

Joe Peckman

In 1535, the Dutch Anabaptist movement reached a moment of crisis. The failed attempt to establish a political kingdom in Munster left the Anabaptists divided amongst themselves, persecuted even more intensely by Catholic and Protestant authorities, and sorely lacking stable leadership. This leadership crisis called for a spokesperson with sound theology, solid organizational skills, and a new, sustainable vision for the future of the church. Menno Simons recognized this need and came to view it as his personal calling. In retrospect it becomes apparent that the success of Menno Simons was partially due to the conditions created by the Munster revolution before Menno had joined the Anabaptists, and partially due to his leadership qualities and ability to direct his followers in the development of a stable Anabaptist church.

Leadership of the Dutch Anabaptists

In discussing the unique leadership of Menno Simons, it is important to discuss what is meant by “leadership,” or more specifically what it meant to be a leader in the Dutch Anabaptist movement in the 1530-50’s. The Anabaptist movement as a whole was not a well-organized movement as it spread across Europe, and, as I will show, Dutch Anabaptism reflected this lack of organization. Among the scattered groups of followers, individuals were ordained as elders (also referred to as bishops) and given responsibility for the health of the church and given authority to baptize new members and ordain new leaders. These individual elders traveled throughout the Low Countries, baptizing and organizing local congregations by connecting members with one another, establishing local leadership, instructing the church in spiritual matters, and settling disputes. However, these duties were not established or regulated, there was

nothing resembling official church doctrine, and the relationships between the elders were not formally defined, though informal contacts were often maintained.

Each elder was essentially a traveling preacher with no definite authority to appeal to except for his particular interpretation of the Bible. However, especially among the militant groups among the Dutch Anabaptists, from time to time a particularly dynamic personality would arise out of one of the sects to serve as an unofficial spokesperson. As various groups and elders that agreed with his perspective would rally themselves around him, he would become the focus of attention within the Anabaptists and also for the Catholic and Protestant authorities. Although there was no official power to this position of spokesperson, neither was there a system of accountability and the power of influence was enormous. Thus, an effective Anabaptist leader was one who was able to unite the movement beneath him and establish an effective hierarchy to carry out his plans.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the rise of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster under the leadership of Jan Matthys. In 1534, Matthys effectively capitalized on the apocalyptic teachings of Melchior Hoffman—by then imprisoned in Strasburg—by uniting many of the splintered Anabaptist groups and instituting a hierarchy with himself at the top. Following Matthys' death, Jan van Leidan claimed the top of the hierarchy and proclaimed himself king. The violent revolt was ultimately put down after nearly two years by a Catholic army that killed the prominent leaders and scattering the survivors.

In the aftermath of Munster, the remaining Anabaptist elders were more divided than ever, and the divisions, along with increased pressure from the government, kept any one elder from maintaining the spokesperson position. These were the conditions that actually convinced Menno Simons to join the Anabaptists, for he felt that he was needed to protect the interests of

the common Anabaptists. Not long after Menno joined the Anabaptist movement, he was ordained as an elder and initially began serving in the role of the traveling preacher like those elders before him. As he traveled, baptized, and organized local congregations, he also wrote a great deal about the issues facing the larger Anabaptist church—the violence of Munster, persecution from Catholic and Protestant authorities, and basic doctrinal disputes. It was through these writings that Menno gained recognition as the next unofficial spokesperson for the pacifist Anabaptists.

The significance of Menno Simons is that during his time of service as an elder and spokesperson, the church leadership structure changed and developed into a lasting organization. Having gained prominence as the unofficial spokesperson, unlike Matthys and van Leidan, Menno did not seek to use his power to glorify himself and solidify his position at the top of the movement. He recognized the need for an organized church structure, but he rejected both the personality-driven sensationalism of the Munster Anabaptists and the top-down hierarchy of the Catholics and Protestants. In its place he built a church based on the Scriptures, with the responsibility for interpretation resting on each individual Anabaptist, and the structure of church discipline through the ban, or shunning.

Individual members were held accountable by the rest of the local congregation, who, through a loose organization of the elders, were accountable to the rest of the congregations of the Anabaptist church. Elders still traveled, preached, baptized and maintained local congregations, but now they were organized with geographical regions of responsibility, regular meetings between elders, and a structure of accountability to local congregations and the larger church. The unofficial spokesperson role was still necessary, but now with a definite arrangement to ensure that his teachings reflected the Scriptural interpretations of the group. No

more would leaders be able to use their influence to lead a movement based on visions or personal agendas; now the church was solidified with each member bearing responsibility for everyone else. Thus Menno changed the very definition of leadership within the Anabaptist movement and thereby changed a disconnected movement into an established church.

