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# The Protestant (Radical) Reformation 2017



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# Our Reformation Heritage: Protestant and Radical

by Terry M. Smith

**T**he Protestant Reformers and the Radical Reformation sought to reform the sixteenth-century Christian Church in Europe and then, when it could not be changed to their satisfaction, to re-establish the Church by a return to first century truths.

Dr. Harold S. Bender defined The Anabaptist Vision as discipleship, community, and the way of peace, but he knew more than this was believed. He said that Mennonites “stood on a platform of conservative evangelicalism in theology, being thoroughly orthodox in the great fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith....”

## Protestant Reformation

Before we discuss Anabaptist distinctives, let’s consider our common Protestant Reformation heritage. Here are some key figures and their teachings.

**Peter Waldo** (ca. 1140-1205) in France spoke against transubstantiation and purgatory. He promoted simplicity, poverty, universal priesthood, lay preaching, and preaching in the common tongue. He oversaw the translation of the New Testament into Arpitan.

**John Wycliffe** (ca. 1328-1384) in England spoke against wealth of the church and papal interference in political life. The Scriptures are the only law of the Church. The Church is centred in people, not in the Pope and cardinals. Scripture is to be in people’s common language. He translated the New Testament into English.

**John Huss** (ca. 1373-1415) of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) said the true head of Church is Christ, not the Pope. Our law is the New Testament. Life is to be Christ-like poverty. The Pope has no right to use physical force. Money payments gain no true forgiveness. The cup is to be administered to the laity.

**Martin Luther** (1483-1546) of Germany said salvation is a free gift based on the God’s grace received by faith and from this obedience flows. Our final appeal is the Scriptures. All believers are priests. Marriage of clergy is permitted. The Lord’s Supper is no sacrifice to God. Pilgrimages are worthless as human efforts of merit. He translated the Bible into German.

**Ulrich Zwingli** (1484-1531) in Switzerland said that the Scriptures are the sole authority of faith and practice. The death of Christ is the only price of forgiveness. Only the Bible is binding on Christians. Salvation is by faith. The mass is not a sacrifice. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial, not a sacrament. Christ is the sole head of Church.

**John Calvin** (1509-1564) of France and Switzerland said the mass empties the death of Christ of

its virtue. The traffic in masses must stop. There should be no worship of images. Indulgences are disloyal to the cross of Christ. All obedience is to be tested against the Word. The Protestant Church is a renewal of the ancient Church.

## The Five Onlys

Summarized, we have the Five Onlys (*Solas*):

- Scripture Only! (*Sola Scriptura!*)
- Faith Only! (*Sola Fide!*)
- Grace Only! (*Sola Gratia!*)
- Christ Only! (*Sola Christus!*)
- God’s Glory Only! (*Sola Deo Gloria!*)

## The Radical Reformation

On Jan. 17, 1525, the Protestant reform in Zurich was slowed by Zwingli’s bowing to the pace of the city-state’s council. The council ordered that children were to be brought forward to be baptized or their parents would be banished from the city-state. In rejection of this decree, on Jan. 21, 1525, the first believer baptisms took place at the home of Felix Manz.

## Anabaptist Distinctives

In addition to many of the above views, the early Anabaptists held key beliefs. While they might not appear unique today, some were at the time.

**Believer Baptism** – Baptism is upon a person’s confession of faith. It’s an act of visible commitment, of community, of open identification with Christ and his Church.

**Believers Church Membership** – The Church is composed of converts. The Church is a voluntary, visible







community. Some Reformers, being uncertain of who were true believers, spoke of the invisible Church. Anabaptists emphasized the visible Church, the need to live our faith together with other believers.

**Discipleship** – Genuine faith in Christ follows. Discipleship is a sign of being a Christian, of salvation. Faith in Christ is to be an active faith. Discipleship is faith in action.

**Covenant Community** — The Church is to display *koinonia*, “that which is held in common.” It is a shared life. Discipleship is to be lived together. This is Christ’s intention in recreating humanity together.

**Christ, the Centre of Scripture** – The Bible is to be interpreted and applied through the coming and teaching of Christ, its centre. For instance, the wars in the Old Testament are to be interpreted through Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

**Priesthood of all Believers** – There is one mediator between God and man, Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Gone are the intercessions of Mary and of saints, the mediating powers of the priest and Pope. Access to Christ is direct, without human intercession (Heb. 4:14-16). There’s a rediscovery of the laity, the people of God, who have a common task and dignity.

**Separation of Church and State** – The Church is not to use the state to enforce beliefs and to limit reform. The state is not to dictate to the Church what it can believe and practice.

**Religious Toleration** – People with wrong beliefs are

not to be killed, but allowed to live. Anabaptists were not the only early voice for religious freedom (toleration), but they were a major one.

**Non-violence** – The Church is to challenge an uncritical view of the state and its use of force. Most early Anabaptists objected to a Christian being a soldier, a police officer, to personal defense, to war, to being a judge or an executioner. They held that Christians are to flee, persuade, or die, but not to fight.

**Non-swearing of Oaths** – Loyalty is to be given ultimately to Christ. They rejected swearing an oath of obedience to the state, which upset the authorities. In a narrower sense, Christ forbids the swearing of oaths (Matt. 5:33-37; James 5:12), while calling Christians to truth telling in court and elsewhere. This is called integrity of speech.

**Separation from the World** – In the 16th century, non-conformity was based on an understanding of Christ and what it meant to follow him. It wasn’t decided by ethnic culture, language, dress (other than modesty), or food. It was reflected in beliefs, values, and actions.

**Church Discipline** – Discipline is a part of discipleship and of the shared life. Opposed to deadly forms of discipline, Anabaptists were devoted to discipline within regular congregational life. They influenced magisterial Protestant Reformers (the ones supported by the state) in this.

**Great Commission** – Evangelism and missions remain a task for the current generation. They emphasized this more than most Protestant Reformers. When Anabaptist leaders gathered in Augsburg in 1527, they divided Europe into fields for evangelism. Hutterian missionaries went out in pairs; many were killed for their efforts.

### Anything in Common?

Dr. Alfred Neufeld, a leader within the Mennonite World Conference, asks, “After 500 years it is time for us to ask the challenging question: *Do we still have anything in common with the founding mothers and fathers of the Anabaptist church? Should we? Can we?*”

For what is the Anabaptist-Mennonite Church known in Canada? Being a Christian is to be shown in action, not a claim apart from how we live. If a Scripture-centred focus in life is learned from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptists-Mennonites, our response is revealed by what we do.

*Terry M. Smith is executive secretary to the Board of Church Ministries. The Messenger will explore, as a BCM project, the Protestant (Radical) Reformation through 2017. The project coincides with the start of Review 2027, Mennonite World Conference’s decade-long study of the Radical Reformation, which is indebted to the wider Reformation.*



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# Martin Luther and the Anabaptists

by Dr. John J. Friesen

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**T**his year, 2017, is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's posting 95 theses on the doors of the churches in the city of Wittenberg, including the All Saints Church. What Luther intended as a debate over how to reform abuses in the Roman Catholic Church resulted in the break-up of the Catholic Church and the start of the Protestant Reformation.

Why should Anabaptists-Mennonites care about Martin Luther, a young university professor, and his reforms? Why should this anniversary be noted in Mennonite-Anabaptist denominational papers?

## No Luther, No Anabaptists

The principal reason why Mennonites-Anabaptists should care about Luther's reform is that Luther is the reason why there was an Anabaptist-Mennonite reform movement at all. Luther's reforms, and the conflicts they spawned between Catholics and Protestants, created space for the Anabaptist movement to take root.

They sprang up in German states, northern Switzerland, Moravia, and the Netherlands. Without Luther, and the other reformers who followed his lead, there would have been no Anabaptist movements.



## Inspired by Key Ideas

Mennonites should also care about Luther's reform because the early Anabaptist leaders were inspired by Luther's key ideas. Luther's reform began as a critique of the Catholic Church selling indulgences. In response Luther formulated his central view that salvation is by grace, that is, a gift from God, and not by works.

When challenged about how he could make such a claim since it deviated from the beliefs of most of the great teachers of the medieval church, Luther said his authority was the Bible, not tradition. Specifically, he based his view of grace on the Apostle Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. It was the Bible alone, Luther said, on which he based his view that salvation is by faith through grace.

Following this claim, Luther decided to make the Bible available to the masses by translating it into the German language. Widespread distribution was made possible by the newly invented moveable type printing presses. Access to the Bible allowed people to read scripture for themselves, and to implement reforms that they believed were consistent with scripture.

Luther also rejected the control that the Catholic priesthood had over access to forgiveness. Luther believed that all believers had direct access to God—no priestly mediation was necessary. Luther called this the priesthood of all believers. All these emphases Anabaptists applauded.

## A Parting

Even though at first Luther seemed to empower common people, he also spoke highly of the role German princes should play in any reform. When the peasants revolted in the years 1524-25, Luther condemned them harshly.

He cast his lot with the princes and adopted the state-church model for his reform. Luther looked to the German princes both for protection and direction. This decision set Luther and the Anabaptists against each other.

## A 'Should Have'

Anabaptists believed that Luther's reform ideas should have resulted in a believers' church. Such a church would have consisted of those who truly had faith in God and had committed themselves to a life of Christian discipleship. This option would have resulted in a church that was a minority in the population.

Accepting a believers' church would have resulted in a pluralist society in which minority church groups



The Wartburg Castle where Luther worked on the German Bible.

were tolerated. When Luther opted for the state-church model, placed the Lutheran church under the authority of the state, and persecuted minority churches, Anabaptists believed that Luther had betrayed the teachings of the Bible.

This commitment to a believers' church allowed Anabaptists to reshape basic Christian beliefs and practices. Anabaptists emphasized baptism on the basis of adult confessions of faith, instead of infant baptism. Church leaders were chosen from within the community of believers instead of being appointed by church hierarchies, or by state officials.

Reforms were based on the church community's reading of scripture, rather than on the basis of what was politically expedient and approved by princes. Church discipline and social shunning replaced trials and executions of those with whom they disagreed.

For worship, Anabaptists gathered in houses, barns, and caves to read scripture together. They discussed biblical texts and discerned together, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, how to apply them to daily living. They sang songs composed by their own members based on experiences of persecution and martyrdom. No more majestic cathedrals, chants, organs, monastic choirs, and elaborate liturgies where members were largely spectators.

They rejected feudal oaths since their primary loyalty was to God and not to princes and emperors. They

**This commitment to a believers' church allowed Anabaptists to reshape basic Christian beliefs and practices.**

advocated a life of peace, rejected violence, refused to carry swords, forgave those who wronged them, and reconciled conflicts between members of the church.

One cannot imagine the Anabaptist movement without Luther's reforms. And yet, the direction that Luther's reforms took resulted in Luther becoming one the Anabaptists' bitterest enemies.

