



The Anabaptists: Radical Reformers of the 16th Century

PART I

DIRK WILLEMS SAVES HIS PURSUER – ETCHING BY JAN LUYKEN, 1685

- The word “Anabaptist” comes from the Greek *ana*, meaning *again*, and *baptizo*, meaning *to immerse* or *to dip*.
- Anabaptists were also called “Rebaptizers.”
- This group also became known as the Radical Reformers.
- The emergence of the Anabaptists begins with the work of Luther and Zwingli in reforming the church.
- Some who were impacted by the Lutherans and the reform movements became convinced that Luther and Zwingli had not gone far enough in their efforts.

- Anabaptists were the spiritual ancestors of modern [Baptists](#), [Mennonites](#), [Amish](#), [Hutterites](#), [Quakers](#) and others.
- The movement's most distinctive tenet was adult baptism.
- In its first generation, converts submitted to a second baptism, which was a crime punishable by death under the legal codes of the time.
- Members rejected the label Anabaptist, or Rebaptizer, for they repudiated their own baptism as infants as a blasphemous formality.

- They considered the public confession of sin and faith, sealed by adult baptism, to be the only proper baptism.
- Following Zwingli, they held that infants are not punishable for sin until they become aware of good and evil and can exercise their own free will, repent, and accept baptism.
- The Anabaptists also believed that the church, the community of those who have made a public commitment of faith, should be separated from the state, which they believed existed only for the punishment of sinners.
- The Anabaptist ideas ran completely counter to the notion of Christendom, and were politically dangerous.

- Most Anabaptists were pacifists who opposed war and the use of coercive measures to maintain the social order.
- They refused to fight as soldiers and were completely opposed to the military and standing armies.
- They also refused to swear oaths, including those to civil authorities.
- Many would not pay taxes, which went to pay for wars.
- For their teachings regarding baptism and for the apparent danger they posed to the political order, they were severely and widely persecuted.

- The Anabaptists, like some Protestant Reformers, were determined to restore the institutions and spirit of the primitive church.
- They often identified their suffering with that of the martyrs of the first three Christian centuries.
- Quite confident that they were living at the end of time, they expected the imminent return of Jesus Christ.
- Unhappy with Zwingli's unwillingness to undertake necessary reforms, Konrad Grebel performed the first adult baptism at Zollikon, outside Zürich, probably on January 21, 1525.

- In the *Schleitheim Confession of 1527*, an early group of Anabaptists, the Swiss Brethren, put together the basic tenets of their doctrine.
- Michael Sattler, a former Catholic monk turned Anabaptist, served as the leader of the group.
- In seven articles “The Brotherly Union,” as they called themselves, summarized certain tenets of the Swiss and south German Anabaptists.
- The first article affirmed baptism to be the basis of the Christian faith.
- Baptism is made a symbol of Christian faith and of one's intention to live a life united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

- Those who sin, and who twice refuse private admonition, shall on the third occasion be excommunicated from the brotherhood because of their life of sin.
- The duties of the *Hirt* (shepherd, pastor) were to read, admonish, teach, warn, discipline, excommunicate, to lead in prayer, to administer the Lord's Supper, and to undertake the general oversight of the congregation.
- The shepherd or pastor is the only church officer.
- There is no denominational church hierarchy as is found in Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, etc.

- The child of God is to follow absolutely the law of love as taught by the New Testament, and leave the worldly sword to the officers of the state as ordained by God.
- Oaths are held to be inconsistent for finite creatures, and forbidden for the Christian by the express commands of Scripture.
- The goal was an entirely separate, pure church, the members of which would be forbidden to associate with Roman Catholics or with other Protestants.
- The idea of withdrawing from the world and forming a separate Christian society was quite different than the views of the Lutheran and Calvinist reformers.

- The Anabaptist view is completely counter to the idea of Christendom.
- The Anabaptist idea of the church as a separate entity from the rest of society leads to the idea of the separation of church and state.
- For many 16th century Europeans, these ideas are so revolutionary that they are nearly unthinkable!
- It appeared that Anabaptist ideas and practices were destructive to society, so that even Lutherans, Calvinists and other Reformed groups looked upon them with hatred.

