

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 84: Pilgrims & Exiles: Amish, Mennonites, & Brethren

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## Eyewitness

David Brainerd: I could scarce believe he used me.

Jennifer Trafton

Expelled from Yale for saying that one tutor "had no more grace than a chair" and refusing to apologize, David Brainerd (1718-1747) did not embark upon his brief career as a missionary to the Native Americans with the shining prospect of being an icon for Protestant missions. Yet his diary, edited and published posthumously by Jonathan Edwards, became a spiritual classic, inspiring such missionary heroes as William Carey, David Livingstone, and Jim Elliot.

David Brainerd's status as a model missionary is ironic, since in many respects he was a failure. Plagued by ill health, self-doubt, and extreme depression, yet driven by a profound determination to obey God's calling, he made relatively few converts in the five years of ministry before his death of tuberculosis at age 29. In 1743 he wrote, "Appeared to myself exceeding ignorant, weak, helpless, unworthy, and altogether unequal to my work. It seemed to me I should never do any service or have any success among the Indians."

But in the summer of 1745 a new mission to the Crossweeksung Indians in central New Jersey began to show some signs of taking root, and in August of that year Brainerd was astonished and overjoyed to see, at last, unexpected fruits from his seemingly barren ministry.

**Aug. 16.** Spent a considerable time in conversing privately with sundry of the Indians. Found one that had got relief and comfort, after pressing concern, and could not but hope, when I came to discourse particularly with her, that her comfort was of the right kind.—In the afternoon, I preached to them from John vi.26-34. Toward the close of my discourse, divine truths were attended with considerable power upon the audience, and more especially after public service was over, when I particularly addressed sundry distressed persons.

There was a great concern for their souls spread pretty generally among them; but especially there were two persons newly awakened to a sense of their sin and misery, one of whom was lately come, and the other had all along been very attentive, and desirous of being awakened, but could never before have any lively view of her perishing state. But now her concern and spiritual distress was such, that, I thought, I had never seen **any** more pressing. Sundry **old** men were also in distress for their souls; so that they could not refrain from weeping and crying out aloud, and their bitter groans were the most convincing, as well as affecting, evidence of the reality and depth of their inward anguish.—God is powerfully at work among them!

True and genuine convictions of sin are daily promoted in many instances, and some are newly awakened from time to time; although some few, who felt a commotion in their **passions** in days past, seem now to discover that their **hearts** were never duly affected. I never saw the work of God appear so independent of means as at this time.

I discoursed to the people, and spoke what, I suppose, had a proper tendency to promote convictions; but . . . I could scarce believe he used me as an **instrument**, or what I spake as **means** of carrying on his work; for it seemed, as I thought, to have no connexion with, nor dependence upon, means in any respect. . . . I seemed to do nothing, and indeed to have nothing to do, but to "stand still and see the salvation of God;" and found myself obliged and delighted to say, "Not unto us," not unto instruments

and means, "but to thy name be glory."

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## Pilgrims and Exiles: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about America's Anabaptists

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### Trail of blood

*The Martyrs Mirror* (1660), an Anabaptist martyrology, has as its full title "The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660."

### A-Fording them a higher profile

By the 1980s, annual visitors to Lancaster County's "Amish country" numbered above 4 million. The 1985 Harrison Ford film "Witness" increased the flood even further (though not doubling it as predicted).

### "Are you saved?" ... "Ask my neighbors"

As with the family above, the early Brethren (Dunkers)—a cousin movement to the Mennonites and Amish—practiced a lively evangelistic outreach. But the typical Anabaptist emphasis on showing, not just telling, one's faith remained strong. When Brethren evangelist Rufus P. Bucher was asked by a stranger in a railway station, "Brother, are you saved?" He replied that since he might be prejudiced on the question, his interrogator should go ask his wife, children, and neighbors. "I'll be ready to let their answers stand as my own."

### You may be more Mennonite than you think

Many American Christians simply assume that the state has no business dictating church beliefs or practices, that a church should be a gathered body of believers rather than a net that scoops up everyone within the area of a parish, and that baptism is a step of obedience upon profession of faith. What most do not know is that Mennonites were the first (surviving) group of Christians to insist on these things, and that they died by the thousands for doing so.

### Plain dress not so simple

To the outsider, the Anabaptists' plain dress looks oppressively uniform. But really study plain dress, and you'll find a dizzying array of differences. In his book *Why Do They Dress That Way?* Brethren scholar Stephen Scott charts out these differences. Amish women may wear a straight or a crossed cape, a Midwest, Lancaster, or "Nebraska" back, and a rectangular or triangular shawl. Amish men may sport hats with a plain, creased, depressed, or flat crown; and wear X-type, H-type, Y-type, or single strap suspenders. Mennonite women choose between Reformed, Wenger, or Victoria bonnets—all with chin straps—or wear a bonnet without a strap, called a "beanie" bonnet. And Mennonite and Brethren men wear either a frock or sack coat.