The Origins of the Anabaptist Movement

The spread of Anabaptism throughout Europe was not a single, united movement, even though it grew primarily from a group of reformers in Switzerland; rather, it grew in leaps and bounds, lacking consistent organization and splitting into multiple sects. The original “Swiss Brethren” Anabaptist thinkers, Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, Felix Manz, and others, embraced adult baptism as the true teaching of Jesus, and called for a separation between secular government and the Church, solidifying their positions in the Schleitheim Confession of 1529.¹

Often referred to as the “Left Wing of the Reformation” or the “Radical Reformers,”² the Anabaptists were suspicious to the authorities of both church and state as heretics and revolutionaries. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli all wrote much to refute the teachings of the Anabaptists and government officials throughout most of Europe ordered the arrest and execution of Anabaptists, forcing the movement to maintain an air of secrecy which made it all the more suspicious. Thus the group was splintered by persecution from both Catholic and Protestant governments, and many diverse theological ideas were lumped together with the movement as it spread from place to place without any fixed organizational structure. Sometimes these ideas were simply passed by word-of-mouth connections, and other times

¹ Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 39-41.

² Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1964), 11-12

through Anabaptist groups that were forced to emigrate due to persecution, but mostly these teachings were spread by church leaders who traveled from city to city preaching and teaching.³

The Emergence of Anabaptism in the Low Countries

It was in this splintered form that Anabaptism reached the Low Countries, the region including the Netherlands and northern Germany. However, the Dutch Anabaptists were not to remain disorganized for long, ultimately emerging with a semblance of order as the Mennonite church. Three stages of development are apparent within the Dutch Anabaptist movement: the spread of Anabaptist ideas throughout the region, the Anabaptist revolution in Munster and the subsequent reaction to the uprising, and the emergence of a more solidified church through the efforts of Menno Simons and his colleagues. The third stage, as well as a bit of the second, is the primary focus of this paper, but it is necessary to engage all three stages to best understand the impact of Menno's leadership.

The Netherlands of Menno Simons' day was rife with changes and tension between politics and religion as new theological ideas were entertained by leaders and lay persons alike. In the 1520-30's, the Dutch people were languishing under the oppressive rule of the Holy Roman Emperor, the King of Spain. Floods, plague, and constant military presence in the area made common people of the region receptive to the ideas of the Renaissance and the Reformation that were sweeping across Europe.⁴ When introduced into this setting, Anabaptist ideas flourished, although they were easily mixed with revolutionary fervor.

Melchior Hoffman was one of the first to bring Anabaptism to the Low Countries. Hoffman, a furrier-turned-Lutheran Reformation evangelist who was denounced for his views on

³ Dyck, 45-46

⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition*, (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 212-213.

the Mass by Luther himself in 1529,⁵ likely came into contact with Swiss Anabaptists in Strasbourg in 1529-30. While accepting their teachings on adult baptism, Hoffman infused his particular style of Anabaptism with the apocalyptic notions that earlier had caused him to fall out of favor with Luther.⁶ Hoffman preached that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and that Strasbourg was to be established as the “New Jerusalem” prophesied about in the Bible. Surprisingly, in spite of his apocalyptic visions, Hoffman strongly embraced nonviolence, believing that God would establish his earthly Kingdom without human violence.⁷ Hoffman gained many followers throughout the Low Countries, but in 1533 he was arrested by the authorities in Strasbourg and remained in prison until his death in 1543.⁸ Even though Hoffman was silenced by his imprisonment, his teachings had set off the spark that would erupt within the Anabaptist movement throughout the Low Countries.

The Anabaptist Revolution in Munster

When Hoffman was imprisoned in 1533 by Strasbourg authorities, Jan Matthys took up the Melchiorite vision, albeit slightly altered. Matthys shifted the focus from Strasbourg, proclaiming that Munster was now to be the sight of the New Jerusalem and that it was the responsibility of the true church to prepare the city for the coming of Christ and the beginning of the earthly Kingdom of God.⁹ In February of 1534, Matthys and his followers put their violent plan into action, forcing every resident of the city to accept adult baptism or to leave the city. As

⁵ J.C. Wenger, “Melchiorites,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, n.d., ><http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/melchior.htm>> (23 October 2002).

⁶ Harold S. Bender, “A Brief Biography of Menno Simons,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 7

⁷ J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 80

⁸ Wenger, “Melchiorites”

⁹ Snyder, 214-215.

word of the revolt spread, a steady stream of Anabaptist refugees headed into Munster the city, joyfully anticipating the end of persecution and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Their political kingdom was short-lived, however, as the bishop of Munster soon returned with an army and laid siege to the city. Conditions within the city rapidly worsened when Matthys was killed in battle, as his successor, Jan van Leidan, declared himself the new King David and instituted a totalitarian rule based on polygamy. The revolt ended in June of 1535 as the bishop's army recaptured the city, killing almost all of the male population and hanging the bodies of van Leidan and two other leaders from a cathedral within the city.¹⁰

The aftereffects of the uprising in Munster were felt for decades afterwards by Anabaptists throughout northern Europe, especially in the Low Countries. As Mennonite historian Cornelius J. Dyck writes, “the Munsterite movement had aroused the hopes of many among the common people in Northwestern Germany and the Netherlands. Now they were not only disappointed at its failure, but even more at the bad name it gave to Anabaptists everywhere. Because of Munster Anabaptists were now labeled as visionaries and revolutionaries.”¹¹ Before Munster, the movement had captured the interest of many of the commoners and had been largely tolerated—unofficially, of course—or at least dismissed as insignificant in the face of constant political turmoil between Catholics and Protestants, now Anabaptism was considered to be a real threat. Anabaptist leaders were now hunted with a new sense of urgency by Catholic and Protestant authorities alike; those peasants who sheltered traveling Anabaptist teachers and sought to live by their teachings were harassed and sometimes put to death.¹² A moment of crisis faced the Anabaptists and their leaders were divided among

¹⁰ Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of Savage Wolves* (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000), 14-16.