Even the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the basic Lutheran con-

fession, included the following among a number of condemnations: "We condemn Anabaptists who forbid Christians to hold office," and "We condemn Anabaptists who reject the baptizing of children, and say that children are saved without baptism." Most Lutheran states crushed Anabaptist groups within their borders.

### **Pietism**

This sharp break between Luther and the Anabaptists, however, is not the end of the story of Luther's influence on Anabaptist Mennonites. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Lutheran Church spawned a Pietist movement, which has in many ways positively influenced Mennonites.

Pietism emphasized Bible reading by laity, a warm devotional life, an experience of conversion and personal commitment to God, a life of discipleship, and an extensive hymnody. Pietists drew upon the early emphases of Luther and thus, in many respects, were close to the emphases of the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement.

Martin Luther and his followers have had a powerful shaping influence on Anabaptists-Mennonites, then and now. It is appropriate to remember Luther and the significant contributions he made to all denominations of the Christian Church, including the Anabaptists-Mennonites. Luther was a giant in his age and will always be honoured for the major impact he made.



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# Conversion Stories of Martin Luther and Menno Simons

by Dr. Terry Hiebert

October 31, 1517, was Reformation Day, an event that produced the second great division in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of the West. By some counts, the Protestant movement has since produced 45,000 more divisions we call denominations.

Centuries earlier, the apostle Paul urged the early Christians in Ephesus to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-6).

We might conclude from Paul’s statement that divisions should cease, denominations should dissolve, and the Christian Church should reunite as one big family. Notice, the word happy was omitted intentionally. For example, Lutherans and Mennonites have dialogued since 2002 about our differences and have expressed forgiveness and pledged cooperation with one another.

Each admits that the other belongs to the extended Christian family even if we do not attend all the same family gatherings. The differences have to do with beliefs, practices, ethics, organization, and traditions now 500 years in the making. Differences between even two Christian groups are complex.

## Simplify the Issues

Now let’s simplify the issues. Lutherans and Mennonites can trace some of our main differences to the conversion stories of our founders, Martin Luther and Menno Simons. Like the influence of parents on their children, the experiences of Luther and Menno have imprinted their descendants for generations. The Reformers wrote of their conversions years after the fact. Luther described his conversion in 1545, recounting his experience of God’s grace in July 1519. Menno in 1554 wrote an account of experienced of God’s conviction and his conversion in 1536.

The conversion stories of Luther and Menno reveal the distinctives between the two Reformers as well as the two traditions that developed over the past 500 years. Consider the features of their stories of coming to faith in Christ. While there are similarities, the differences are also striking. I will highlight some of the more important distinctions.

What can we learn from the two conversion stories? Let’s reflect on the stories of transformation, before, during and after conversion. Again we discover as many differences as similarities. Perhaps we should not be so surprised at their differences considering the conversion stories we hear in church every year at baptism.

**The conversion stories of Martin Luther and Menno Simons display aspects of the Reformation advantage.**



University lecturer above reproach	Parish priest playing cards and drinking
Miserable sinner repented regularly	People pleasing sinner but unrepentant
Doctrinal problem with God’s righteousness	Moral problem is with his sinful heart
Raging conscience hating the God of wrath	Troubled soul disturbed by his own hypocrisy
Crisis that miserable sinners are born in sin, condemned by the Law, and hear a Gospel of wrath	Crisis of belief in the traditional views of the Lord’s Supper, infant baptism, and the violence of Christians
Scripture study in Romans 1 about the righteousness of God	Scripture study about the Lord’s Supper and believers baptism
Focuses on God’s objective work for us	Focuses on God’s Spirit at work in us
Finds support for justification by faith in the tradition of Augustine	Finds support for his new beliefs about the sacraments in Scripture but not in tradition
Experiences transformed love for God.	Experiences a call to service and suffering in obedience to Christ

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## Different Places, Mindsets

Before their conversions, Luther and Menno came from very different places, backgrounds, and mindsets. Luther was a university lecturer who encountered a biblical, theological, and philosophical problem that tormented his spiritual life as well. It seems that for Luther, the biggest problem was with a God of wrath and not so much with Luther the sinner.

Menno was a parish priest serving without ever having read the Scriptures. Menno started reading the Scriptures, but admitted that he wasted this knowledge through youthful lusts, sensual living, and looking for the favour of people. Luther started out to please a wrathful God while Menno started out to please worldly people.

At their conversions, Luther and Menno experienced a deep crisis of faith. Luther admitted he was a sinner, but was angry at a God who was not satisfied with his attempts at repentance. Luther was converted by an insight from studying the Bible that God justifies the sinner by the gift of faith. Luther had a theological conversion and repented in his beliefs about God.

Menno grew in awareness that his preaching of Scripture clashed with his sinful lifestyle. Menno was converted by the conviction that God would judge him for misleading his parishioners through hypocrisy. Menno had a moral conversion or a repentance of heart toward God and people.

## Different Emotions and Callings

After their conversions, Luther and Menno followed experienced different emotions and callings. Luther felt “altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” He returned to his study and was comforted to discover that his mentor Augustine had written similar ideas about justification by faith years earlier.

Nine months after Menno’s conversion, he felt God’s Fatherly Spirit empower him to renounce his worldly reputation. Menno yielded to “the heavy cross of Christ” and accepted the call to lead a small group of the Anabaptist faithful.

The two conversion stories are quite different. Luther’s conversion transformed his life from tormented anguish of soul in anger towards God to a place of love for God and the proclamation of God’s grace. Menno’s conversion transformed his life from sensuality, ease, and popularity with people to a place fearing for his life and the proclamation of obedience to God.

Both Luther and Menno in their conversion stories indicate that they were ministers of God before their conversion. Luther posted his 95 Theses two years before his conversion. Menno served as parish priest 12 years before his conversion. Both confessed troubled souls. Both identified a moment of enlightenment

when a new understanding of God’s Word transformed their minds. Both yielded themselves to the grace of God after their conversions. Both continued to serve God resulting in a renewal of worship, beliefs, and morals for generations of followers.

## Beyond Lament, a Blessing

While I hear many Christians lament the disunity in the Church today, the Reformation has become more of a blessing even considering the great difficulties experienced in the early years after 1517. Why? Because the message of unity is not the only word in the Scriptures. Paul continued his appeal to the early churches by celebrating the importance of diversity in the body of Christ as well.

In Ephesians, Paul wrote, “but to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (4:7). We hear echoes in praise of diversity as Paul calls the Corinthian church to unity in the Spirit’s manifestations of grace. To a divided church the apostle still maintained, “now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). The phrase common good is better translated as “to be an advantage to someone.”

One legacy of the Reformation is found in the conversion stories of the Reformers and their followers. Like faith stories today, no two Reformers were identical. The conversion stories of Luther and Menno are quite different. The Reformation advantage is that over 75 million Christians identify more fully with the body of Christ because Luther and Menno taught us to see God’s grace in different ways.

Still, 500 years later we are Christian first, and only then Lutherans or Mennonites, because there is one Lord Jesus Christ, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In the case of Luther and Menno, how about three out of four?

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## Resources:

Martin Luther’s conversion account see <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/MartinLutherConversion.pdf>

Menno Simons’ conversion account see <http://www.mennosimons.net/horsch01.html>



# A Tribute: Menno Simons (1496-1561)

by Dr. Royden Loewen

In 1496 a boy named Menno was born to Dutch dairy farmers. The father's name was Simon; the mother's we don't know. Neither do we know whether Menno was born in the springtime when the warm air shines on the flat lush green pastures of the province of Friesland, or in the fall when cold and wet northerly winds bear down from the nearby North Sea.

Whatever the case, it was here in Friesland that Menno was raised, where he studied and began his work as a Catholic priest, installed to that position at age 28, near his home village of Witmarsum.

His early years in the church were routine. He carried out his duties as priest, seemingly without caring to use knowledge of Greek or Latin to pursue “biblical truth,” and using what spare time he had to cavort with his fellow priests, living a life that he later described as frivolous and greedy, “without spirituality or love.”

## A Movement

Then something happened to change his life. Around 1530 Menno began to hear of Anabaptists, a religious movement originating in Switzerland, but spreading quite quickly northward, reaching his very village. He heard the Anabaptists preach that Christ could only be truly known by following his radical message of peace and service daily, not through communion, for example, where Christ was relegated to ritual and symbol.

By 1531 he heard, too, that an Anabaptist, Sicke Freerks, had been executed for baptizing adults—to follow Christ for this believer was a matter of decision and will, not one of inheritance and custom. Menno turned to the Scriptures to seek the pure gospel and there discovered the essence of religious faith—to “live in Christ.” Menno felt the strong pull now to leave the old church and join the Anabaptists, but later he noted how the lure of money and status had made this an almost impossible step to take.

## A Break

In 1536, however, Menno made the break—a true conversion, he said, that followed a tearful plea for the gift of God's grace and a clean heart.

Menno was out of the old church, out of money, and, after he agreed to lead the Anabaptists of his region, suddenly also out of luck. He was on the run.

As he raced ahead of the authorities, he preached,

**Around 1530 Menno began to hear of Anabaptists, a religious movement originating in Switzerland, but spreading quite quickly northward, reaching his very village.**

baptized, and wrote profusely on being a person of peace, of sacrifice, of service, of purity. He was neither a great theologian nor a charismatic preacher. He was a common man, strongly identifying with the simple and devout craftspeople and farmers of his region.

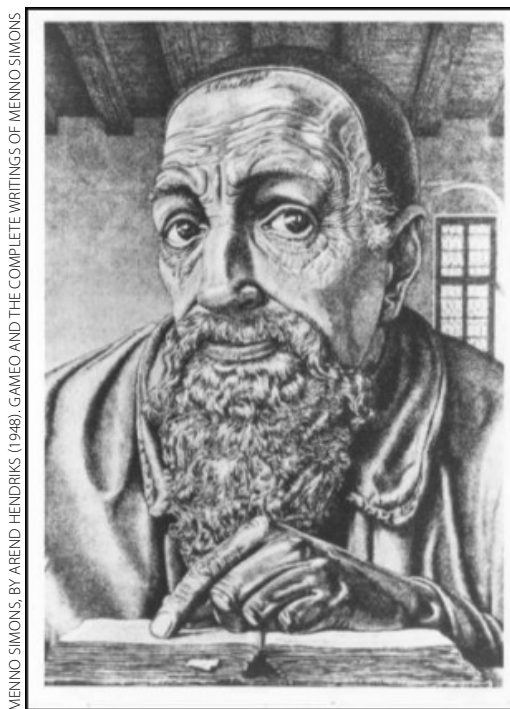
Yet Menno rarely shied from stopping in the cities—Bonn, Amsterdam, Cologne, Gdansk, Luebeck,

Wismar—to debate publicly or secretly with the “learned” men. His stand was unequivocal: the Bible is the sole authority; Christ is the full model of life; salvation means being a “new creature” implanted in Christ; this “new life” is revealed in community as peace, purity, simplicity, and the willingness to suffer.