- Luther and Calvin advocated for religious reform but never considered separating church and state.
- The *Schleitheim Confession of 1527* achieved wide recognition after the trial and execution of Michael Sattler, the Anabaptist leader who had led the Swiss Brethren, by the civil (Roman Catholic) authorities at Rottenburg, Germany on May 20, 1527.
- Sattler was charged with defying the emperor, rejecting the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, rejecting infant baptism, rejecting extreme unction, dishonoring the saints, teaching against oaths, practicing the love feast, marrying, and advocating nonresistance.

- After the trial Sattler was tortured and then burned to death. His wife and other Anabaptists were executed also.
- His antagonists drew up nine articles that refuted the *Schleitheim Confession* and demonstrated the official opinion that Anabaptism was immoral and treasonable.
- Thus began the severe and widespread persecution of all types of Anabaptist groups throughout Europe.
- In 1529 the Second Diet of Speiers (Germany) issued a death decree against the Anabaptists.
- Despite the severe persecutions, the number of people who joined the movement increased and many Anabaptists sought to move to places where there was less persecution.



- One of the most important of the early Anabaptist leaders is Balthasar Hubmaier.
- Born c. 1480-81 of peasant stock in Augsburg (Germany), he managed to obtain a university education, and like so many of his day, went from the university to the church.
- He was mentored by (Catholic) John Eck, who had argued theology with Martin Luther.

- Hubmaier first encountered reformation ideas through Lutherans, but later came to support Zwingli.
- Hubmaier introduced Anabaptism to Moravia (eastern Czech Republic), whose ruling elite welcomed colonies of Anabaptists and other settlers.
- Persecuted even by the Zwinglians for his beliefs, he was arrested in 1525 at Zürich and forced to recant his views.
- Hubmaier continued to preach throughout what is today Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic.
- He was finally captured by the Hapsburg (Austrian) army and put to death as a heretic on March 10, 1528.

- A very important and well-known Anabaptist of this period is Menno Simons.
- Menno was born in 1496 (exact date unknown) in the little village of Witmarsum, Dutch province of Friesland.
- Little is known about his youth and parental home. His parents, who lived in Witmarsum, were probably dairy farmers.



- Since Menno did not enter the priesthood until the age of 28, it can be assumed that he made the decision for this career relatively late in his life.
- He may have received his training in a monastery of Friesland or in a neighboring province.
- Menno knew Latin, and Greek was not entirely foreign to him. During his study he acquainted himself with some of the Latin Church Fathers.
- One of his critics said of him, “he took the Bible into his hands without formal training causing such great damage...that posterity will not be able to shed sufficient tears because of it.”

- Simons was ordained a priest in 1524 at the age of 28 at Utrecht.
- His first parish was Pingjum near Witmarsum, where he served as a vicar, with two colleagues.
- Judged by his reminiscences he was not deeply convinced of the sacredness of his duties, for he states that he joined his fellow priests in "playing cards, drinking. . . ."
- But during the first year he was suddenly frightened. While administering the Mass he began to doubt whether the bread and the wine were actually being changed into the flesh and blood of Christ.
- First he considered these thoughts the whisperings of Satan; but he was unable to free himself through "sighings, prayers, and confessings."

- At that time in the Netherlands there was a (heretical) group known as the *Sacramentists*.
- The Sacramentists denied the actual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, i.e., transubstantiation.
- This thought was first advocated publicly by Cornelis Hoen, a Dutch lawyer.
- The Sacramentists were promoters of a reform movement in the Low Countries advocating the removal of abuses in the Catholic Church and a return to a Biblical Christianity, although they were not specifically "Lutheran" or "Reformed."

- Zwingli became aware of Hoen's and other Sacramentists' views, and agreed with many of them.
- Hoen's *Epistola Christiana* was published by Zwingli in 1525.
- After Simons had been tormented for about two years by his doubts he finally turned to the Bible and searched it for help on his particular problem.
- "I did not get very far in it before I saw that we had been deceived," is Simons's summary of the result of his search.
- In the Scriptures he found certainty regarding the Lord's Supper.
- He found what he believed to be true: that the Sacramentist view, which interprets the meaning of the Lord's Supper as being symbolic, was the Biblical view.

- Now Simons perceived that he was torn between two authorities: the Bible and the (Roman Catholic) Church.
- Thus far he had avoided the use of the Bible, for he believed that the Bible had taken Luther, Zwingli, and others out of the Roman Catholic Church; now he was on the same path.
- Which of the two authorities would win? He wanted to be loyal to both.
- In the meantime Simons found help by reading certain writings of Luther, which taught him that the Scriptures should have the first place.