¹¹ Dyck, 101.

¹² *Ibid*, 101-2

themselves. This crisis situation set the stage for the start of Menno Simon's ministry among the Dutch Anabaptists.

Divisions following Munster Lead to Menno's Conversion

The revolt at Munster had two primary effects on Dutch Anabaptism. First, it intensified the division between pacifist and revolutionary Anabaptist leaders; second, it put much pressure—both internal and external—on the leaders of both sides of the debate. This pressure proved to be too much for almost all of them, and their failings created a leadership void within the movement. It was this division between pacifists and revolutionaries that gave Menno Simons reason to join the Anabaptist movement and this leadership void that allowed him to quickly gain prominence.

Even before the fall of Munster in 1535, two branches were emerging within the Dutch Anabaptists. Mennonite historian J.C. Wenger describes the split as two branches of Melchiorites (followers of Melchior Hoffman), the “Peace Wing” under the leadership of brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips, and the “apocalyptic and revolutionary Melchiorites” by Jan Matthys into the revolution at Munster.¹³ As Wenger makes apparent, the division existed before Munster, but with in the aftermath of such a bloody revolt the discussion moved from a theoretical debate to a practical crisis of enormous consequences. The groups were divided over the error of Munster: the pacifists preached that Munster was an un-Christian abuse of authority, while the Munsterites believed that the only error was its military weakness.

In 1535, Menno Simons joined this debate on the side of the pacifists. At that time he was still serving as a Catholic priest, yet he recognized the severe ramifications for the common people should the Munsterites win the debate. A close look at Menno's conversion experience

¹³ Wenger, “Melchiorites”.

reveals his loyalty to his parishioners and the importance he placed on the outcome of the pacifism debate.

Menno was born in 1496 into a peasant farming family in the Friesland province in northeast Holland. Early in his life, his parents decided that Menno was to become a member of the Catholic clergy and sent him to study at a nearby monastery. Upon completion of his training, Menno was ordained as a priest in 1524 and was assigned a parish near his hometown of Witmarsum in 1531.¹⁴ Menno was quite comfortable in his life as a country priest, in spite of growing awareness that he was not living the life called for by the Bible, especially the teachings of Christ. Of these years, Menno writes:

There I spoke much of the Word of the Lord, without spirituality of love, as all hypocrites do, and by this means I made disciples of my own kind, vain boasters and frivolous babblers, who, alas, like myself did not take these matters too seriously. Although I had now acquired considerable knowledge of the Scriptures yet I wasted that knowledge through the lusts of my youth in an impure, sensual, unprofitable life, and sought nothing but gain, ease, favor of men, splendor, name and fame, as all generally do who sail that ship.¹⁵

In his personal study of the Scriptures, Menno began to support Anabaptist teachings on the Mass and adult baptism, but refused initially to acknowledge his changing beliefs because of the public repercussions that were sure to follow.¹⁶

Eventually Menno's convictions caught up with him, however. Sometime in 1534, he learned of the Anabaptist uprising in Munster, which troubled him greatly. He was especially concerned at the far-reaching impact of the revolt even among the common people of his own parish, as he later wrote that "many pious hearts in our quarter were deceived."¹⁷ Many Anabaptists near Witmarsum were caught up in the revolutionary fervor of Munster and in an

¹⁴ Bender, "A Brief Biography," 4-6

¹⁵ Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 669.

¹⁶ Simons, "A Reply to Gellius Faber," 668.

¹⁷ Ibid, 669.

effort to quell the local uprising Menno twice met with Munsterite leaders, apparently to no avail.

In March of 1535, even after the revolution in Munster itself had turned sour, approximately 300 Anabaptist rebels attacked an old monastery, Oldeklooster (literally “old monastery”)¹⁸ not far from Witmarsum and barricaded themselves inside.¹⁹ The authorities quickly amassed a vastly superior army and within seven days had retaken the monastery and routed the Anabaptists, killing most of them.²⁰ As Menno writes in his retelling of his conversion experience, the loss of lives at Oldeklooster was appalling to him and he held himself personally responsible. “The poor straying sheep who wandered as sheep without a proper shepherd...in opposition to the Spirit, Word, and example of Christ, they drew the sword to defend themselves,” he wrote afterwards. “After this had transpired the blood of these people, although misled, fell so hot upon my heart that I could not stand it, nor find rest in my soul.”²¹ He saw these “zealous children” willingly following their convictions to their deaths, even while he failed to publicly acknowledge his own convictions so that he “might enjoy physical comfort and escape the cross of Christ.”²²

Even further, Menno recognized that these people lacked the theological knowledge to recognize the heresies of the revolutionary violence; without strong leadership the “sheep” were vulnerable to every storm that passed through. Confronted with this crisis in his own backyard, Menno could no longer remain unmoved in his comfortable priestly lifestyle. In April of 1535,

¹⁸ J.C. Wenger, ed. note in “A Reply To Gellius Faber,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 670.