### Just another farming group

Public fascination with the Lancaster County Amish began early in the 20th century with romanticized images of Amish life like the WPA poster above and theatrical treatments like the 1955 musical ***Plain and Fancy***. But throughout most of the 19th century, the Amish numbered fewer than 5,000, and the nation had not progressed in technology and culture to the point where they stood out. The press and public generally tended to ignore them.

### **Give us this day our daily bread**

All Brethren celebrate the "love feast" twice each year. But the Old Order River Brethren (so named because upon joining they were baptized in the Susquehanna River, Pennsylvania) reserve a special role for their women in preparing for the feast. Breadmaking—mixing, kneading, and baking unleavened bread used for communion—is part of the ceremony itself. At long trestle tables in the main meeting room, the sisters (baptized women) work the dough, while the brothers stand by and preach a spiritual interpretation of the act. Preparing the bread together in this way reinforces the unity of Christ's body; leaving leaven out of the bread is akin to getting rid of any kind of pride or spiritual impurity.

### **Going—and staying—"Dutch"**

Pennsylvania German, or Pennsylvania Dutch (***Pennsilfaani-Deitsch***), is a High German language spoken by 150,000 to 250,000 people in North America. ("Dutch" is an archaic English term meaning "German.") Only Amish and Old Order Mennonites are passing the language along to their children in the current generation, although they were originally minority groups within the Pennsylvania German-speaking population. In these cultures, the language is a sign of ***Demut*** or humility, and the language serves as a barrier against the outside world. With the high birth rate in Amish communities, the possibility is great that the language will survive at least in the short term.

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## Shaken Up by the Peace-Lovers

A trip through Pennsylvania's Lancaster County.

Chris Armstrong

Nothing restores one's sanity like a little peace and quiet. As my colleague Steve Gertz and I rode through Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in the car of our host Steve Scott, the peacefulness of "Amish Country" refreshed us like a tonic.

Granted, faced with the near-perfect tranquility of the rolling fields, neat houses, and slow-moving black buggies, I did begin to get fidgety—looking around for a manuscript to edit or a layout to proof. But the sensation of being away from the "shot-out-of-a-cannon" life of publishing in the Chicago suburbs was nonetheless a pleasant one.

As he drove, Steve Scott, the administrative assistant of the Young Center of Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, regaled us with "silly tourist stories"—like the one about the lady who, rebuffed by an Amish farmer when she demanded that she have her picture taken with him, threatened to call the police because this costumed fellow wasn't "doing his job."

And it occurred to me that a countryside that seemed so peaceful to me might contain its share of interruptions and frustrations for its inhabitants.

But how to get beyond such "outward" observations about the Amish and their Anabaptist kin—the "costumed" farmers, buggies, barn-raising, and prospering farms—to these groups' roots, beliefs, and worldview? This was our task at the Young Center, where we met to plan this issue with some of the foremost scholars of these movements.

Early on, our hosts at the center— Steve, director David Eller, Brethren historian Donald Durnbaugh, and historian of the Amish Donald Kraybill—convinced us that an excellent way to communicate the inner workings of the Anabaptists was to ask Anabaptists to write our articles.

This we have done in most of this issue's theme articles, and I am glad we did it this way. Often in these pages the author's voice will emerge for a sentence or a paragraph, relating a trenchant observation, anecdote, or vignette in the first person. Through meeting these authors over the phone and reading their articles, I feel I have been introduced not just to a set of beliefs, but to a family of believers. Indeed, not just introduced, but invited to dinner—even to the famous Brethren "love feast."

### "Mirror, mirror ..."

Not far into the editorial process, though, I found the mood of peace I had enjoyed on that tranquil day's drive through Amish country broken decisively by an uncomfortable sensation: the sense of having my own lifestyle and presuppositions challenged. The more I studied the three groups we feature in this issue—the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren—the more I found myself looking into a mirror. And the way it reflected back on some of my modern American evangelical presumptions has made me just a bit uncomfortable.

These folks, after all, preach and live a conviction that seems heretical to most modern folk: If you want

to live as a dedicated follower of Christ, you have to do without some of the comforts and conveniences that others around you take for granted.

### **Gentle counterculture**

But there's more. Consider the list of core values of these groups' "Old Order" branches presented by Donald Kraybill and Carl Desportes Bowman in their acclaimed book ***On the Backroad to Heaven*** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). These groups, the authors argue persuasively, are above all (1) relational, (2) practical, (3) constant, and (4) gentle.