- Simons also believed that Luther's writings also taught him that if violations of the tradition of the Catholic Church have a Biblical basis they can not lead to eternal death.
- Gradually the Scriptures became the authority for Simons, and the source of his sermons.
- Soon he became known as an "evangelical preacher," yet he complains that in those days "the world loved him and he the world."
- Thus Simons, influenced by the Sacramentists and Luther, began to place the Scriptures above the authority of the church.

- Simons then began to consider whether infant baptism was valid and Scriptural.
- He did not leave the Roman Catholic Church until January 1536.
- He went into hiding, and traveled through the Low Countries and German provinces looking for sanctuary.
- Many Anabaptists, in hiding themselves, came to Simons and asked that he lead them.
- During this period, Simons came into contact with many Anabaptists who held differing views on the church, the Bible and even the deity of Jesus Christ.

- David Joris was considered by many to be an extreme Radical Reformer.
- His significance for the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands long depreciated, David Joris is now seen as the most important Dutch Anabaptist leader from the Bocholt conference of 1536 until his departure for Basel in 1544.



- Joris embraced 16th century *Spiritualism*, which has been described as a tendency in the period of the Reformation to emphasize the possession of the Spirit (occasionally called the Holy Spirit, by Anabaptists also called "the Power of God" or the "Heart") over against a literal acceptance of the Scriptures.
- This was pitted against a stronger reliance upon the letter of the Scriptures such as with Luther and Calvin.
- Spiritualists emphasized inner illumination, with its corollaries: freedom of decision, centering in man's conscience, and neglect of historical elements in Christianity such as the organized church.

- Spiritualists de-emphasized the sacraments (as means of salvation), and the historical setting of Christian events: creation, fall, redemption, Last Judgment, etc.
- While all Scripturally oriented Christians center around some type of organized form of church life, Spiritualists usually minimize these social aspects of faith, relying on the "invisible" church rather than on any visible one.
- These ideas tend to promote a strong individualistic element within Christianity.
- Lutheran critics began to label all dissidents as *Schwärmer* – German for "enthusiasts", with the connotation of "fanatics."

- In its extremist forms Spiritualism moves even further away from its New Testament matrix, only to become a vague "spiritual religion" of some Neoplatonic character, hence no longer justifiably called "Christian."
- The real *Schwärmer* of the 16th century were the Inspirationists who relied on inner inspirations and visions, such as the Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, David Joris and Melchior Hoffman.
- Many Anabaptist Spiritualists were focused on eschatology, the imminent return of Christ, angels, demons, dreams and visions.



- Melchior Hoffman (b. 1495) a German mystic and lay preacher has roots reaching back to the Spiritual Franciscan tradition.
- His insistence on the superiority of the spirit over the letter was supported by a medieval allegorical hermeneutic.
- He combined Spiritualist (mystical) ideas with Anabaptist principles.

- Hoffman was not an educated priest who left the Catholic church to join a reform movement.
- He was a skilled artisan and furrier who became caught up in the religious upheaval occurring in Europe.
- He traveled throughout the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia.
- Hoffman wrote a commentary on the Book of Daniel in 1526.
- He seems to have embraced some Anabaptist ideas, but came up with many ideas of his own, including:

- The end of the world would occur in 1533 and that he would ride into Strassburg with Christ in the clouds to establish the New Jerusalem.
- Christ had a “heavenly” or “celestial” flesh. When Mary was pregnant with Christ, she did not furnish any part of the flesh of Christ herself. Her body provided only nourishment for His.
- Rejected the typical Anabaptist pacifism and advocated that the children of light should fight against the children of darkness.
- Followers were known as Melchiorites.

The Anabaptist Movement in Münster

- Anabaptists took over Münster in northeastern Germany, led by John Mathijs and Jan van Leyden.
- They expelled the Roman Catholics, but the bishop and his armies laid siege to the city.
- Münster became the refuge of all persecuted, desperate people and the "New Jerusalem" of radical Anabaptism.
- Evangelists spread the news that the Lord had chosen Münster to establish His kingdom on earth.