## A Leader

Menno Simons was not the founder of the movement that acquired his name. But, at their request, he became their leader, a shepherd to the scattered, persecuted flock. He became widely known through his travelling, debating, counselling and prolific writing—loved by his friends, hated by his enemies.

Menno says, “In this it is evident that where sincere



MENNO SIMONS, BY AREND HENDRIKS (1948). GAMED AND THE COMPLETE WRITINGS OF MENNO SIMONS

faith and true faith exists, the faith which avails before God and is a gift from God, which comes from hearing the holy Word, there through the blossoming tree of life all manner of precious fruits of righteousness are present, such as the fear and love of God, mercy, friendship, chastity, temperance, humility, confidence, truth, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Menno’s life verse, 1 Corinthians 3:11, appeared on the front of all his books and pamphlets: “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

### Brushes With Death

With a 100 gold guilder reward on his head, Menno’s brushes with death were close. In 1539 Tjard Reynders had been severely tortured (“broken on the wheel”) for having given Menno refuge in his house. Then in 1544 Menno’s publisher Jan Claeszoen (Klassen) was beheaded for possessing 600 copies of Menno’s book. In

**With a 100 gold guilder reward on his head, Menno’s brushes with death were close. In 1539 Tjard Reynders had been severely tortured for having given Menno refuge in his house.**



A memorial to Menno Simons in his hometown of Witmarsum.

1545 a boatman whisked Menno down the Mass River to escape Holland, but the ferryman was caught and killed. Once Menno escaped when sheriffs stopped a stagecoach, but failed to recognize him.

### Later Years

In his later years Menno’s energy began to run out and he became disabled. To add to this difficulty, his wife Geertrudyt and two of his three children, a boy and a girl, died probably sometime in the mid-1550s.

Moreover, Menno’s own idealistic vision of a church as the very expression of Christ’s love generated almost continual debate within the church. He readily confronted men and women who he thought were too easily given to strict doctrine, to violent lifestyles, to spiritual apathy, to faintheartedness.

Menno died in 1561 and was buried in a private garden in Bad Oldsloe, Germany. His work would not be forgotten, for he had left a legacy of having been a leader of a people and a church formed around his undying motto: “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is . . . Jesus Christ.”

*Dr. Royden Loewen, with roots in the Blumenort EMC, is Chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. This article is reprinted. It first appeared in The Messenger on Sept. 18, 1996.*



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# Menno Simons, Remembered and Forgotten

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by Terry M. Smith

In this year when the Protestant (Radical) Reformation is remembered, Menno Simons is a 16<sup>th</sup> century leader to whom we are indebted and yet often forget. Some EMCers know Menno's story; others know little. Pastors play a role in this.

Many of us were raised within the EMC. We're shaped by this Dutch former priest, indebted to the Radical Reformation, influenced by the Small Church's leaving the Big Church in 1812, and have family who were born on "this side" or "that side" of a river.

For others, few reasons why we attend an EMC church clearly relate to Menno Simons: it meets nearby, is evangelical, friendships, family, Kids' Club, VBS, camp work, Sunday School, coming to faith in Christ, limited options, church conflict elsewhere.

Some people attend because a local EMC church has Mennonite in its name; others, because it doesn't. Some attend because of a church's non-resistant position; others despite it or because it might mean little locally. Yet each church is linked to Menno Simons.

## Credit WGM and Others

Credit leader Ben D. Reimer and the Western Gospel Mission's workers for opening the EMC door 70 years ago to non-Dutch/German people. The WGM in 1946-1961 planted churches in non-Mennonite communities in three provinces, downplayed the term Mennonite because it was a barrier to outreach, and adapted somewhat to local cultures.

As people have noted, it is ironic that aggressive church planting happened by pacifist German-speaking people just after World War Two. Credit also goes to non-Dutch/German people who decades ago became members (or a pastor, such as Edwin Wright) when it might have been easier to go elsewhere. As a result, changes have happened and are happening.

## Honed Earlier

For some of us, our "Anabaptist convictions" were partly honed in Baptist, Pentecostal, and other Evangelical circles before joining the EMC. I was attracted to the Mennonite church because the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, a fine denomination, would likely not have ordained me because of my stance on the Holy Spirit. I sought an evangelical option (despite my United Church roots) and was influenced by MCC on peace and social issues. Joining the EMC in particular was more luck than good management—credit Jim and Virginia Dyck (then in Wabowden) and the EMC contingent among SBC's faculty.



GAMEO

Menno said to test what he taught by the Word—and stay with the Word. His focus was on Christ.

## Thought and Menno Simons

Whether we've joined the EMC from the inside or outside, we're to consider Menno Simons' teachings. It dishonours him and seems un-Anabaptist to do otherwise. Not that we must agree with him on all matters. Menno Simons insisted that people test what he said by the Word and Spirit and, if there's a difference, stay with the Word and Christ (*Complete Writings*, 311). Menno never said to study Scripture because all roads lead to him. His focus was different: it was on Christ.

Exploring Menno Simons and the history he symbolizes is enriching, confusing, and disturbing—as can be any part of Church history. We might become aware of the many Anabaptist divisions, how some Anabaptists disassociate from Evangelicals, and how some people merge faith and culture under the term Mennonite. For some people the migrations to Prussia, Russia, Canada, and elsewhere fall within family history that is both significant and enriching; to others, the connection that matters starts and remains in Canada.

## Comfort in Menno

When disturbed, though, we can find some comfort in



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Menno Simons: he disliked divisions among Anabaptists, wouldn't want the church to be named after him, and thought the term Anabaptist didn't fit him (334, 630). What might he think, then, when people claim to be born Mennonite, talk of Mennonite food and language, or describe themselves as Mennonite while not following Christ? How is Menno Simons honoured if not allowed to critique the church named after him?

What's attractive for some of us is that Menno was evangelical in his understanding of Christ and his work. "For Christ's sake we are in grace; for His sake we are heard; and for His sake our faults and failings . . . are remitted," he wrote in 1550. "For it is He who stands between His Father and His imperfect children, with His perfect righteousness, and with His innocent blood and death, and intercedes for all those who believe on Him and who strive by faith in the divine Word to turn from evil . . ." (506).

### Assurance of Salvation

Further, Menno Simons taught that a weak follower of Christ could have an assurance of salvation. In 1557 he pointed a sick woman to Christ: "I pray and desire that you will betake yourself wholly both as to what is inward and what is outward unto Christ Jesus and His merits, believing and confessing that His precious blood alone is your cleansing; His righteousness your piety; His death your life; and His resurrection your justification; for He is the forgiveness of all your sins; His bloody wounds are your reconciliation; and His victorious strength is the staff and consolation of your weakness. . . ." What wonderful words!

He told her, ". . . rest assured that you are a child of God, and that you will inherit the kingdom of grace in eternal joy with all the saints" (1051-1052). I once showed this passage to Rev. Dave K. Schellenberg, the WGM's former field man, EMC church planter at Portage la Prairie, and the first editor of this magazine. It puzzled him. If earlier Kleine Gemeinde leaders read Menno's writings and he taught on the assurance of salvation, why did they seem so uncertain of assurance?

### No Boast of Perfection

Comfort in Menno Simons can also be found in his being an imperfect saint. "Think not, beloved reader, that we boast of being perfect and without sins," he wrote in 1552. "Not at all. As for me I confess that often my prayer is mixed with sin and my righteousness with unrighteousness" (506). J. C. Wenger, a modern Anabaptist scholar, highlighted such references (footnotes on 233, 311, 447).

Menno was properly concerned about Protestants who sang of freedom in Christ "while beer and wine verily run from their drunken mouths and noses." He objected in 1541 that "anyone who can but recite" that salvation is by grace through faith alone, "no matter

now carnally he lives, is a good evangelical man and a precious brother." Simons was concerned about a living faith, about faith and practice. Memorization and slogans weren't enough then. They still aren't.

Such correction wasn't always well received: "If someone steps up in true and sincere love to admonish or reprove them. . . and points them to Christ Jesus rightly," Menno said, ". . . then he must hear. . . that he is one who believes in salvation by good works, is a heaven stormer, a sectarian agitator, a rabble rouser, a make-believe Christian, a disdainer of the sacraments, or an Anabaptist" (334). How might Menno Simons be received today as a preacher within our EMC churches and on Mennonite colonies?

### An Unnatural Death

J. C. Wenger says Menno wrote far too much defending what now is mostly discarded: that Jesus was born in Mary, but not of her (836-837). I agree. Nor do we need to hold to his strict view of church discipline: a spouse is to separate from a mate under discipline (478-479). He fluctuated on this depending, we can suspect, on who was pressuring him at the moment (1048-1049, 1058-1061).

His six "true signs" of the "Church of Christ" are useful for assessing a church's maturity and doctrinal integrity (734-743), though I hold that denominations can be in Christ while partly in error. As well, given our strong concern in the EMC for evangelism and church planting, it's important for us (including missionaries and evangelists) to learn from Menno's concern for peace and social justice (100, 117-119, 194-198, 367-368, 602-604).

Menno said more. Agree or disagree with him on a particular matter, we best not dismiss him. He held his views in a difficult time at a high personal cost. If he physically died a natural death denied many others in his time, his memory dies unnaturally in our time if we forget him—whether our local EM church name says Mennonite or not.

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*Major source: The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Herald Press, rev. 1984) edited by J. C. Wenger. A biography of Menno Simons is on 1 to 29; an autobiography is on 668-674. Leonard Verduin, a Christian Reformed minister who died in 1999, graciously served as translator.*

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# A Look at John Knox and Menno Simons Today

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by Bill Rambo

I was baptised as an infant. Don't be too shocked, please. I was rebaptized as an adult.

But my early life was informed by my parents' commitment to the Presbyterian Church. It sent them as missionaries to the Congo, later called Zaire, for many of my formative years.

I have missionaries on both sides of my family, going back four generations on Dad's side and five on Mom's. My wife Sharon Hildebrand and I met serving in Christian missions in Africa, she with MCC and I with the southern Presbyterians.

This intertwines my history with the experiences of reformers John Knox and Menno Simons, and it raises questions for me and others today.

## Priests and Reformers

Knox (c.1505-1572) was a founder of the Reformation in Scotland as it broke from the Roman Catholic tradition in 1560. Simons (1496-1561) was, of course, a key leader of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in which the EMC has a place. He began as a priest in Friesland in what is now the Netherlands.

Both priests found that political and cultural circumstances, as well as inner convictions, pushed them to consider the Scriptures more highly than the traditions and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Both were influenced by the Reformation activities of Martin Luther in Germany and John Calvin in Switzerland.