¹⁹ It should be noted that one of the rebels killed at Olde Clooseter was named Pieter Simons. Many historians have speculated that Pieter was the brother of Menno Simons, but Menno does not mention a brother in his autobiographical writings, including those on the events at Oldeklooster, although he does mention “a poor brother who was fallen” in his “Reply to Gellius Faber.” There is not a consensus among historians on the matter.

²⁰ James M. Stayer, “Oldeklooster and Menno,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 9,1 (1978): 56.

²¹ Simons. “Reply to Gellius Faber,” 670.

²² *ibid*, 670.

he began to publicly proclaim his Anabaptist views from the pulpit²³ and “faithfully warned everyone against the abominations of Munster, condemning king, polygamy, kingdom, sword, etc.”²⁴

The Error of the Munsterites

For Menno, the need to lead people away from the dangers of apocalyptic thinking was so great that he gave up everything for which he had previously lived and put his own life in danger. For nine months after publicly acknowledging his Anabaptist beliefs, he remained at Witmarsum, using his pulpit to proclaim the message of pacifism. During this time he also wrote a booklet entitled *The Blasphemy of Jan van Leidan*, in which he declared his opposition to the use of force in the name of Christianity.²⁵ To Menno, the error of the Munsterites was clear: they sought to establish the Kingdom of God on their own human strength and thus elevated themselves to a position of authority that should have been reserved for Christ alone. “We do not serve the contentious ones [the Munsterites],” he writes, “Let them rave, let them put forth another king. Yet will Christ remain the eternal King reigning over his believing church...None shall succeed who exalts himself to Christ.”²⁶ In his view, the consequence for the arrogance of the Munsterites was their destruction at the hands of the Catholic army.

Menno had a different vision for the purpose of the true church. Whereas the Munsterites saw the nature of the church as being responsible to prepare an earthly kingdom in preparation for the return of Christ, Menno believed that the Kingdom of God was to be found already in the true church, rather than in a political kingdom. The true church was to Menno a place “where

²³ Snyder, 225.

²⁴ Simons, “Reply to Gellius Faber,” 671.

²⁵ Menno Simons, “Blasphemy of John of Leiden,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986),32

the Spirit, Word, sacraments, and life of Christ are found.”²⁷ To be sure, Menno believed that the Kingdom of God was imminent, but unlike other Anabaptist theologians, Menno did not strive to establish this kingdom by force and viewed it as separated from any political empire. “All the evangelical scriptures teach us that the church of Christ was and is, in doctrine, life, and worship, a people separated from the world,” he wrote.²⁸

This doctrine of separatism became the basis for Menno’s church. Separation from the political and government structures was the only way Menno saw for his followers to be able to remain true to their convictions while remaining in relative safety. Thus protecting the church from New Jerusalem teachings and impressing the distinction between the pacifist Anabaptists and the revolutionaries became Menno’s life work. Menno’s conversion experience clearly shows that in reaction to Munster, Christ and the Bible were the center of Menno’s faith, rather than in a hope for an earthly New Jerusalem.

Munster Leads to Failings Among Anabaptist Leaders

In addition to increasing the urgency of the debate between the pacifist and revolutionary branches of Dutch Anabaptism, the second factor created by the Munster rebellion was intensified pressure on the leadership of both branches. In the days leading up to Munster, both sides of the pacifist/revolutionary debate had strong leadership, although neither group was particularly organized or solidified. The Philips brothers very ably defended their pacifist position with Obbe taking the lead, and baptized many followers, while Munsterite leaders flourished under the teachings of Melchior Hoffman.²⁹ However, after the Munster uprising was

²⁶ Simons, “Blasphemy,” 42

²⁷ Quoted by Franklin H. Little in *A Tribute To Menno Simons*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961),25.

²⁸ quoted by Harold S Bender in *The Anabaptist Vision*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944),27.

²⁹ Dyck 101, and Snyder, 222.

put down, heightened persecution from both Catholic and Protestant authorities throughout the Low Countries eventually caused leaders from both branches to succumb to the pressures of leading an oppressed people. Ultimately, David Joris and Menno Simons both stepped up to provide the necessary leadership to the movement following Munster, but the success of both was due in large part to the death or departure of other potential leaders.

Following the failure of Munster, the visionary Munsterites who survived responded to the increased pressure from the authorities by going into hiding, all the while planning to re-establish their kingdom elsewhere. They viewed the military defeat at Munster as the work of the devil, merely a sign that God was preparing to punish the Holy Roman Empire and the House of Habsburg-Burgundy. While their leadership remained fragmented, a Munsterite group in the Dutch city of Groningen recognized in Jan van Batenburg a leader under which the movement could reorganize itself.