(1) For the Old Orders, love is not an individual, subjective, personal feeling, but a matter of "bonds of intimacy in community." The texture of their life together is one of "spiritual kinship, close relations, and a transparent lack of privacy." How many times have I wished for more "community" in my church life? But not, please, the "intrusive" kind (as if there were any other kind!)

(2) The Old Orders live the truth taught in the Book of James, that "faith without works is dead." For these practical Christians, "one's manner of living outweighs concerns about proper belief." I think of how easily I move in the realm of Bible studies and long discussions, but how far behind I lag in putting faith in practice.

(3) The Old Orders value constancy above innovation or novelty. They take pleasure in repeated patterns of life, greetings, and rituals: "Dress is old-fashioned, worship patterns are ancient, and songs are old." I blush to think of how many times I have pored over catalogs researching the latest whatever-it-is.

(4) Finally, the Old Orders discipline themselves in a ***gentle*** way of life: Against the deadliest sin, pride, the Amish cultivate "gentleness, steadfastness, and devout living."

The Anabaptists challenge almost every one of what Kraybill and Bowman call America's "core values": individual rights, moral autonomy, competition, success, participation in government, and the yearning for progress and material improvement.

Against such modern values, many Anabaptists espouse a church-centered, anti-individualist way of life so diametrically opposite to modern sensibilities that the fact they are able to sustain it is nearly miraculous.

No persecution, cultural pressure, or lure of prosperity and convenience the world has thrown at them has been able to derail these modern monastics from their path of "extreme discipleship."

And that strong perseverance, surely, is a rare and precious enough quality that we should spend some time in its presence, learning what we can learn.

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## Living History

Monastery in a war zone, affluent Essenes, and Luther's loo

Compiled by Ted Olsen

### Kosovo's refuge: worship & life in a war zone

The [Decani Monastery](#) in Kosovo's western Prokletije mountains is one of the latest added to the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Meanwhile, "the monastery's cells are brimming," reports *The Christian Science Monitor*. "Days are busy with farming, writing, icon-painting, translating, woodcarving, and more. For the first time in decades, Decani is thriving."

The monastic life at Decani has rarely been happy—or safe. The monastery faced lootings in the 16th and 17th centuries, and persecution from Albanians in the 19th century and the Bulgarians, Albanians, and communists of all ethnicities in the 20th century.

During the Kosovo conflict of the late 1990s, the Serbian Orthodox monastery became an important refuge for Muslims and ethnic Albanians even as shocks from nato bombs threatened its fragile onyx sculptures. nato forces still guard the site and its 30 monks, and anti-Serb demonstrations from ethnic Albanians threatened the monastery as recently as last March. "We are living in this monastery like in a prison," Father Nektar told Voice of America (VOA) in October.

It is the 14th-century Byzantine-Romanesque architecture and ancient icons that attracted UNESCO, which notes that the monastery "represents an exceptional synthesis of Byzantine and Western traditions," and "exercised an important influence on the development of art and architecture during the Ottoman period." That makes it, art historians told VOA, "the most significant medieval structure in its part of Europe."

That history can unite Kosovo's warring ethnicities, says Father Sava Janjic, the monastery's deputy abbot. "These places where the beauty and the history and something which is noble is enshrined so deeply in these stones and these frescoes is bringing people together around the values which have eternal meaning," he said.

### Affluent Essenes

The consensus in the academy has been that the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the cliffside caves of Qumran, were written by Essenes, an ascetic, monkish sect that avoided materialism and population centers.

But results of a 10-year-study of Qumran promise to "contradict everything we know about every aspect of the Essenes," says Yizhar Hirschfeld of the Hebrew University's Archaeological Institute. The dig, by Israelis Yitzhak Magen and Yuval Peleg, found imported Phoenician glass, jewelry, perfume bottles, and other non-ascetic artifacts. "It's impossible to say that the people who lived at Qumran were poor," Peleg told the Tel Aviv newspaper Ha'aretz.

Magen, who believes the scrolls were written by Jerusalem temple priests, told the ***San Francisco Chronicle***, "We did not find any evidence that the scrolls were written (at) Qumran or the caves which overlook it. Our conclusion is that they were brought there mainly from Jerusalem across the Judean Desert. We discovered several ancient way stations which once were [first-century] Jewish communities where they could have been kept temporarily in local synagogues before being transferred to the caves of Qumran for safety."