Simons was converted and broke with the more mainstream reformers, especially on the issues of believers' baptism and participation in civil government. Knox came from Great Britain where Protestant forces, especially Henry VIII's Church of England, contended with Roman Catholics in government; this showed the political influence of the French and the Spanish in England's royal family.

## A Guard and Galley Prisoner

John Knox was influenced by his association with Scottish reformers Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, both of whom were martyred for their Protestant teaching in the first half of the 16th century. Knox was



actually an armed bodyguard for Wishart, and was taken prisoner after the French put down an armed uprising. This attack was at the request of Mary of Guise, the Catholic mother of Mary Queen of Scots, and the Roman Catholic regent of Scotland.

Knox was forced to row galleys for the French for almost two years. Later exiled to England, Knox became a priest within the Church of England and was one of six chaplains for the young King Edward VI. In the early 1550s, Knox was offered various posts to keep him under the thumb of Edward's in-fighting regents. In 1554 he left Great Britain for the continent.

## Idolators and Rulers

For the next five years Knox developed his doctrines of Protestantism, focusing on "idolators"—meaning Roman Catholics—and women as secular rulers. He published "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women" largely against Mary of Guise in Scotland and English Queen Mary I, the daughter of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon. Hundreds of reformers were executed under "Bloody Mary" during her reign from 1553-1558.

Knox consulted both John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger in Switzerland about civil government. He served

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as a minister to English exiles in Frankfurt and Geneva, before returning to Scotland in 1559. (Menno Simons had read the works of Bullinger and Luther in developing his stance against infant baptism.)

From 1560 to his death, Knox was a renowned preacher in Scotland as the country continued to develop its commitment to Protestantism and against Catholicism. Knox was part of the impetus toward Scottish emphasis on preaching, reading and singing in “the Kirk” (the Church) based on the Word of God.

## Heresies

Even before he returned to Scotland, Knox had written letters to the Scottish churches warning about idolatrous Catholicism and what he called heresies. He included Arminianism, which emphasizes that people are free to choose either to follow Jesus or to reject him.

To Knox, this said that people control their eternal destiny and are justified by works rather than faith. In turn, Simons and other Anabaptists saw the doctrine of predestination as leading to moral laxness for individuals and for the church.

Knox’s longest work, more than 170,000 words, was “An Answer to a Great Number of Blasphemous Cavillations Written by an Anabaptist, and Adultery to God’s Eternal Predestination.”

To be fair, Richard Kyle points out that Anabaptist was a “generic label for all kinds of nonconformity, virtually synonymous with fanaticism or heresy.” Knox may not have referred to the strain of Anabaptism that would eventually respect Menno Simons’ teachings, although he touches on several Anabaptist distinctives.

## An Anabaptist?

For instance, Knox had a run-in with an “Anabaptist” while a chaplain for King Edward VI. The man presented Knox with a book that he claimed to be written by God and asked his opinion. After reading that the Devil, not God, had created the world and the wicked creatures in it, Knox said, “Ye deserve death as a blasphemous person and denier of God, if you prefer any word to that which the Holy Ghost has uttered in his plain Scriptures.”

The Anabaptist took the book and left. Knox regretted that he had not kept the book and reported the Anabaptist. This failure could have created serious problems for Knox. Yet even years later, Knox would not mention his name, which could have led to the Anabaptist’s death.

Obviously, this “Anabaptist” was not in the *sola scriptura* tradition of Simons, Luther, and others.

## Baptism

However, most major reformers and Roman Catholics saw it as dangerous heresy to reject the sacrament of infant baptism. Anabaptists, according to Knox, saw

baptism as non-sacramental, a testimony of faith, not itself a part of the process of salvation. Knox and most reformers agreed that baptism did not confer salvation, but Knox asserted that it was not necessary to be rebaptized.

## Five Centuries Later

Where does all this controversy leave us five centuries later? Debate continues about predestination versus free will, though with perhaps more charity. Likewise, Christ’s Church has developed more loving attitudes, rather than executing those with whom we don’t agree. We may still have a way to go to conform to the Sermon on the Mount in the areas of anger and the desire to call each other various kinds of fools (Matt. 5:21-22).

As for baptism, it would be nice to think that the Church is more tolerant now than in the Reformation. However, in Zaire as a young adult I requested to be rebaptized and saw the anguish of a Presbyterian colleague from Scotland whose mission authorities forbade him to take part in the ceremony.

Knox and the major Reformers thought that Christians should take part in civil government. Simons and many other Anabaptists thought that separation from the world was required of followers of Christ.

Today, the nature of government in modern democracies seems to require that good people not be separate from the way government is done. “In the world, but not of the world” was easier to discern in the past when rulers came from distinct strata of society and Christian leaders too often confused secular power and religious authority.

Today, citizens of all classes may ascend to political power, and Christian integrity should be shown in the service of politics as well in as our call to be Christ’s witnesses and his hands and feet in the world.

## A Command and a Warning

In spite of Reformation conflicts in the past, we should continue to progress into a more perfect expression of Christ’s commandment and warning: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

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# Transformed by the Word

by Dr. Hanspeter Jecker

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**R**enewal 2027 is a 10-year series of events launched by Mennonite World Conference (MWC) to mark the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement.

“Transformed by the Word: Reading Scripture in Anabaptist Perspectives” (the inaugural event in Augsburg, Germany, Feb. 12, 2017) fit well within the mandate of the MWC Faith and Life Commission to help member churches “understand and describe Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and practice.”

In the midst of the many Reformation commemoration celebrations, especially in Europe, it’s important to remember that the Anabaptists also emerged within the context of the Reformation and were decisively shaped by its rediscovery of the Bible as an authority for Christian faith and life.

Shortly before the first adult baptisms in January 1525, a member of the Bible study group that formed the core of the emerging Anabaptist movement illustrated this clearly: “However, after we too had taken up the Bible and studied all the possible points, we have been better informed.”



## Renewal Renovación Renouveau

The letter went on to describe how they came to a deeper understanding of Scripture. Five central themes—visible in the quote above—distinguished their shift from walking alongside the Reformers to a posture of opposition:

- **Scripture** is the key point of departure for the renewal brought about by the Reformation.
- It is crucial to learn not only second-hand, but to **read Scripture for yourself**.
- The Bible study group read with an **expectant attitude**. They “studied all the possible points,” posed questions about the text, and received answers.
- **They reoriented themselves around these new insights**.

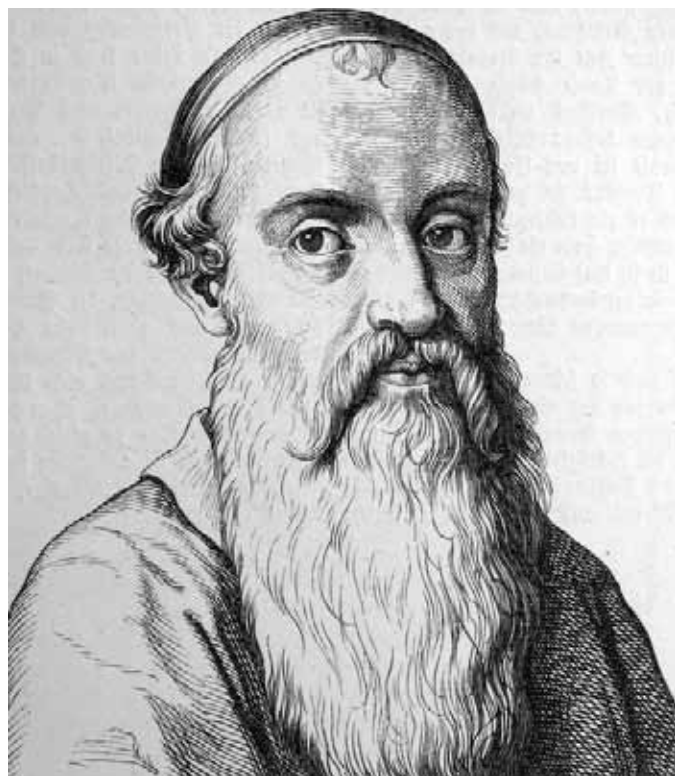
In this way, they were “better informed” in regard to the teachings of the Catholic Church, but also in regards to Zwingli and the other Reformers.

To be “better informed.” At first glance, that statement sounds very positive. But it also carries some pain. It suggests that one has indeed been mistaken; it includes a readiness to let go of older, cherished understandings. This is often not easy.

The key question at stake here is: do we allow the biblical word (and the God who desires to speak to us) to scrutinize our convictions so that we allow ourselves “to be better informed”? Or does the admonition to “test all things and hold on to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) only apply to other people?

Up to this point, all the themes could be regarded as Protestant principles. But the fifth point is the most distinct Anabaptist principle:

- The “we” in the quote is crucial: not only does Bible study happen in community; **but new understandings of Scripture are also reached collectively**.



CREATIVE COMMONS



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No one is forced to be part of an Anabaptist congregation—faith and membership are always voluntary. No single person has all the understanding or all of the gifts, but everyone has something.

Therefore, it is crucial that we create frameworks for Bible study in which everyone can contribute to a better understanding of the biblical text: old and young, men and women, academics and labourers. Precisely for this reason the “we” in our text is so important!

But several dangers are already evident in this same quote.

To allow ourselves to be “better informed” sounds nice, but who can protect us from endless efforts to prove the superiority of one understanding or from the notorious church divisions that have occurred so frequently in Anabaptist history? How can we ensure that space remains for the recognition that all of our knowledge is partial and in need of additional insights? And how do we ensure that the “struggle for the truth” does

not come at the cost of a “struggle for unity”?

If “renewal of faith and life” and “transformation through the Word” are going to happen within the context of Mennonite World Conference, then it will be essential for it to happen in the form of members from north and south, east and west, walking together alongside each other as “we.”

**Therefore, it is crucial that we create frameworks for Bible study in which everyone can contribute to a better understanding of the biblical text.**



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# Letters to the Family: A Mother's Treasure

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by Arlene Friesen

**O**ur children are among the most important things given to us in our lives. With this gift comes the responsibility of passing on faith. This can be a daunting task in a cultural climate that isn't always friendly to followers of Jesus.

## The Desire of our Hearts

Maeyken van Deventers expresses the desire of our hearts when she writes to her children, "I seek the salvation of your souls; believe me, and no one else, that you may come to me and live forever." Maeyken wrote this from a Rotterdam prison in 1572. She was one of the female Anabaptist martyrs whose final letters are preserved for us in *Martyr's Mirror*.

These letters, written by imprisoned wives and mothers facing impending death, show us what they thought was most important—a primary commitment to God which led them to desire their children's salvation, urge them to fear the Lord, and bequeath them with the true treasure of a mother's testimony and faithful death.

## Family is Secondary

These women viewed their families and life together as secondary to their life with God; they would sooner leave their family than leave their faith. Adriaenken Jans reminded her husband that they had built their house on the rock of Christ, and martyrdom was the cost they would pay for their house.