Batenburg was a member of the lesser nobility in the region surrounding Amsterdam who had become interested in the Anabaptist movement when the kingdom of Munster was at its peak. After a political falling out in his hometown, Batenburg had been exiled to Groningen, where he eventually connected with the Munsterite fugitives. The group became convinced that van Batenburg was just the man to become the new “King David” and offered to make him their leader in April of 1535. As historian James Stayer describes, “whatever his initial fright about slaying the Habsburg and the pope and ruling the world, Batenburg rapidly accustomed himself to these ideas.”³⁰ Obviously these ideas concerned the authorities, and Batenburg was eventually tracked down and executed in 1538. Still, his followers continued to cause trouble throughout the Low Countries, spreading rumors about a second revolution in Munster even as late as

³⁰ James M. Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword 2nd ed. (Lawrence, KA: Coronado Press, 1976), 285.

1580.³¹ Without capable leadership, though, these most violent Munsterites failed to maintain their attraction among most of the Anabaptists, who turned either to the nonresistance espoused by the Philips brothers and Menno Simons or to the apocalyptic spiritualism of David Joris.

The Philips brothers, Obbe and Dirk, were clearly the leaders of the “Peace Wing” of Dutch Anabaptism before and in the days immediately following the Munster uprising. Before Menno had even considered leaving his priestly position in Witmarsum, Obbe and Dirk were working hard to refute the teachings of the Munsterites to keep the revolutionary fervor from spreading further among the Anabaptists of the Low Countries. Of the two brothers, Obbe was the dominant leader; in fact, Obbe Philip’s work as an elder was so influential that many of his followers were referred to as Obbenites by their associates and the government authorities.³² When Menno did renounce his Catholic ordination and position in January of 1536, it was likely Obbe and Dirk Philips whom he sought out for guidance and protection.³³ Obbe quickly recognized the leadership gifts of Menno, including his writing ability and theological training, and within a year had, with the assistance of several others, convinced Menno to accept a position as an elder in the church. In fact, it was Obbe who ordained Menno sometime in 1537, likely in Gronigen. However, the constant struggle of leading a people persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant authorities, as well as divided against itself by revolutionary leaders, proved to be too much for Obbe. He relinquished his leadership position sometime in 1539-40, and eventually, under pressure from the Catholic authorities, he renounced his Anabaptist beliefs entirely.³⁴

³¹ Snyder, 223.

³² Bender, “A Brief Biography,” 15

³³ Menno’s autobiographical info says that he “sought out the pious”, who are believed to be the Philips brothers and their followers. Simons, “A Reply to Gellius Faber,” 671.

³⁴ Bender, “A Brief Biography,” 15-16.

After Obbe Philips left the church, only two experienced leaders were left among the pacifists, Menno Simons and Obbe's brother, Dirk. Menno had been ordained as an elder in the church in 1537, but at the time of Obbe's departure was only four years removed from his Catholic parish. Although little information has been uncovered about Menno's activities during those years, it is evident that he was already showing himself to be a capable writer and organizer. Thus when Obbe abandoned the church, Menno was already a natural choice to be considered as his replacement, even though Dirk Philips had been with the Anabaptist church much longer

Dirk Philips had been by Obbe's side from their beginnings in speaking against the Munster revolt. However, for reasons that are not entirely clear, Dirk never took up the mantle of his brother, instead choosing to defer to Menno's leadership. Accounts of Dirk Philips' involvement mostly describe him as being very supportive of Menno's work, willingly accepting Menno's leadership while continuing to serve as an elder for the duration of his life.³⁵ While remaining an important figure in the church, it appears that Dirk Philips was best suited—and quite willing—to play the role of sidekick, both to his brother and Menno. Whatever the case, in the years following the departure of Obbe Philips, Menno shared in and benefited from the work of Dirk Philips, but eventually surpassed him to gain prominence as the sole most important leader and spokesperson for the pacifist Anabaptists.

Menno Secures His Leadership Position

Following his conversion and acceptance of a position as an elder in the Anabaptist church, Menno's primary concern was the well being—both spiritual and physical—of his followers. For seven years, from 1536-1543, he remained in east Holland, moving often to avoid

arrest, teaching, writing, and organizing congregations in each area he visited.³⁶ His rise to prominence and his ability to maintain his position as the spokesperson for Dutch Anabaptism were not due to a desire for personal advancement, but rather a humble response to what he saw as a call from God. His description of his decision to accept the office of elder shows this in two ways: his heartfelt concern and sense of responsibility for the common people, and his humble lack of regard for his own life.

As previously noted, Menno did not immediately abandon his Witmarsum parish following his public confession of his Anabaptist beliefs in 1535 but rather remained in his pulpit to preach against the continued threat of Munsterite influences. Eventually it became too dangerous for him to maintain this public position and Menno formally renounced his involvement with the Catholic Church on January 30, 1536.³⁷ Menno was now an enemy of the authorities, and immediately went into hiding. For the next year, he moved from place to place continually, using this time to study the Scriptures, to write, and to continue to teach against revolutionary fervor, but he did not hold any formal leadership position.³⁸ However, about a year after he left the priesthood, he was approached by a group of Anabaptist leaders and asked to serve as an elder in the church.