## **Psalter psatire**

When the 1320s "Macclesfield Psalter" was discovered in 2003 between two larger books in a private collection, it was hailed as the most exciting discovery of an English manuscript in living memory. Created in eastern England, at the foremost school of English art at the time, it may not stay in the country. The Getty Museum in Los Angeles purchased it in June for \$2.8 million, and the National Art Collections Fund has until November 10 to attempt to buy it back. The 252-page book is of particular interest for its humorous marginal artworks, many of which scholars believe are satires on the army commander who commissioned the book, John de Warenne, the 8th Earl of Surrey, Earl of Sussex and Strathern. The many rabbits, for example, symbolize the earl's lust (he was excommunicated in 1316 for multiple adulterous affairs), and their burrows (called warrens) were apparently a pun upon his name. Other satirical images include a dog dressed in bishops' robes, an ape playing doctor with a bear, and a man without pants fighting a dragon.

## **The Real Rosslyn Chapel**

The Episcopalian Church at Roslin was almost empty every Sunday," a government official wrote to the British Minister of Labor in 1942. "On a recent Sunday there was a congregation of only two, and ... I suggest that steps are taken to close it down."

This July, 9,029 people visited the 15th-century Rosslyn Chapel in Midlothian, Scotland—up 96 percent from 2003, and about as many as visited annually a decade ago. These new visitors are pilgrims of a different sort. Their holy book is Dan Brown's ***The Da Vinci Code***, a novel that suggests the gothic structure holds the Holy Grail. Others claim secret chambers beneath the chapel hold the Ark of the Covenant and the head of Christ, while some tourists come to the chapel because it's supposedly an "astral portal," a good place for UFO sightings, and the spiritual birthplace of freemasonry.

"I think it's very much in kin with the Loch Ness Monster. It's a hugely good story," chapel director Simon Beattie said of Brown's novel. Recent bans on documentary filmmakers, however, suggest that the chapel keepers' humor is waning.

The church does have ties to real history, however. In 1589, William Knox (brother of John) was censured for baptizing in the Catholic-seeming chapel. Presbytery records described it as a "house and monument of idolatry, " and in 1592 Protestants demolished the altars and worship there ceased. Mobs finished the job in 1688, destroying all religious imagery. Services didn't begin again until 1861.

## **An icon's extraordinary travels**

Pope John Paul II intended the return of one of the most revered icons of the Russian Orthodox Church to be an entrée to Christian unity. Instead, it became a subject of dissent.

"This icon is only one of the copies of the miraculous image," Patriarch Alexis II claimed. Vatican experts say it's "an authentic icon attributable to a period not later than the first half of the 18th century," but agree that it's not the original, which was discovered (miraculously, it is reported) by a 9-year-old girl in 1579 and credited with the defeat of the Polish army in 1612. A thief stole the original in 1904—and later claimed that he stripped it of its gold, silver, and jewels, then burned it.



The Pope has had the copy since 1993 and had hoped to give it to Russia in person. Alexis II, however, said the Pope was not welcome in the country.

### **Chaucer's scribe anonymous no more**

Geoffrey Chaucer was so annoyed with errors introduced by his scribe that he once composed a poem complaining, "So oft a day I mot thy werke renewe," and threatened to curse him with "the scall" (scabs) if he didn't shape up. Now the University of Maine's Linne Mooney says she knows the identify of the scribe, whom Chaucer called "Adam scrivener." The signature of Adam Pinkhurst, the son of a small landowner near London, matches several Chaucer manuscripts, including a note at the end of the Canterbury Cook's Tale: "Of this tale Chaucer wrote no more."

### **Here I squat**

According to some historians, what archaeologists uncovered in October in a previously buried annex of Martin Luther's house may be a key site of the Reformation. Since Erik Erikson's 1958 biography, many historians have interpreted Luther's remark that his insight into justification came "in cl." to mean "**in cloaca**"—on the toilet. "We just had no idea where this sewer was. Now it's clear what the reformer meant," Luther Memorial Foundation director Stefan Rhein told *The Telegraph*. "The 450-year-old lavatory, which was very advanced for its time, is made out of stone blocks and, unusually, has a 30 cm-square seat with a hole," the paper reported. "Underneath is a cesspit attached to a primitive drain."

In his 1990 *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, Heiko Oberman muses, "The cloaca is not just a privy, it is the most degrading place for man and the Devil's favorite habitat. Medieval monks already knew this, but the reformer knows even more now: It is right here that we have Christ, the mighty helper, on our side. No spot is unholy for the Holy Ghost; this is the very place to express contempt for the adversary through trust in Christ crucified."