- On April 4, 1534, Jan Matthijs, a fanatical representative of the view that “the sons of Jacob” would vanquish the “sons of Esau,” was suddenly seized by a foolhardy inspiration to go outside the city walls with a few followers to disperse the besieging army, as in the days of Israel. He fell in this attempt.
- Hille Feicken, an Anabaptist woman, sacrificed herself in an attempt to kill the bishop as Judith had beheaded Holofernes in Israel. She was captured and put to death.
- Jan van Leyden instituted the principle of community of goods, a practice that some Anabaptist groups followed.

- The practice of community of goods was in imitation of the Jerusalem church in the Book of Acts, in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God.
- More complicated is the reason for introducing polygamy. Jan van Leyden introduced it against the judgment of some of the more serious ministers.
- It probably was originally an impulse of the "king of the new Zion."
- In the "New Jerusalem," the capital of the "New Israel" in which the children of light were fighting the children of darkness, according to the pattern of Israel in the Old Testament, "King David" could with the same justification introduce this Old Testament practice.

- Polygamy served at the same time as a social welfare practice since the number of men continued to decrease during the siege of the city.
- Word spread throughout Europe about the activities and persecutions of the Anabaptists in Münster.
- The idea of armed uprisings was a potent idea for many Dutch Anabaptists, who were from the lower classes and very poor.
- Like the Peasants' Revolt in Germany during Luther's time, the incident in Münster appealed to the lower classes and the peasants, who felt disenfranchised by social, political and religious reform.

- The Anabaptist rule over Münster came to an end in June 1535. It had lasted about a year.
- Jan van Leyden had sent out “apostles” to Holland and elsewhere trying to recruit followers and build up his “army” in Münster.
- Although some Anabaptists were able to get into the city, van Leyden was not successful in getting the large numbers of men he needed to fight the Catholics.
- Finally on June 25, 1535, Heinrich Gresbeck, an Anabaptist leader, went over to the Catholics. He let the bishop’s army into the city.

- Gresbeck led a group of Roman Catholic troops through a gate into the city.
- The Anabaptist leaders were cruelly tortured, displayed in various parts of the country, and put to death on Jan. 23, 1536.
- Their corpses were hung on the tower of St. Lambert's church in Münster. The cages are still hanging on the same tower to this day.



- In 1987 the church installed three yellow bulbs in each of the cages to be lit from dusk until dawn each night "in memory of their departed souls."

The Hutterites



Jakob Hutter (c. 1500 – Feb. 25, 1536), was a Tyrolean Anabaptist leader and founder of the Hutterites. He was a hatmaker and itinerant craftsman. He probably first encountered Anabaptists in Klagenfurt, Austria, and soon thereafter was converted to their belief.

- Hutter began preaching in the mountainous Puster Valley region (between Italy and Austria), forming several small congregations.
- As soon as the Habsburg (Austrian Roman Catholic) authorities in the Tyrol learned of these activities in early 1529, they began to persecute the Anabaptists.
- The beliefs of the Hutterites were:
 - The church must go back to the primitive beliefs of the New Testament.
 - The church community must hold all goods in common, just as in the New Testament.

Peter Riedemann, a member of Hutter's community, described Hutterite beliefs:

- Christians must forsake private property.
- A regenerate person has no desire to own personal goods.
- The community of goods is a necessary sign of the true Church as seen in Acts 2.
- “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and **especially to those who are of the household of the faith.**” (Gal. 6:10)

Persecution led to loss of goods, livelihoods and lives. Orphans had to be looked after. The community needed to take care of its own.

- Due to the often severe persecutions and difficulties that Anabaptists faced, and their common pacifist belief of nonresistance, these people began to think of themselves as “the quiet in the land.”
- Due to the conditions in Europe, their beliefs meant that they had to constantly be on the move in order to escape the sword and fire of both church and state.
- Hutter escaped out of the Tyrol into Moravia (eastern Czech Republic), but the emperor Ferdinand I had decreed that all Anabaptists be expelled from Moravia.
- Hutter and his wife were tortured and executed in 1536.

Hutter wrote the following words to a magistrate in 1535:
"Now we are camping on the heath, without disadvantage to any man. We do not want to wrong or harm any human being, not even our worst enemy. Our walk in life is to live in truth and righteousness of God, in peace and unity. We do not hesitate to give an account of our conduct to anyone. But whoever says that we have camped on a field with so many thousands, as if we wanted war or the like, talks like a liar and a rascal. If all the world were like us there would be no war and no injustice. We can go nowhere; may God in heaven show us where we shall go."