Menno describes his decision to accept the responsibilities of elder and to devote his life to leading these people in his autobiographical writings:

Trouble and fear were on every side. On the one hand I was sensible of my limited talents, my unlearnedness, my weak nature, the timidity of my spirit, the exceedingly great wickedness, perversity, and tyranny of the world, the great and powerful sects, the subtlety of many minds, and the woefully heavy cross that would weigh on me not a little should I comply. On the other hand I saw the pitifully great hunger and need of these

³⁵ Dyck, 102.

³⁶ Bender, "A Brief Biography," 16-18.

³⁷ Bender, "Brief Biography," 9.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

God-fearing, pious children, for I saw plainly that they erred as do harmless sheep which have no shepherd.³⁹

It was Menno's concern for these people that had led him to leave his comfortable life in Witmarsum even more than his own personal theological disagreements with the church.

Menno felt the need to use his gifts to guide and protect these "poor straying sheep who wandered as sheep without a proper shepherd,"⁴⁰ and thus committed himself to their aid. His choice was clear and intentional; of the moment of decision Menno writes, "without constraint, of a sudden, [I] renounced all my worldly reputation, name and fame, my unchristian abominations, my masses, infant baptism, and my easy life, and I willingly submitted to distress and poverty under the heavy cross of Christ."⁴¹ Taking up "the cross" and thereby following the example of Christ, Menno never looked back. From that moment on, as Mennonite historian Cornelius J. Dyck writes, "to lead the fledgling Anabaptist group through this spiritual wilderness became the lot of Menno Simons. His lot in life was to sift truth from half-truth, oppose error with clear teaching, encourage the persecuted, correct the misguided, and build the young church while himself being hunted as a heretic."⁴² Thus engaged, Menno lived his life with a sense of abandon, giving himself freely to serve the people who followed him.

Those who did follow Menno's teachings certainly sensed his concern for them and rewarded him with their unswerving loyalty. For a man in Menno's position, sought after by both Protestant and Catholic authorities throughout the Low Countries as the key figure to a group of accused revolutionaries, this loyalty from his followers was invaluable to his very life, to say nothing of its importance in his ability to maintain his leadership position. In spite of

³⁹Simons, "Gellius Faber" 672.

⁴⁰Ibid, 670.

⁴¹ Simons, "A Reply to Gellius Faber," 671.

⁴² Dyck, 104-105.

constant pressure from the authorities⁴³, especially in Holland from 1536-1543, Menno's followers continued to give him shelter and provisions enough to enable him to focus on his writings. As C. Arnold Snyder notes, "by 1542 the authorities had put a price of 100 guilders on his head but miraculously, in spite of constant travel and a life spent underground, Menno never was betrayed or apprehended."⁴⁴

On multiple occasions those who assisted Menno or were baptized under his teachings were arrested and executed, but even the offer for complete forgiveness and release in exchange for details about Menno's whereabouts were ineffective. However, in 1543, in order to relieve the pressure on his followers and to protect his family, for Menno was by then married with three children, he left the Friesland region of Holland for a more tolerant area in northwest Germany.⁴⁵

During the seven years that Menno spent in Holland following his conversion, he not only displayed his loyalty to his followers and in so doing gained their respect and trust, but also composed several of his most influential theological writings. Most important was the 250-page book *The Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, which Menno wrote in order to explain clearly the Biblical basis for Anabaptist theology for both his followers and the authorities who accused them of heresy.⁴⁶ *The Foundation* and other early writings such as *The True Christian Faith* and *Christian Baptism* already show the beginnings of the community of believers doctrine that Menno would eventually cultivate into his vision for the future of the Anabaptist church.

At the time of their writing, however, Menno's first books and pamphlets were most often intended to clearly defend Anabaptism from charges of heresy and also to distance

⁴³ specifically Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, according to Bender's "Brief Biography," 17.

⁴⁴ Snyder, 225.

⁴⁵ Bender, "A Brief Biography," 18

⁴⁶ Menno Simons, "The Foundation of Christian Doctrine," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 104.

Menno's theology from that of the Munsterites.⁴⁷ He urges the government authorities and church leaders who aligned themselves against the Anabaptists to consider the Scriptures before judging against them. "Christian baptism is not a corrupt sect," he wrote in 1539, "It is the Word of God...If you find in me or in my teachings...any thievery, murder, perjury, sedition, rebellion, or any other criminal act, as were and are found among the corrupt sects—then punish all of us."⁴⁸

The results of his entreaties were mixed, as Menno's appeals to the authorities asking for religious tolerance were largely ignored, but the distinction between Menno's followers and the Munsterites was often recognized. In any case, Menno was successful in gathering his followers together and urging them to live peacefully as according to his interpretation of Jesus' teachings. Perhaps Menno intended for his writings to solidify the scattered pacifist Anabaptists underneath himself, or perhaps he wrote purely with the intention of offering spiritual guidance and sound doctrine to them in their confusion. Whichever the case, it is clear that Menno writings and appeal to the common Anabaptists propelled him into the role of unofficial spokesperson for the church, and it is equally clear that Menno did not intend to use his power for his own personal gain but rather for the protection of his followers.