### **Viking last rites a mixed lot**

Archaeologists in northwestern England have for the first time discovered a Viking burial ground in their country. It dates from the 900s—supposedly long after the Vikings would have been Christianized. Indeed, they were buried from east to west, in keeping with Christian tradition at the time. But the Vikings, or perhaps their buriers, also maintained significant ties to their pagan beliefs, and included weapons, spurs, a bridle, and a drinking horn for the afterlife. Newspapers described the Vikings as "hedging their bets," but such syncretism was not unique. A Viking metalworker's mold in Norway, for example, has casts for both the cross of Christ and the hammer of Thor.

## Was King Arthur really a Pelagian?

Ted Olsen

Director Antoine Fuqua's 2004 movie *King Arthur* may be "demystified," as it claims, but that doesn't mean it's historical. The film's Lucius Artorius Castus is a half-Roman/half-Celtic soldier on the verge of retirement, but assigned by a bishop named Germanus to rescue a Roman family north of Hadrian's Wall from the dreaded Saxons. It's a kind of suicide mission, but of course Arthur pulls it off, meeting and marrying Guinevere, Pictish warrior princess, in the process.

History-minded critics have savaged the film, noting, for example, that the Britons and Saxons didn't fight as far north as Hadrian's Wall. But students of church history will find an interesting assertion here: Arthur was a Pelagian Christian.

If Arthur really existed, and if the earliest references to him can be trusted, then it does appear that he was a Christian. The 10th-century *Annals of Wales* claim that at the battle of Badon in A.D. 516, "Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders, and the Britons were victorious."

By the 11th century, Arthur is a recurring character in hagiographies. He's a scoundrel in the lives of St. Cadoc and St. Padarn, a king seeking a dragonslaying saint in the *Life of St. Carannog*, and "the king of the whole of Great Britain" by Caradoc's 12th-century *Life of St. Gildas*. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1136) adds many of the now familiar details of Guinevere, Mordred, and the magician Merlin. But none of the Arthurian texts suggest that Arthur was a follower of the 4th-century heretic Pelagius. This was the British monk who taught that humans could morally perfect themselves—making him *persona non grata* to the likes of Jerome and Augustine of Hippo.

Fuqua's film, however, goes to great lengths to show a "Pelagian medallion," worn by Arthur, and several scenes contain discussion about his allegiance to Pelagianism, and Rome's opposition to it as a heresy. A deleted scene shows Arthur meeting Pelagius. The date is all wrong—Pelagius was born around 354—but the place isn't. Pelagius was probably from Wales, where Arthur probably had his base, if he existed. And to his opponents, Pelagius's homeland and beliefs were inextricably tied together. Jerome, for example, mocked the former law student as a bumpkin "stuffed with the porridge of the Scots."

The corpulent Pelagius was condemned as a heretic in 416, but his ideas lived on. In 429, writes Geoffrey of Monmouth, two bishops were sent "to preach the word of God to the Britons: for their Christian faith had been corrupted by the Pelagian heresy." One of these was Germanus of Auxerre (the film's Germanus?).

Ironically, it is Bishop Germanus, not Arthur, who gives us one of the period's most dramatic and historically credible encounters against the Saxons. As a raiding party approached shortly after Easter, Germanus led a newly baptized army in a bloodless victory by a shout of "Hallelujah!" "The enemy was panic-stricken, fearing not only the neighboring rocks but even the very frame of heaven above them," recounts Bede. "Many of them, flying headlong in their fear, were engulfed by the river."

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## A People of Conscience

How America's plain people first arose in Europe as a discipleship movement repressed by the state church.

Chris Armstrong & Jeff Bach

Imagine yourself in the imposing Grossmünster church in Zurich. This is a sanctuary in transition: the votive candles have been snuffed out, the frescoes painted over, and the wooden statues depicting saints and biblical figures removed. The expansive space echoes with the high-pitched voice of Huldrych Zwingli. In the language of the marketplace, he preaches directly from the text of the New Testament, moving verse by verse through each book, ignoring the centuries-old liturgical order of readings. He insists on the need for a biblical Christianity to complete the Reformation Luther has begun.

### The Reformation's most radical moment

Several young men listen with particular intensity. These are George Blaurock, a striking, black-haired man of peasant stock, with no great education but great zeal for reform; the scholarly Felix Mantz, illegitimate son of a clergyman at the Grossmünster; and Conrad Grebel, a well-educated young aristocrat whose mangled hand—relic of a student brawl at Vienna—testifies to an impetuous nature. They share a hunger for reform and a respect for Zwingli, with whom they are studying the Bible in the original languages.

The three friends' blood rises with excitement at Zwingli's radical words—some preached from this pulpit and others confided in private: The tithes paid to the church to sustain layabout monks and nuns can not be supported from the Bible. Those who eat meat during the weekly fast break not a divine commandment but a human custom. Even the Mass—the regular recapitulation of Christ's sacrifice, supposed to bring his real body and blood to the people—is an abomination that should no longer be celebrated.