This was not a cold-hearted stoicism; great affection and longing was also conveyed. Janneken Muntsdorp, writing to her infant daughter, expressed how well suited she and her husband were and that nothing could have separated them except a desire to do the Lord's will. Soetgen van den Houte's letter to her children is filled with tearful prayer, loving admonishment, and terms of tender affection.

Choosing the narrow way of primary allegiance to Christ was not always easy. Maeyken Wens admitted in a letter to her husband that she was struggling with being thankful for all that was happening to her, and that parting was harder than she had imagined. "Oh, how easy it is to be a Christian, so long as the flesh is not put to the



This image accompanies Anna Jansz's story in the 1685 edition of the *Martyr's Mirror*. It depicts Anna entrusting her son with a local baker on the day of her execution. The information and image are taken from the Bearing Witness Stories Project website, which describes witnesses worldwide throughout history. Check it out at [martyrstories.org](http://martyrstories.org).

trial, or nothing has to be relinquished; then it is an easy thing to be a Christian."

## Entrusting Children to God

Working through this struggle, the women came to a place of entrusting their children to God. They did not blame him for what was happening to them, but in trusting that their persecution was part of his foreordained plan, they also trusted that he would care for their children.

Soetken, whose husband had already been martyred, wrote to her soon-to-be orphaned children, "When I thought that for Christ's sake we must separate from all that we love in this world I committed all to the will of the Lord." Maeyken's final letter to her son, written just before her death, informs him that her struggle has been met with God's grace: "The Lord takes away all fear; I did not know what to do for joy, when I was sentenced. . . I cannot fully thank my God for the great grace which He has shown me."

## Encouraging a Death-Defying Commitment

Out of their own death-defying commitment to God, these mothers urged their children to a similar decision. In their concern for the children's salvation, they encouraged them to learn to read and write, because in this way they would gain understanding and wisdom.



The importance of this for the Anabaptists is evident in their Scripture-filled letters; in reading you can know the Scriptures for yourself and come to an understanding of salvation.

Six months before her death, Maeyken Wens urged her oldest son, Adriaen, to begin to fear the Lord, being old enough to perceive good and evil. She pressed him to join himself to those that fear the Lord, and to write her with his decision. She wanted a better letter than the last two!

### The Fear of the Lord

The fear of the Lord is a predominant theme in these final letters. Whether writing to believing children, or to those “of the flesh”, the mothers commended the narrow way. Anna warned Isaiah that this way is found by few and walked by even fewer, since some regard it as too severe, even though they see it is the way to life. “Where you hear of the cross, there is Christ; from there do not depart.”

To fear the Lord is to follow the example of Christ and others who have suffered. Persecution is to be expected. Do not for this reason fail to join the fellowship of true believers.

To fear the Lord is to obey. The children were to obey those who took care of them now, as long as it was not contrary to God. Their mothers instructed them in the specifics of speech, diligence, prayer, simplicity and generosity, among others. With their own lives as examples, the women encouraged their children to forsake pleasures of this world for eternal reward. Soetgen wrote, “We are of such good cheer to offer up our sacrifice that I cannot express it. I could leap for joy when I think of the eternal riches which are promised to us as our inheritance.”

### Who Were These Women?

- Anna of Rotterdam (d. 1539) has a 15-month-old son Isaiah whom she entrusts to a baker on the way to her execution, along with a letter.
- Lijsken Dircks, Antwerp (d. 1552), writes to her husband Jerome Segers, also in prison.
- Soetken van den Houte, Ghent (d. 1560), writes to her three children, David, Betgen, and Tanneken. Her husband had previously given his life for the truth. Her lengthy letter is full of Scripture references and quotes.
- Adriaenken Jans, Dordrecht (d. 1572), writes to her husband.
- Maeyken van Deventers, Rotterdam (d. 1572), writes to her four children “in the flesh” with a concern for their salvation.
- Maeyken Wens, Antwerp (d. 1573), writes to her oldest son Adriaen, as well as to her husband, a minister.
- Janneken Muntsdorp, Antwerp (d. 1573, at the same time as Maeyken Wens), writes to her one-month old daughter Janneken, who was born in prison and is now being cared for by relatives.

Their letters can be found in *Martyr’s Mirror* (453-4; 504, 515-22; 646-51; 926-9; 977-9; 981-3; 984-6).

### Testaments Our Inheritance

And so, they wrote their final testaments, viewing the testimony of their word and death as the true treasure they left with their children. Soetgen recognized this was not a memorial of silver, gold, or jewels, but something more lasting; if her children paid heed to this testament they would gain more treasure by it than if she had left them perishable riches.

The letters of these martyrs are also our inheritance. They offer us wisdom for ordering our lives and passing on our faith. We are left with questions of priority, vision, and urgency.

Is our first priority God and his kingdom? In our desire to give our children every opportunity in this life, are we in danger of neglecting this first priority? What are we communicating to our children?

What is our vision for our children or those we influence? Recently I took some time to think about this vision, to write it out, and to begin praying it. The next step is to share it with the ones I carry in my heart.

### Do We Sense the Urgency?

Do we sense the urgency of these life choices? These women viewed every choice through the lens of eternity, as life and death matters. Do we shy away from this “narrow way” talk, desiring a less demanding portrayal of faith? In emphasizing the love of God, has our pendulum swung too far?

What is the narrow way? For these women, one expression of it was choosing adult believer’s baptism as a sign of their loyalty to Jesus, knowing that this baptism marked them for a baptism in blood. They did not shy away from expressing the cost to their children, but fearlessly called them to follow in the same path. In our lives, what are the “narrow way” choices we are making and calling our children to?

Recent research encourages us with the fact that the spiritual vitality of parents contributes to “sticky faith” in their children. Let these women’s examples embolden you to speak your faith and live it before your children as the richest inheritance you can leave to them.

“Fear God; this is the conclusion” – Janneken Muntsdorp, 1573.

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# Believer's Baptism: Stay With What the Bible Teaches!

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by Dr. Harvey Plett

**A**s we celebrate the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation there is much to celebrate. One of the things to celebrate is the rediscovery of believer's baptism.

## Apostolic Church Baptism

Water baptism was practiced in the Church from its beginning. Peter's Pentecost message ended by saying, "Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). Some 3,000 responded in faith and were baptized and added to the Church that day.

This is what is called believer's baptism. That is, when you decide to become a Christian you, in obedience to the teaching of the Bible, follow it up with water baptism and thereby become a member of the Church, Christ's body.

Matthew 28:18-20 tells the Church to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then teach them all that God has commanded. Those who believe are to be baptized. Scholars are in essential agreement that apostolic baptism was believer's baptism (Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*).

## Infant Baptism

An occasional infant baptism appears to have happened in the second century. But after the third century it became the practice of the Church. Prior to the Reformation, to refuse infant baptism was subject to state oppression, even execution.

Martin Luther, in the early 16th century, was struggling with his faith and through study of the Bible discovered the words, "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). Out of that came what we call the Reformation. Luther's emphasis on faith and the Bible began to influence the church scene and ultimately the Lutheran Church emerged.

Luther retained infant baptism partially because he felt if he went to believer's baptism his work would be annihilated. He, however, modified the sacrament somewhat. For the Catholic Church water baptism is used by God to remove original sin. For Luther the grace of God works alongside the water to do that.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and the Lutheran Church



subscribe to this kind of sacramental baptism. A sacrament is a ceremony that if done right conveys God's grace to the individual.

The Reformed Church, the outgrowth of John Calvin's work, practises infant baptism, but does it in a Covenantal Theological system. They say that baptism is the sign of the New Covenant and replaces circumcision.

As circumcision was done to infant boys and was the sign of the Old Covenant, so now baptism is the sign of the New Covenant in Christ. One change is that now both male and female infants, of Christian parents, are baptized, indicating they are members of the New Covenant people.

In infant-baptizing churches, baptism is followed up with confirmation when the person has reached the age of accountability. At confirmation the individual makes the faith, vicariously believed for him by a godparent or sponsor at baptism, his or her own.

Churches who practise this covenantal concept of baptism include the Reformed Church, the Methodists, Presbyterians, and the Covenant Church.

There are some church groups that don't practice water baptism. This includes the Quakers and the Salvation Army. It is also of interest to note that Karl Barth, a key theologian, switched to believer's baptism due to his study of the Bible. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian (d. 1834), said to read children into the family baptisms in Acts is putting something there that is not there.

## Believer's Baptism

At the time of the Reformation another movement emerged that did not accept infant baptism as a valid baptism. Through serious Bible study, this group, known as the Anabaptists, understood the Scriptures to teach believer's baptism. With this understanding of baptism they refused sacramental or covenantal infant baptism because they didn't find it in the Bible.

They understood the Scripture to teach believer's baptism; that is, only those who personally understood the gospel and accepted it should be baptized. Many who had been baptized as infants asked for baptism based on their faith and thereby joined the Church. This is where the name Anabaptist comes from. They were accused of being re-baptized, but they responded and said their infant baptism was not a baptism because it did not involve the faith of the one being baptized.

Their refusal to accept infant baptism, as well as refusing to have their infants baptized, resulted in severe opposition and persecution. They persisted and the Anabaptists emerged as a significant branch of the Church, still active and alive today. The Anabaptists claimed they were going back to what the Bible teaches. They insisted that believer's baptism ruled out covenantal or sacramental infant baptism. It also ruled out child baptism.

In support of rejecting infant and child baptism they quoted Matt. 19:14 where Jesus says, "Do not hinder children from coming to me for to such belongs the Kingdom of God." They said children are innocent and saved until they reach the age of accountability. They said the Bible teaches that children are to be nurtured and taught the love of God; and then as they grow and understand they will respond, and when they reach accountability they will know how to respond and ask for baptism when they reach the age of accountability (Eph. 6:4).

## Continued Commitment

We need to celebrate the Reformation by a continued commitment to do what the Bible teaches. As we celebrate 500 years of back to the Bible freedom, we, as a people who believe the Bible teaches believer's baptism, rejoice that children are innocent and saved until they reach the age of accountability. Being nurtured in the teaching of the Word and accepting it as they grow up, they will then be able to ask for baptism.

The issue we face is, does the Bible teach believer's baptism? To answer this question we need to go back to the Bible. We do not find sacramental baptism in Scripture, and we also do not find the idea that baptism has replaced circumcision.

I suggest we respond by rejoicing for what the Anabaptists found and practiced back in the 16th century, examine it biblically, and take what the Bible teaches. We affirm believer's baptism even if it is uncomfortable. If that is what the Bible teaches, that is what we want to do.

This does not mean we reject fellowship with churches that practice infant baptism, but we do not accept their practice of infant baptism because we believe it is not supported in Scripture nor is it a baptism based on personal faith. We stand for and commit ourselves to what the Bible teaches.