The Confrontation with David Joris

In Menno's first years of Anabaptist leadership, the only real competition to his authority as the spokesperson for Dutch Anabaptism came from David Joris. Joris had joined the Dutch Anabaptists prior to Munster and joined with Obbe and Dirk Philips in the Peace Wing of the

⁴⁷ Bender, "A Brief Biography," 18.

⁴⁸ Simons, "Christian Baptism"

movement. After Munster's collapse, Joris worked to unite the splintered followers of Melchior Hoffman under his own leadership, perhaps with even more success than the Philips brothers.⁴⁹

Joris' teachings were fairly similar to those of Hoffman in that the earthly Kingdom of God was imminent but that would come about through the action of God rather than through a violent uprising. As time passed, Joris increasingly mixed his Anabaptist theology with an elite spiritualism, describing in sophisticated terms a mystical transformation from "fleshliness to divine perfection."⁵⁰ This mysticism was quite popular among the Dutch nobility and Waite credits much of Joris' success to his ability to attract their support.⁵¹ Ultimately, Joris' popularity and teachings brought him into direct conflict with Menno.

As Menno studied Joris' teachings, he became convinced that Joris presented a threat to Menno's doctrine of the separation of the true church from the world and began to teach against Joris' spiritualist doctrine. While Menno appreciated Joris' non-violent stance, he still considered his New Jerusalem teachings to be dangerous. Menno viewed Jorists to be just as much a threat as the Munsterite Batenburgers, for in Menno's estimation Joris was making the same error. Like Jan Matthys, Jan van Leiden, and Jan van Batenburg, Joris elevated himself to the role of the new "King David." In Menno's view, any claim to such a position was heresy; Christ himself was the head of the church and the Bible was the supreme authority, not an earthly prophet or king.

Though it is not entirely clear why Joris' popularity waned, it is likely that Menno's allegiance to the common people gave him an advantage over Joris. As I have discussed, the highest leadership position within Dutch Anabaptism was that of an informal spokesperson, and

⁴⁹ Snyder, 223

⁵⁰ Gary K. Waite, "The Dutch Nobility and Anabaptism: 1535-1545" *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23, 3 (1992): 475

⁵¹ Waite, "Nobility," 461-2

as such it rested heavily on popular opinion. Joris appealed to the nobility with his ideas of personal spirituality, but after Munster the majority of the common Anabaptists were wary of leadership based on visions and dreams. Menno offered a solid base of Scripture from which he would not stray, and gave a great deal of responsibility for the interpretation of the Scripture to common individuals and local congregations.⁵² To a people misunderstood and persecuted by just about everyone around them, Menno's steady leadership likely appeared to be much more safe and solid than the spirituality and mysticism of Joris.

After Menno's stern rebuke of Joris' personal spirituality, Joris' response to Menno's emphasis on the Bible was to increase his own emphasis on individual spirituality. Before long, Joris gave up all outward signs of Anabaptism, claiming to possess the true Anabaptism within himself. Not long after, in 1544, Joris moved to Switzerland and settled comfortably there by adopting a pseudonym and claiming to be a Reformed merchant. He continued to correspond with his followers in the Low Countries until his death in 1556, but although a remnant of his followers remained until the end of the century, the movement largely fizzled without Joris' direct leadership.⁵³

Scripture and Community as the Basis for Authority

Menno's confrontation with Joris showed two things about the uniqueness of Menno's vision for an Anabaptist church based on the authority of Scripture. First, Menno's claim to Scriptural authority was different than prior Anabaptist leaders, and second, Menno gave the responsibility for the interpretation of the Scriptures to each individual Anabaptist believer. Obviously, all of the Anabaptist leaders—and those of almost every branch of Christianity—

⁵² Simons, *Foundations*, 212-15

⁵³ Snyder, 223-4

prior to Menno claimed to have Scriptural authority for their theology. What made Menno different was that he relied much more directly on Scripture, refusing to endorse any practice or ritual that was not directly called for by the Scriptures. He accused the Munsterites, Batenburgers, and Jorists of teaching that the gospel was incomplete and adding their own visions and dreams that were not in line with the “Spirit of Christ.”⁵⁴ Instead, Menno promised to rely solely on the direction of the Scriptures:

In short, here the Spirit, Word, will, commandments, prohibitions, ordinances, usages, and example of Christ, to which all Scripture refers us, are taught; not the inventions of false prophets, high-sounding words, bewitching make-believe, big talk, dreaming visions, and lying miracles against which the Spirit of God and the Scriptures everywhere warn and counsel.⁵⁵

Menno saw a theme of love and peace running through Scripture, to which the apocalyptic visions ran contrary. He saw this theme as being so obvious that it was not merely his own personal interpretation.

In this, Menno was even more different than the other leaders—Anabaptists, Protestant, and Catholic—of his day, for he did not preach his own interpretation but rather encouraged and gave authority to the common people to discern this for themselves. His *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* is addressed directly “To the Common People:”

You sat, we are inexpert, unlearned, and know not the Scriptures. I reply: The Word is plain and needs no interpretation: namely, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself... Again, you shall give bread to the hungry and entertain the needy... All who do not understand such passages are more like irrational creatures than men, more like clods than Christians.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Simons, *Foundations*, 220.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 218.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 214.