These men have learned much from Zwingli's teaching. But like others among the townspeople who support Zwingli's proposed reforms, they are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his approach and his progress. Why, they ask, does he dither with the Council, seeking a moderate road to reform, when the Bible so clearly and directly contradicts so many of the church's inherited practices and teachings? Why, bowing to conservative pressure, has he failed to fulfill a promise to abolish the Mass on Christmas Day, 1523?

Zwingli's protégés have concluded that baptism as ordained and practiced in the New Testament is not an automatic conferral of grace, but a sign attached to faith, to be administered upon confession of sin and profession of faith. Surely the sprinkling of some water and the muttering of a few words do not a Christian make! And look at the results: in a state and a church where every person born is baptized in infancy, thus assumed to be Christian, the church (it seems to the radicals) has become nothing more than a social club filled with slackers and sinners.

On January 21, 1525, these young men come to a new understanding of faith and grace in baptism while worshiping in a home near Zurich. Convinced of the need to profess faith and to repent of sin, the impetuous Blaurock asks Grebel to baptize him. Grebel obliges, pouring water over his friend's head in the names of the Trinity.

### Into the lion's mouth

Blaurock and Grebel understood that by their act, they were making themselves outlaws in church and society. For over a millennium, since the reign of Emperor Constantine, all Christendom had believed that civic and religious community were indissolubly linked by God. When the Swiss brethren instituted adult baptism, daring to separate church and civil government by declaring that the only true church was a church of gathered believers, they would of course raise the ire of the established order.

But even these first zealous Anabaptists ("re-baptizers"—the term of reproof used by their enemies) could not have foreseen the magnitude of the ensuing persecution.

The purge would start almost immediately at the hands of their teacher, Zwingli, and the Zurich city council, and by the end of the 16th century would wipe out some 2,500 of their brethren in the Low Countries—by burning, drowning (fitting, felt their persecutors, for those who insisted on baptism by immersion), and cruel tortures.

The violence would intensify quickly as Anabaptist teachings were implicated in the bloody Peasants' War of 1524-26. And it would intensify again in 1534, when a group of militant radicals with Anabaptist links gained control of the city of Münster. Under assaults from without, events in the city turned both bizarre and bloody. Innkeeper Jan of Leiden declared himself "King David," instituted polygamy, and began purging the city of opponents.

Severe persecution quickly deprived the Anabaptist movement of some of its abler leaders such as Mantz and Michael Sattler. Grebel died of disease. The confusion of persecution and loss of skilled leaders slowed the formation of cohesive theological statements or ecclesiastical structures for Anabaptists.

Many of the movement's leaders, like the black-haired peasant Blaurock—called "Strong George" and a "second Paul" by followers—came from and cared for the common folk, exemplifying the Anabaptist article of faith that it is the simple and the poor in spirit, not the learned and famous, who are given the gift of understanding God's kingdom mysteries.

But their zeal and love was not always matched by theological or organizational acumen. A preacher would come into town, preach the message of a Bible-based, gathered church, and move on. Converts often came together to form churches on the barest framework of teachings.

In February 1527, several Anabaptists met at Schleithem, on the Swiss-German border, to bring cohesion to the movement. There they agreed to the "Schleithem Confession." Michael Sattler, the Benedictine prior-turned-Anabaptist who helped to shape this document, was burned at the stake in May that year for his role.

The Schleithem document lists seven points of agreement, namely: believers' baptism upon confession of faith; the practice of mutual church discipline (the ban); the Lord's Supper in place of the Mass; separation from Roman Catholic and Protestant churches; the role of ministers ("shepherds"); rejection of violence ("the sword"); and rejection of oaths.

### **A man of unity**

In January 1536, a year after bishops and Protestant authorities suppressed the Anabaptist kingdom in Münster, a Dutch priest in the rural Frisian village of Witmarsum sought baptism from a small circle of Anabaptists who were pacifists. Of Frisian peasant stock, Menno Simons had become a priest at 28 in 1524. Like many rural and small town priests of his day, he had very little theological training. Nonetheless, he was a man given to careful thinking, and in his first year of priesthood, he had begun to have doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Soon after, Menno had heard of a man who was beheaded for being re-baptized, and the Frisian priest had begun to study the Bible on infant baptism. Baptism, he had concluded, could not cleanse infants from original sin. Nor could he find anything in the writings of Luther and other infant-baptizing Reformers to change his mind.

