

# THE ANABAPTISTS

The Anabaptist movement is now described as "the left wing of the Reformation." This term is an obvious effort to supersede the defamatory label of "Schwarmer" (in English, "enthusiasts" or fanatics). The movement began in 1523 in Zurich, Switzerland, where the Reformation caused the questioning of traditional values, including the rite of baptism. It aimed to reconstitute the early apostolic church.<sup>1</sup> Its adherents insisted on the primacy of Scripture and separation of church and state. Some were millennialist, and others were pacifists and distrusted the state.

Anabaptists believe that salvation is directed more than among the chief Reformers towards the experienced, inwardly perceivable transformation of a person.<sup>2</sup> In 1527 seven articles of faith were adopted. The first two may be summarized thus:

- (1) "Baptism is to be given to people who have repented and believed on Christ, who manifest a new way of life, who 'walk in the resurrection,' and who actually request baptism (Infants and children are considered saved without ceremony, but infants are often 'dedicated.')
- (2) "Before the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper), special effort shall be made to reclaim from any form of sin any brothers or sisters who may have strayed from Christ's way of love, holiness, and obedience. Those who are overtaken by sin should be twice warned privately, then publicly admonished before the congregation. The rite of exclusion of impenitent sinners the Swiss Brethren called the ban."<sup>3</sup>

## The Anabaptist Church Model

Ronald Sider claims that the Anabaptist church model offers to the world a visible model of redeemed (although not yet perfect!) personal, economic relationships. Salvation is personal and social. The Good News is that people can now enter this new community, the church. Sider says that some radical Anabaptists find no place for political engagement. They believe that living as converted individuals and offering fallen society the new model of the church are the only ways to change the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Anabaptists became the forerunners of the free church life in our time, and ancestors of the Baptists and Mennonites.

## The Mennonites

Mennonites hold the major doctrines of the Christian faith. They don't believe that seeking to be faithful to both the letter and the spirit of the New Testament is legalism. They see the will of God revealed in a preparatory but non-final way in the Old Testament but fully and definitively in Christ and in the New Testaments.<sup>5</sup>

The Mennonites were among Canada's first settlers. In the 1780's a large group of them arrived in Waterloo County, Ontario.<sup>6</sup> In the 1920's, in an effort to escape from communism and the measures of the Soviet State, about 20,000 came to Canada.

Some settled in Ontario. Next to the Lutherans, the Mennonites are the largest Protestant group of non-British origin. Overwhelmingly rural, they had a high birthrate and hence a rapid increase even without conversion from outsiders.<sup>7</sup> The Mennonites have always been noted for their excellent farms, exemplary conduct and orderly co-operation with the general community, in spite of their unique view of separation from the world and asceticism.<sup>8</sup>

The Mennonites are very active through their worldwide impressive service program of the Mennonite Central Committee.<sup>9</sup>

## Education

Since the 1950's many Mennonites have become urbanized. An increasingly educated ministry has changed the outlook of many of them. With some Mennonite groups there is support for Christian Day schools. In the late 19th century the government granted some of the Mennonites the right to their own schools. <sup>10</sup> In 1978 Haldeman Mennonites in Alberta were able to have a court interpret legislation so as to allow them to operate their own denominational school system.<sup>11</sup>

See for statistics on the Mennonites and all other groups *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1993*. Prepared and edited in the Office of Research, Evaluation and Planning of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Published and distributed by Abingdon Press, Nashville New York.

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