We also need to do a diligent study on the role of children and the church. Our Anabaptist forebears found no basis for sacramental or covenantal infant baptism. As already noted, they believed the Scriptures teach that children are safe in the kingdom until the age of accountability when they decide to continue in the faith or leave it (Pilgram Marpeck; *Schleitheim Confession*).

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation we rejoice in the testimony of our forebears and commit ourselves to be true to the study and teaching of the Bible and its teaching on baptism as our Anabaptist forebears did.



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# Earlier Voices for Church Reform

by Terry M. Smith

**B**efore Martin Luther, there were other voices calling for the reform of Roman Catholic beliefs, practices, and structures. Earlier than Anabaptists, these Christians were concerned about careful study, preaching, and living out of the Scriptures.

**Peter Waldo** (ca. 1140-1205), a French reformer, formed a group that held to the Bible as final authority and used lay preaching, stressed the words and example of Jesus, chose and taught voluntary poverty, and initially opposed capital punishment and war.

**John Wycliffe** (ca. 1329-1384) was an English reformer, with a doctorate in theology, who held that “civil government should seize the property of immoral clerics.” He was critical of church wealth and the civil power of clergy.

He disagreed with transubstantiation, held the Bible as the final authority for faith and practice, and influenced the translation of the complete Bible into English. He died of a stroke, but later was convicted of heresy. His body was dug up, burned, and his ashes flung into the Swift River.

**Jan Hus** (1373-1415) came from poor parents, became a priest, and served as the preacher at Bethlehem Chapel, a centre of Bohemian (now Czech) church reform. He defended the writings of English reformer John Wycliffe. When anti-reformers won the archbishop to their side, Huss was forbidden to preach, but he refused to be silenced.

**Many factors prepared for the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation and assisted in its spread. Among these were the earlier Reformers' activities and the printing press.**

Over the years he suffered various excommunications, opposed the sale of indulgences, and resisted his adversaries in writing. When an offer of safe passage was withdrawn after he arrived at a council, he was imprisoned. He was tried on many charges and, despite saying the charges did not reflect his views, declared a stubborn heretic and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

**Girolamo Savonarola** (1452-1498) was a Dominican monk and an Italian Reformer. In 1490 he moved to Florence, “calling for repentance on the part of the city’s leaders and pleading the cause of the poor and oppressed.” Twice influencing a French king not to sack the city, Savonarola reformed both the tax system and the courts and aided the poor.

Under his supervision, “people made a great bonfire of their gambling equipment, cosmetics, false hair, and lewd books” (*R. G. Clouse*). He denounced the papal court. He was later tried for heresy, found guilty, and executed.

When earlier Reformers spoke in protest, the hand of the Roman Catholic Church came down hard; but when it later tried to flatten Luther, it felt, to its surprise, pain caused by a sharp object (*Dr. Ron Kydd*).

Many factors prepared for the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and assisted in its spread. Among these were the earlier Reformers’ activities and the printing press.

Because of the influences of Luther and other Reformers, positively and negatively, the Anabaptist movement began. The negatives stand out in some Anabaptist minds, yet the positives are foundational. Because of the positives we are indebted.

*Sources: C. Neff, H. S. Bender, and N. van der Zijpp, “Waldenses” (GAMEO, 1959); “Wycliffe, John”; “Hus, Jan”; and “Savonarola, Girolamo” in J. D. Douglas, ed., The International Dictionary of the Christian Church (Zondervan, rev. 1978). H. E. Fosdick, Great Voices of the Reformation: An Anthology (Random House, 1952).*



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Peter Waldo



# What Happens When a Student Disagrees With a Mentor?

by Terry M. Smith

**C**onrad Grebel (1498-1526), a nobleman by birth, studied at universities in Basel, Vienna, and Paris. When he returned to his home in Zurich in about 1522, he made contact with Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), pastor of the Great Church (Grossminster) who became a Reformer.

Zwingli highlighted salvation by grace through faith in Christ, saw the Mass as a memorial and not a sacrifice, opposed enforced fasting during Lent and on Fridays, opposed greed in the church, supported the removal of relics and images, and opposed the adoration of the saints.

Grebel and Zwingli disagreed on the validity of infant baptism. Zwingli, as well, saw the support of the city-state's council as essential to the reformation—"certain matters cannot be trusted to the mass of people," he said. Grebel, on the other hand, saw the council's involvement as interference that slowed change.

Dr. Harold Bender and Leland D. Harder say, "The closing months of 1524 were full of increasing conflict for [opponents of Zwingli's style of reform]. Open threats from the pulpit, as well as private warnings, made it all too plain that suffering and persecution awaited them.

"In a touching letter to his friend Vadian in December 1524, Grebel indicates his fears for the future and his determination to press on unflinchingly upon the course he felt God wanted him to follow. He says, 'I do not believe that persecution will fail to come. . . . By their fruits you shall know them, by persecution and sword. . . . May God give grace; I hope to God that He will grant the medicine of patience thereto, if it is not to be otherwise. . . . and may peace, faith, and salvation be established and obtained.'"



Conrad Grebel



Ulrich Zwingli

**Less than a decade after Grebel and Zwingli engaged in Bible study together, both lay dead in strange locations because of the strength of their convictions—despite a common faith in Christ.**

About a month later, on Jan. 17, 1525, the city-state's council decided that parents were to present their children to be baptized or leave the area. On Jan. 18, 1525, the council decreed that Grebel (named with Felix Mantz) accept the ruling. On Jan. 21, 1525, Grebel and others gathered to talk and to pray; on the spot, some decided to be baptized on their confession of faith. This is looked on as the start of the Anabaptist and Free Church movement.

For his part, Grebel, who was married, was imprisoned and then exiled; he died of the Black Plague outside of Zurich less than two years after the Radical Reformation began. He was not even 30.

Zwingli also became ill with the plague, but recovered and continued to be engaged in church reform and the politics of the day. In a battle in 1531 between Catholic and Protestant forces, Zwingli was present as a chaplain. He died in battle, his body dismembered and burned. In the ashes his heart was found "intact and whole," a sign, some said, of his spiritual purity.

Less than a decade after Grebel and Zwingli engaged in Bible study and discussions together, both lay dead as the victims of people or nature in strange locations because of the strength of their convictions—despite a common faith in Christ.

*Sources: W. Klaassen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant (Conrad Press, 1981); R. C. Walton, "Zwingli, Ulrich," and P. Toon, "Grebel, Conrad" in Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981); H. Bender and L. D. Harder, "Grebel, Conrad" (GAMEO, 1989); J. H. Yoder, "Zwingli, Ulrich" (GAMEO, 1959); H. J. Hillerbrand, The Reformation (Baker, reprinted 1987); Southwestern News, Fall 2012 (SBTS). by Terry M. Smith*



# Felix Manz and a Sympathetic Pastor

by Terry M. Smith

**W**ho was the first person killed for being an Anabaptist? It wasn't Felix Manz.

Manz (ca. 1498-1527) was drowned on Jan. 5, 1527, "in the River Limmat, the first Protestant martyr at the hands of Protestants" (J. G. G. Norman).

Hippolytus (Bolt) Eberle, an Anabaptist, had been killed much earlier on May 29, 1525, in the Catholic canton of Schyz. (An unnamed Catholic priest was killed that same day for associating with Eberle.)

Felix Manz is better known. He knew Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, and had joined Ulrich Zwingli's Bible classes in 1522. With others, he pressed for reform. When Zwingli deferred to the pace of the city-state's council, Manz and others began to meet separately.

When some parents refused to have their children baptized, they were fined. On Jan. 17, 1525, Manz made the case for believer baptism before city council; the council rejected this. The next day council threatened to banish people who did not present their children for baptism within eight days; Manz was to submit to the order and cease arguing. On Jan. 21, 1525, he and others were baptized as believers.

During the next two years Manz was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned; he escaped once only to be recaptured. He would emerge to strengthen his brothers and sisters in the faith, and, when allowed, make the case for believer baptism before Zurich's city council.

He said he had never rejected government, preached in other pastorates only as any disciple would do, denounced both capital punishment and the use of the sword, and taught to share with the needy.

Once, when released from prison, Felix left Zurich for the canton of Grison. He was arrested and returned to Zurich with a letter dated July 13, 1525, that shows the magistrate's frustration with him and, perhaps, Zurich's city council: "But because he is an obstinate and recalcitrant person we released him from prison and because he is one of yours we have sent him to you, with the friendly request that you look after him and keep him in your territory, so that we may be rid of him and our people remain quiet, and that in case of his return we are not compelled to take severe measures against him"

**It is an even greater tragedy,  
and a more curious form of  
martyrdom, when a Christian dies  
at the hands of other Christians.**

(H. Bender and C. Neff).

On March 7, 1526, Zurich city council made believer baptism punishable by drowning. On Dec. 3, 1526, Manz was arrested and on Jan. 5, 1527, sentenced to death. That afternoon he was taken in a boat onto the Limmat River.

There, he heard his mother call out for him to be steadfast. Manz spoke out in Latin: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." An executioner forced Felix's bound hands over his knees, put a stick between his arms and knees, and pushed Manz into the water. Four centuries later a memorial plaque would be placed on the riverbank.

Ironically, as Felix Manz had prepared to die, a "preacher at his side spoke sympathetically to him encouraging him to be converted." Converted to whom? If to Christ, Felix was that already.

It is a tragedy for Christians to die at the hands of non-Christians. It is an even greater tragedy, and a more curious form of martyrdom, when a Christian dies at the hands of other Christians—especially when a sympathetic pastor is present.

*Sources: C. J. Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History (Herald Press, rev. 1981); C. Neff, "Eberle, Bolt" (GAMEO, 1953); W. Klaassen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant (Conrad Press, 1981); J. G. G. Norman, "Manz, Felix," Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981); H. Bender and C. Neff, "Manz, Felix" (GAMEO, 1957); H. J. Hillerbrand, The Reformation (Baker, repr. 1987); Southwestern News, Fall 2012 (SBTS).*



Felix Manz





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# Elsbeth and Balthasar Hubmaier

by Terry M. Smith

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**W**hat was it like for a Christian who defends the state's use of force to have the force used against him? Or for a wife, after her husband's imprisonment and torture, to watch as he is burned at the stake? Or, three days later, for her to be tied to a large stone and dropped from a bridge into the Danube River?

The couple was Elsbeth (Elizabeth) and Balthasar Hubmaier.

Christian Neff and Christian Hege sum up Elsbeth's life, some of it indicated above: "Elsbeth (Elisabeth) Hügeline, the wife of Balthasar Hubmaier, was the daughter of a citizen of Reichenau on Lake Constance, whom he married on 13 January 1525. She was an energetic and courageous woman, who shared the very sad fate of her husband with devoted love and faithfulness. When he was seized and after cruel torture condemned to death, she spoke words of comfort to him. Three days later she also suffered a martyr's death in Vienna. With a stone tied to her neck she was thrown from the large bridge over the Danube on 13 March 1528, in Vienna." Her birthdate is not provided.