Finally, the claims of Anabaptism faced Menno with particular force in April, 1535, when a close relative died in a Münster-related riot. Though he found them fanatical and mistaken on some points, they also led him back to scriptural truths. And so he "prayed to God with sighs and tears that He would give to me, a sorrowing sinner, the gift of His grace" and a clean heart. Thereafter he identified openly with the Anabaptists, leaving his comfortable clerical life and traveling (under constant threat of death) to strengthen and unify the movement's scattered congregations. Dying of natural causes in 1561, Menno left behind a more clearly defined Anabaptist movement that became known by his name: Mennonites.

During the 17th century, Dutch Mennonites faced a new and unwanted problem: prosperity. This they began to achieve under a new, more tolerant regime after Dutch independence from Spain. Fearing that newly respectable Mennonites would forget their radical origins, one minister tried to stir up new vigor. Tieleman Jansz van Braght compiled stories of Dutch, Swiss, German, and Austrian Anabaptist martyrs and in 1660 published them in a book known as the *Martyrs Mirror*. In the 18th century the *Mirror* became an influential work connecting Dutch and Swiss Mennonites to the Amish and Brethren.

### **Tailor-made reform**

After 1670, new internal tensions arose in the wake of a Bernese edict ordering Anabaptists to join the Reformed Church or be expelled. In response, some Anabaptists fled Switzerland for Alsace and the Netherlands. But others chose to stay and worship occasionally in the Reformed churches, even allowing their children to be baptized. In addition to appeasing local officials, this conformity guaranteed that children of Swiss Anabaptist families could legally inherit land.

One Anabaptist minister, an Alsatian tailor named Jakob Ammann, sought to tighten church discipline. He sought to return them to the old practice—approved by Menno Simons—of "shunning" unrepentant members by avoiding all social contact with them until they repented.

Another minister back in Switzerland, Hans Reist, objected to Ammann's teachings. In 1693 a series of rancorous meetings took place in Switzerland, during which Ammann excommunicated Reist and others who followed his laxer teachings. Believing that Mennonites were now turning their backs on the humility and simplicity of the earlier movement in order to fit in and advance in society, Amman insisted male members wear untrimmed beards and eschew "haughty clothing." (One can imagine that as a tailor, he had seen at close hand the inordinate pride some took in keeping up fashionable appearances.)

News of the split soon spread to Mennonites far and wide, from the south Rhine to Holland and North Germany. In Alsace, Mennonite leaders agreed with Ammann that the compromises of a newly comfortable Mennonite community threatened their very souls and the purity of the church for which so many had died 150 years earlier.

Reist's fellow believers in Bern, however, were living in far from socially compromised ease. They faced enough external threats without dividing the church from within through legalistic requirements. "Nor," as historian Steven M. Nolt puts it, "were they keen to receive lectures on faithfulness from those who lived in relative safety outside of Bern." Eventually Ammann's group broke fellowship from Reist's group, taking the name "Amish."

### **A third branch**

Meanwhile, the 17th-century Pietist movement within the Lutheran and Reformed churches planted the seeds for a third branch of the Anabaptist tree, the Brethren. Seeking to complete the Reformation's reform of doctrine with a reform of devotion, the Pietists read the Bible and pursued godly living in small groups that made the authorities nervous enough to ban them in several territories.

Although most Pietists had preferred to reform their Lutheran and Reformed churches from within, some soon began to question the form of the church itself, rather than seek its renewal. For example, the Pietist historian Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) compared Protestantism to the ancient Christians and found the Protestants lacking. Arnold's writings inspired others to separate fully from Protestantism. Some of these separatists sought refuge in tiny territories offering limited religious toleration.

In Schwarzenau on the Eder River, separatists Alexander and Anna Margareta Mack looked to Arnold's accounts of early Christians and to the New Testament for models of the church. Mennonite writings such as the *Martyrs Mirror* also influenced the Macks. They felt called to form a gathered church.

In August 1708, eight people went to the Eder River to receive baptism by threefold immersion in the names of the Trinity upon the confession of their faith and repentance from sin. The group also agreed to practice mutual church discipline. They observed the Lord's supper with foot washing, an agape meal ("love feast"), and the Eucharist, consisting of unleavened bread and wine.

These "New Anabaptists," or "Dunkers" were pacifists and rejected oaths. They evangelized energetically and emphasized the joy in discipleship. With their baptism in 1708 the Brethren broke with their separatist friends in Schwarzenau.

Although not members of Mennonite congregations, the Brethren were spiritual kin to the Anabaptists who had been awakened in Pietism. In the 18th century, they would join their Mennonite and Amish counterparts in a great migration to America.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 84: Pilgrims & Exiles: Amish, Mennonites, & Brethren

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## The Germans Have Landed

Once William Penn welcomed the freedom-seeking Anabaptists to his colony, they spread and flourished.