Menno's confidence in the ability of the common people to interpret the Scriptures as he had reinforced his emphasis on the community of believers as the basis for church discipline and structure.

Menno's Vision for the Community of Believers

In 1543, Menno fled Holland for the region near Cologne under the control of Archbishop Hermon von Weid. Weid was extremely tolerant and Menno and his family enjoyed two years of peace before Weid was overthrown by a Catholic regime. Once more Menno was forced to flee, this time to the Holstein near to Hamburg. Anabaptists were only marginally persecuted in Holstein, sometimes finding protection from sympathetic nobles, and Menno was able to spend the rest of his life—although his church duties led him to travel frequently—there until his natural death in 1561. During these last eighteen years of his life, Menno traveled a lot and wrote only a little.⁵⁷ For the most part, his theology was already established; the work that remained was crafting that theology into a lasting vision for the church.

I have already discussed Menno's theology on the pacifist separation of the true church from the political realm of the world, and also Menno's reliance on the Bible as the sole authority of the church. This emphasis on non-violence and separation from the world gave his followers space to live quietly amongst themselves, but having established that, Menno sought to impress his church with the importance of community. While the church as a whole was to remain separated from the world, it was still to remain as a whole.⁵⁸ To maintain an individualist view of spirituality was to give opportunity for misinterpretations of Scripture and abuses of power. To build and maintain the church community, Menno sought to provide a more definite

⁵⁷ Bender, "A Brief Biography," 21

structure to the loosely group congregations and to encourage to use of the ban as the necessary form of church discipline.

It was around 1546 that Menno and these leaders organized themselves by dividing the Low Countries into four definite “territories” where each elder would be responsible for “pastoral insight, for discipline, and for baptizing new converts.” Menno held the position of chief bishop while maintaining responsibility for the area of Germany from East Friesland to Holstein. These elders met together when their travels allowed, discussing theology, discerning church discipline issues, and putting together church policies⁵⁹. At one such meeting in 1554, a collection of articles was given approval by the bishops, including one key addendum: “no one is to undertake of himself to preach or admonish from church to church unless he be commissioned or ordained thereto by the congregation or the elders.”⁶⁰ Here again, Menno was using his influence to build a structure that limited the potential for abuse of power by a single charismatic leader. In all, the loose structure Menno and the elders maintained was just enough to keep the church moving together in the same direction while maintaining a community-based fellowship.

Church discipline and the ban

The idea of church discipline being enforced on a local level through the use of the ban was the final piece in the bottom-up structure that Menno had built into the Anabaptist church. No individual carried enough power or influence to rebuild the revolutionary fervor of Munster; each Anabaptist believer, leaders and common people alike, were subject to the ban if the congregation decided it was necessary. The acceptance of an endurance of the ban as the sole

⁵⁸ Menno’s *Foundations*, which Menno revised in 1558 gives Menno’s view on “Shunning Babylon” and the community of believers, 158-177.

⁵⁹ Bender, “A Brief Biography,” 22-23

form of church discipline shows that the Dutch Anabaptists now preferred solidarity to separation. Only a few years before, in the turmoil surrounding Munster, disagreements between elders or within congregations almost always resulted in another division among the Anabaptists with more and more different sects emerging. Under the influence of Menno, individuals and local congregations were willing to reach a consensus under the structure of elders and the ban. As Menno wrote of the use of the ban, “Build up, and destroy not. Let one instruct the other in love, and do not disrupt, so that blessed peace may be with all the children of God and remain with us unbroken and unto eternal life.”⁶¹

Menno’s theology was nothing spectacular as it held mainly to teachings endorsed by the Swiss Brethren founders of Anabaptism. This “Anabaptist Vision” begun with the Swiss Brethren and carried on through the leadership of Menno Simons is described by H.S. Bender as “realistic,” for it did not foresee an immediate utopia or even an end to persecution, but rather long struggle for the church ahead. “The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society,” Bender writes, “but the Brethren did believe that the kingdom of God should be set up in the midst of earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith.”⁶² For Menno, that was best accomplished by remaining separated from the political system, committing the church to pacifism, and remaining true to the Scriptures. While not unique, Menno’s particular brand of theology and vision for the church structure was exactly what the Dutch Anabaptist church needed to sustain itself and carry on that vision far beyond Menno’s death.

⁶⁰ Menno Simons, “The Wismar Articles of 1554,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 1042.

⁶¹ Menno Simons, “Instruction on Discipline to the Church at Franeker,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 5th ed (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 1042.

⁶² Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, 35-36

Conclusion

Menno Simons was indeed a great man, as his influence reached far among both his contemporaries and many generations to follow. But his greatness did not lie in oratory skills, writing ability, or charismatic leadership, for none of those caused his rise in power. Rather, it was the atrocities of Munster that created a Menno-shaped hole in the Dutch Anabaptist movement. In that moment of crisis, Menno recognized that his gifts could be used to help his fellow Christians and in following that path he gained a loyal following. His legacy lasted not because he emphasized himself but because he gathered the community around the scriptures that would last far longer than his own teachings.

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