Balthasar Hubmaier (ca. 1480-1528) was connected with the Peasants' War in Germany, a popular, short-lived protest against abuses within government and church. People wanted freedom from some taxes; the ability to use the land, water, and forest (and its creatures) for their benefits, not just the social elite's; and the right to choose their own pastors. It's suggested that he even assisted in writing a list of the commoners' demands.

A former priest who held a doctorate in theology, Balthasar was an able theologian who opposed Catholic and Protestant abuses, defended believer's baptism, and was imprisoned for his views. He did not endure imprisonment and torture well, but who should be surprised at this?

After physical torture he agreed to recant his Anabaptist beliefs, but, when he was to make a public statement before Ulrich Zwingli, he could not do it. He spoke up for believer's baptism. Zwingli had him taken back to prison where he was stretched on the rack.

Balthasar Hubmaier held that the state was divinely ordained to use force to protect the innocent, that a king could rule better if a Christian, and a Christian could defend others with force. He did not do so in ignorance of other Anabaptists' positions.



In the same year that the Schleitheim Confession was prepared largely by Michael Sattler and endorsed by others (1527), Balthasar had earlier written a booklet *On the Sword* in which he challenged non-resistant views among Anabaptists. Because of his views on the use of force, Hubmaier has been set aside in some non-resistant Anabaptist circles and highlighted in some wider circles, including Baptist.

Some people think it is ironic that Balthasar defended the government's use of force and yet he was tortured by officials. They are confused. What Balthasar defended was good government; what he suffered from was an abuse of government. Both are realities in our world.

Elsbeth suffered equally. Think of her if ever you gaze upon the beautiful waters of the Danube River.

Sources: C. J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Herald Press, rev. 1981); W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Conrad Press, 1981); H. Bender and C. Neff, "Hubmaier, Balthasar" (GAMEO, 1957); C. Neff and C. Hege, "Hügeline, Elsbeth (Elisabeth)" (GAMEO, 1956); H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation* (Baker, repr. 1987); Southwestern News, Fall 2012 (SBTS); H. W. Pipkin and J. H. Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier* (Herald Press, 1989).



# Menno Simons and Martin Luther

by Terry M. Smith

**W**hat does a priest do when struggling with his beliefs? He might study to gain knowledge and peace. The priest was Menno Simons; the one who helped him toward peace was Martin Luther, a former priest.

Luther (1483-1546) earned BA and MA degrees before entering a monastery because of a vow made in a storm that frightened him. He studied theology and was ordained as a priest in 1507. He later earned a doctorate in theology.

On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther displayed a written protest against the practice of indulgences. Instead, he highlighted the grace of God revealed in Christ. By 1521 Luther was declared an outlaw and for the next 25 years he was a reformer.

Menno Simons (1496-1561) was born in the village of Witmarsum, Friesland, now part of the Netherlands. After lengthy studies, he was ordained as priest in 1524 and served for 12 years. During that period he struggled with the doctrines of transubstantiation and infant

## What does a priest do when struggling with his beliefs? He might study.

baptism. He read the Bible and found it at odds with some of what he practiced.

In his struggle, Menno found some peace through the writings of Martin Luther: “He was always grateful to Luther for . . . the fundamental principle of the authority of Scripture as over against any human authority” (H. S. Bender). While indebted, Menno disagreed with Luther on infant baptism.

In 1535 Menno left the Roman Catholic Church; within a year or so he was approached and then ordained to lead a group of Anabaptists. For the next quarter-century Simons sought to provide stable leadership to a persecuted group that was too often at odds with itself.

Luther and Simons each married, had children, and died of natural causes. Near the end of Menno’s days, the influence of Martin on Simons remained clear. In 1556, five years before he died, Menno was disturbed by the actions of Anabaptist leaders at Emden who ordered a woman to shun her husband or be excommunicated.

“I can neither teach nor live by the faith of others,” he wrote, disagreeing. “I must live by my own faith as the Spirit of the Lord has taught me through his Word.” The Word had final authority, not the questionable practices of people—whether Catholics or Anabaptists.

“I desire, according to my humble talents, to teach a Gospel that builds up, and not one that breaks down” wrote Simons, “one that gives off a pleasant odor, not a stench, and I do not intend to trouble the work of God with something for which I have no certain Scriptural grounds.”

Menno, like Luther before him, had earlier sought spiritual peace and found it in Christ. Now, later in life, Menno did not want to unnecessarily add to another’s distress.

*Sources: W. Klaassen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant (Conrad Press, 1981); Menno Simons, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Herald Press, 1956, 1984), H. S. Bender, biographer, and L. Verduin, trans.; C. S. Meyer, “Luther, Martin,” in Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981); R. H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Mentor, 1950).*



# Melchoir Hoffman and the Prison Tower

by Terry M. Smith

To sit in a group where Melchoir Hoffman (1495-1543) teaches from the Book of Revelation would be fascinating.

If anyone believed in the soon return of Jesus, it was Hoffman! To act as he did required great confidence in Christ and in his skill to interpret both Scripture and the times.

Hoffman was “one of the most dramatic early Anabaptists, responsible for the spread of the movement from South Germany to the North” (*H. Hillerbrand*). His work and his preaching took him even farther, though, to Sweden and Denmark where he enjoyed brief favour.

A dealer in furs with an elementary school education, he was an avid reader and became a keen writer. By 1523 he was a follower of Martin Luther.

Early on he held to salvation by grace through faith, holy living, the use of allegory, and millennialism. During this time he preached and, when authorities questioned his doctrine, some leaders (including Martin Luther) vouched for him.

By 1525, however, Hoffman considered himself a prophet, one of the two witnesses spoken of in Rev. 11. He was critical of Lutheran pastors; to him, they minimized the need for holy living.

His trade took him to Sweden where he married and had a son. There he preached in the Lutheran church. When the king asked him to resign, he returned to Germany and later went to Denmark. In Denmark he clashed with Luther (who wrote, wanting him to stop preaching till better informed) and Lutheran clergy. The Danish king expelled Hoffman.

It was in Sweden that Hoffman wrote three of his many writings, one book of which interprets Daniel 12, explains the gospel, defends preaching by lay people, explores communion and confession, and deals with church authority.

Hoffman was baptized on confession of faith in 1530; his next 13 years continued a pattern of service, conflict, and a focus on the Lord’s return.

On May 4, 1534, Hoffman asked officials in Strasbourg to imprison him in the tower—so soon did he expect the Lord’s return and his freedom. They agreed, treating him gently at first. On April 15, 1535, Hoffman said the Lord would return in his third year of imprisonment.

By May 8, 1539, Hoffman’s face and legs were “greatly swollen.” He asked authorities to “let him out for a month until he feels better, then he would gladly go



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back.” The authorities “let him out of the hole” while carefully guarded. Former Anabaptists and Reformed leaders visited him, seeking to change his beliefs. Did he recant? This is unclear. At any rate, he was not released.

His prison conditions became harsher and his health weakened. Conditions were eased somewhat, but in 1543 he died before the Lord’s return, a victim of the authorities and his folly.

What’s a fair assessment of Hoffman? C. Neff and W. O. Packull say this: “Aside from his unbridled fantasy, his arbitrary interpretation of Scripture, and his fanatical view of the end-times, his writings also contain a wealth of sound Christian ideas and sober thoughts.” But what happened to Hoffman’s wife and son?

Sources: *H. J. Hillerbrand, ed., The Reformation (Baker, repr. 1987); C. Neff and W. O. Packull, “Hoffman, Melchoir” (GAMEO, 1956, 1990); J. C. Wenger, ed., The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (Herald Press,*





# Thomas Müntzer: Too Easily Dismissed

by Terry M. Smith

**W**as Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1488-1525) an Anabaptist? He seems to have opposed infant baptism, yet it's uncertain if he was rebaptized. In any case, he's a figure from whom many modern Anabaptists disassociate themselves. But what do they do, then, with the prophet Amos and the apostle James, whose social concerns and words were equally strong (violence excepted)?

There's more to Müntzer than his support of violence. Look beneath it to his broader social concerns. His story reflects the social environment out of which Anabaptism emerged.

Thomas Müntzer was from Saxony, a "bright, but undisciplined," yet serious student at three universities who became a priest. By 1519 he was influenced by Martin Luther. He became a reformer and yet soon was sharply critical of Luther.

Yes, he promoted the use of force, but not for its own sake. He wanted the Christian faith to be expressed partly through social justice. People were oppressed; social change was needed, he said.

Müntzer "proclaimed that God would soon bring the present age of the world to an end, punishing those who oppressed the people." In 1524 he preached a blunt sermon to Duke John of Saxony, his son, and court officials, "urging them to become God's instruments in the revolution." "Not surprisingly, they declined," says William Placher.

These powerful people could have punished Müntzer had they so chose. Yet he didn't mince words. Such courage!

Here's a bit of his sermon: "... Perform a righteous judgment at God's command! You have help enough for the purpose, for Christ is your Master. Therefore let not the evildoers live longer who make us turn away from God. . . God is your protection and he will teach you to fight against his foes. He will make your hands skilled



Thomas Müntzer

in fighting and will also sustain you" (see Placher).

After that, Müntzer joined German

peasants in their short-lived Peasants' War (1524-1525). Captured at the Battle at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, he was tortured and imprisoned. He recanted and was executed (*H. Hillerbrand*).

I've read that just as modern Anabaptists reject the violent legacy of Thomas Müntzer, some Lutherans today grapple with what Martin Luther wrote to German princes about the warring peasants: that the princes could kill them just as a person would kill an attacking mad dog.

Luther had earlier, and still later, supported some of the peasants' concerns, but this was overshadowed by his support of force against them. By alienating some of the peasants, he hurt the Reformation in some circles.

We might ask what would have happened if Luther had been as forceful as Müntzer in challenging the princes to show their Christian convictions through social justice? At the same time, it's important to realize that, as Dr. Robert Kolb shows, Luther did challenge rulers.

Consider these quotes: "Disciples of Christ commit themselves to righteousness, justice, peace and love in their homeland and in the global community." "Stewardship is demonstrated in our lifestyles, in our relations with the poor and the disadvantaged, in our view of possessions, in our concern for all of God's creation and in our response to global economic injustice." Christians "should assume social responsibility; oppose corruption, discrimination, and injustice."

No, these statements aren't from the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants. They are found within our EMC Constitution.

Sources: C. S. Meyer, "Luther, Martin," in *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981); R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Mentor, 1950); W. C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (WJK, 1988); H. J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation* (Baker, repr. 1987); "Müntzer, Thomas," *Wikipedia*; "Battle of Frankenhausen," *Military Wiki*; R. Friedmann and W. O. Packull, "Müntzer, Thomas" (GAMEO, 1956, 1987); "Thomas Müntzer," *New World Encyclopedia* (2014); Robert Kolb, "Luther on Princes and Peasants," *Lutheran Quarterly* (online in more than one form).



