennonites declare that they have no quarrel with the Nazi regime, and even join with the totalitarian state in sending certain Lutherans to concentration camps. One wonders how long the Mennonites in America will survive, especially if religious freedom should be taken away from them.

One thing the Mennonites have failed to understand is, while a person may try to separate himself from the world, it is impossible to separate himself from his sinful heart. No matter how extremely careful and strict he may be in his outward walk in life, it avails nothing, as long as the heart remains unconverted. Only when the heart is converted to God, is it possible to live as pilgrims and strangers—“in the world but not of the world.”

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