# An Ugly Incident Over Communion

by Terry M. Smith

“**T**his is my body”(Mark 13:22)—who would fight over this? In the sixteenth century, some people. Today?

Roman Catholics hold that the wafer or bread is transformed into the actual body of Christ. To the senses, it appears as bread; to faith, it is the actual body of Christ. Menno Simons left partly because he could no longer affirm this teaching.

Martin Luther, the reformer in Germany, held that the bread remained bread, but was, in a spiritual sense, the real presence of Christ. When received by faith, it becomes a means of grace.

Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer in Zurich, held a third view: “. . . the words ‘this is my body’ were meant symbolically,” he wrote. “. . . I found the precious pearl: that the ‘is’ of the words of institution must be understood as ‘means.’” Some early Anabaptists adopted Zwingli’s view, but not all. Pilgram Marpeck, for instance, held that more than a symbol was involved.

“Overshadowing other events in the last few years of Zwingli’s life,” says historian Hans Hillerbrand, “was the controversy with Luther concerning communion.” In 1529 Philip of Hesse invited Zwingli and Luther to participate in a conversation on communion. Among those involved were Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon on the “real presence” side, and Ulrich Zwingli, Johannes Hussgen, and Martin Bucer on the symbolic or memorial side.

Philip of Hesse wisely counseled that Zwingli and Luther were both too “vehement and fiery” to talk together initially; each were first to talk with someone else. Those gathered were not to “seek his own advantage, but rather God’s honour, the profit of Christendom and brotherly accord” and, he said, to “present their arguments in modesty as becomes this matter.”

The discussion didn’t go well. Luther was uncomfortable interpreting “this is my body” figuratively. Hussgen replied, “You consider it faith that Christ is in the bread. It is an opinion and not faith. It is wrong to attribute too much to the element.” At one point Luther said, “Even if we debate for a hundred years, we are not going to prove anything.”

When it seemed that the meeting was falling apart, Martin Bucer appealed to Luther: “I ask: Will you



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**Visualize three christians sitting in the same pew today at a communion service. May they receive communion together? As a pastor, I know my answer. What’s yours?**

recognize me as a brother or do you think that I err so that I can overcome them? Please tell us what displeases you in our teaching!”

Luther refused. “I am neither your master nor your judge nor even your teacher,” he replied. “Your spirit and our spirit do not go together. . . . Thus, as said before, we commend you to the judgment of God.”

Chancellor Fiege diplomatically thanked people for their participation and dismissed the meeting. Zwingli and Luther returned home, each claiming victory.

In reality, everyone lost. The Lord’s Supper is to assist community among believers, yet Zwingli and Luther parted scarcely recognizing each other as believers. Given what was at risk within the Protestant Reformation and its positive desire to reform the Roman Catholic Church, this in-fighting served no one well. It saddens me five centuries later.

Visualize three Christians sitting in the same pew today at a communion service. One holds to a symbolic view, another the real presence, and a third transubstantiation. Do the differences matter? This is an important question.

A second important question is may they receive communion together? As a pastor, I know my answer. What’s yours?

*Sources: R. G. Clouse, “Oecolampadius” (Johannes Hussgen), Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981); H. J. Hillerbrand, ed., The Reformation (Baker, repr. 1987); R. H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Mentor, 1950).*

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# The Reformation and Unity by Kevin Wiebe

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**W**hile we can celebrate half a millennium of existence as Anabaptists, it is sobering to think that we are also commemorating what we would now call a church split. We Anabaptists typically look fondly on the courage of the Reformers, but how should our understanding of Christian unity influence our perspective of the Reformation?

I was talking recently with another EMC pastor about the nature of unity. At first we talked about the damage that is done in churches when people sew seeds of discord and disunity. One comment made was that, “Disunity is always evil!” After those words were spoken, we began to question: Is disunity always evil?

As we continued to discuss this, the first example that came to mind was Babel, where God, in fact, caused a fracture in the unity of the people, spoiling their plans. It seemed to us that God’s ways involve uniting good and fracturing the power of evil. On the other hand, the path of darkness unifies evil and fractures the good.

We often talk about unity as an end unto itself, yet it seems that unity is only good insofar as the object of that unity is good. To be united in rebellion against God surely is not good, as happened at Babel. To be united in corruption, greed, and a hunger for power surely isn’t good, as was happening in the Church leading up to the Reformation.

So what is it that should unite us as Christians? All those around the world who are disciples of Jesus, regardless of denominational affiliation, live in this strange reality: while we may do our best to distance ourselves from certain types of other believers, we are still somehow united with them as part of the Body of Christ. Thus the most profound thing that unites us is not a “thing” at all, but rather a “who.” It is Jesus that unites us, the head over his body.

So what do we make of the Reformation? There are several observations I think are important. First, there were problems in the Church leading up to the Reformation that Christians did and should stand against.



ISTOCK

## So what is it that should unite us as Christians?

Corruption, greed, and false teaching are not things for Christians to be united in. Second, the Reformers did sincerely try to reform the existing Church, as they were also aware of the importance of unity.

Third, while the Reformation did do a great deal of good, it also led to countless other church splits, many of them not worth the disunity and scandal that they caused. And fourth, while there is most definitely a kind of unity that was broken by the Reformation, that brokenness does not negate the mysterious way that we are still bound together with other believers through Jesus.

As we reflect on the Reformation, whether we commemorate it as the death of an era for the Church or celebrate it as the birth of new streams of faith, it is helpful for all believers to remember that we are ultimately united not through a statement or philosophy, but through the very person of Jesus. We are part of the same body. May we learn to better act like it!

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# The Reformation: Over or to Continue?

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by Terry M. Smith

In 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Would Martin Luther have signed the statement?

An Anglican professor of mine thought so. Yet it's said that "more than 45 percent of Lutheran church-bodies in the world did not support the declaration" (LCMS News, Dec. 8, 1999). I suspect Martin Luther would not sign it.

Is the need for the Protestant (Radical) Reformation over? The Roman Catholic Church is a diverse body and changes have happened since Vatican II and, now, with Francis I. What now?

Much can, for instance, be learned from Raymond E. Brown in New Testament study and on social justice from Walter J. Burghardt—both Jesuits.

Such examples could be multiplied. Some works of Catholic scholars are within my library and I benefit from them. I am not alone in this among EMC ministers.

Around the world, priests, monks, nuns, and many other Catholics are involved in helpful ministries in ways almost beyond counting. Catholics have suffered and died in many settings because they have followed Jesus. It would be unfair to view their many efforts, motivations, personal theology, and discipleship in simple terms: since some of Roman Catholic teaching is wrong, they can't really be following Jesus.

Is, then, the need for the Protestant Reformation over? My answer is no. Here's why in part:

- An EMC worker in northern Canada says a Bible Club team was "amazed and amused to see the people being pressured into buying their Indulgences now with quick and simple payments from their Visas and MasterCards."
- Our EMC cross-cultural workers in various countries encounter folk forms of Catholicism with mixtures of beliefs. A focus on Christ, his grace, and discipleship are key markers for our workers.
- Indulgences are still being issued.
- U.S. evangelical theologian Roger Olson recently wrote of participating in Protestant-Roman Catholic dialogues. At one, after suggesting that the Roman Catholic Church needed to become less exclusive and learn from Protestants, he found himself uninvited



(see his blog, *Is the Roman Catholic Church Catholic Enough?* Oct. 27, 2017).

The settings and climate might have changed somewhat, but the theological concerns of 16th century Protestants in Europe remain relevant today.

Others, often Protestants, say, "The Reformation must continue." How so? If it means that the Protestant Reformation's concerns must be used today to examine our faith in life, yes, it should continue.

However, "The Reformation must continue" is a slogan that can be used to set aside key doctrines of our Christian faith. Used in this way, the slogan does not adequately respect or continue the earlier Protestant (Radical) Reformation's focus on Christ, his grace, and discipleship.

Are Christians in Canada today as aware of doctrine as believers were in the 16th century in Europe? A blanket statement seems unhelpful. There are, though, some reasons for concern.

We do well to consider carefully what we think and practice. For instance, some funerals seem to be services of celebration with a confidence that nearly everyone, if not everyone, goes to heaven. A common thought among Canadians seems to be: If there is a God and if there is a heaven, then good people go there and likely all people get there. In what way does this match or contradict biblical and classic Christian teaching?

# A Reformation Fantasy

by Terry M. Smith



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Zurich, the starting site of Swiss Anabaptism

What if I'd lived in 16th century Zurich? I would not have been baptized at the home of Feliz Manz, nor would I have challenged Zurich's city council. I would not have been burned at the stake.

Rather, I would have consented to attend Reformed services and, if married with a family, to have my children baptized. It is pure fantasy to think that I would have exhibited Anabaptist heroism of the type that inspires 500 years later. Yet this fantasy is only a minor one.

The real fantasy is much greater than this. It is to think that I would have been alive long enough to make any of these choices at all.

Infant mortality rates were much higher then and medical services much poorer. Being born three months prematurely and then having pneumonia, I would have died as an infant and, possibly unnamed, been placed in a small grave and then replaced.

If I had lived for a few years, my physical limitations would have forced me, if fortunate, to be perhaps a cobbler's apprentice; at worse, to beg on the street. Education, regular employment, marriage, and children would likely have been but bitter dreams.

Four related surgeries during my childhood and as a teen would not have happened; my limitations would have been clearer. A third of a century of marriage, 20 years of education (eight higher), a call to the pastorate, 20 years in the national office, and an enjoyment of the outdoors would not have happened.

This is the only time in history in which I want to live because it is the only time that I would have lived.

Looking around at the world's situation, much is troubling. Yet I also know that I have received much of Christ's grace, Canadian privilege, white privilege, and

male privilege—as complicated a package as this is. Much of my life is good even as it includes a few obstacles that seem challenging to some observers.

What does this mean? The key question is not what I would have done five centuries ago, but what I am doing today. My privilege involves an obligation to stand up now for people less fortunate. The question includes the risks taken for others today.

One last thought. Many people five centuries ago, under pressure of potential banishment, agreed to attend Reformed services and to present their children for baptism. It's wrong to think that all of them somehow deserted Christ—to view them as akin to Demas or Judas.

They were not forced to choose between following Christ and not following Christ. They were forced to choose between following Christ as a Reformed member or as an Anabaptist. These choices are not on the same level.

Apparently one of my relatives was born in 1530 in the canton of Berne, five years after and 125 kms away from the start of the Swiss Anabaptist movement in Zurich. By the time of his birth, the movement was active in Berne where many Anabaptists suffered.

If the information about a possible relative is accurate, I don't know what choices his parents made then. But I know this: their choices during the Reformation were actual, not fantasy. This makes me respect people then who served Christ, both those who stood in a bonfire and those who did not.



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