David Eller

It is October 1683. In a temporary cave-dwelling on the high banks of the Delaware, a German Mennonite family and several German Quaker families cast lots for parcels of land. The settlement they are founding—Germantown—will play a crucial role in the early history of the American Anabaptists.

### The Germans' "other holy experiment"

A wave of German immigrants began landing at the port city of Philadelphia in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. William Penn, the colony's Quaker proprietor, did not intend to establish a Quaker commonwealth in the New World. Rather Pennsylvania—"Penn's Woods"—his "holy experiment," was open to all people of Christian faiths.

Penn's agents combed Germany's Rhine Valley for potential colonists, and German immigrants flocked to Pennsylvania by the thousands. These immigrants were mostly Lutheran and Reformed, and a few were Catholic—these were the legal, state-supported faiths of the German territories. In Penn's vision, however, dissenting and persecuted Anabaptist and Pietist groups were welcome as well. These included German Quakers, Moravians, Schwenkfelders, Mennonites, Brethren (Dunkers), and Amish. English residents soon labeled all of these groups "Pennsylvania Dutch." Gradually the Pennsylvania German settlers developed their own dialect and perpetuated their own folkways and traditions that clearly set them apart from their English-speaking neighbors.

Germantown, the first intentional German-speaking community in America, was laid out in 1683, a mile-long section of an Indian trail some six miles northwest from Philadelphia. The first German settlers—13 families—arrived that October on the ship *Concord*. They were greeted at the Philadelphia wharf by William Penn and one of his land agents, a young German lawyer named Francis Daniel Pastorius. They met in the cave-like dwelling he had constructed at Germantown and cast lots for land.

### Free enterprise, free religion

The new village was an economic success from the beginning. The first winter they dug cellars for shelter. The first log homes appeared the next spring along a wide main street on lots 180 feet wide by 800 feet deep, but these were soon replaced by larger dwellings made of native stone. Cemeteries were laid out at both ends of the village, which also contained a central market. Outlying fields were cleared for crops and nearby creeks supplied power for mills. The settlers planted flax (for linen), fruit trees, and vineyards. Germantown incorporated in 1689, with Pastorius as its first mayor.

Initially Germantown was a Quaker enterprise; by the late 1680s they were planning for their first meetinghouse, and in 1689 they issued the first formal protest against slavery in America. Continued immigration from Germany, however, allowed a Mennonite congregation to develop. By the early 1690s Mennonites were meeting together for worship, but they did not organize a congregation until 1698. Shortly after the turn of the century, they built a log meetinghouse on Germantown Avenue. It was replaced in 1770 by a fieldstone building, still used by the congregation today.

## Lure of the land

Penn advised new immigrants to live in towns where they could then clear and work the outlying fields, as had long been done in England. However, the lure of inexpensive, fertile land to the north and west—perceived as the key to wealth and economic independence—proved too powerful. From Germantown, clusters of Mennonite families could soon be found at "Skippack," to the northwest in what is today Montgomery County, and at the "Swamp" to the north in Bucks County. Shortly after 1710 Mennonites also moved to the back country, to "Conestoga" in what is now Lancaster County.

The arrival of a few hundred Mennonite immigrants in 1717, most from the Palatinate or Switzerland, greatly aided the stability of Pennsylvania's Mennonite communities. But these newcomers bypassed the Germantown congregation—largely influenced by Dutch Mennonite traditions—preferring instead the upcountry farming settlements at Skippack and Swamp or Lancaster's Conestoga country. These two areas, "Franconia" and "Lancaster," soon became major centers of Mennonite development in America.

## Baptized and cloistered

The first group of Brethren, colloquially known as "Dunkers" (after their manner of baptism—threefold immersion) arrived on the ship *Allen* in 1719. The leader was Peter Becker, a weaver, who settled at Germantown. Brethren organized a congregation on Christmas Day, 1723 after "newly awakened" candidates for baptism had come to Germantown. Since there was no minister on this side of the Atlantic, the settlers chose for this office Becker, who then led the congregation down to the Wissahickon Creek for the baptisms. Rejoicing together, the Brethren proceeded that night to a member's cabin for a love feast. This is the Brethren setting for Holy Communion, which has traditionally included a time of self-examination, feetwashing, a simple communal meal, and the observance of the bread and cup (pp. 29-30). The Germantown Brethren did not build a house for worship until 1770. It is located on the north end of Germantown Avenue, and still used for worship today.

Those baptized in 1723 were from the outlying areas of "Coventry," along the Schuylkill River in northern Chester County, and the Conestoga country in northeast Lancaster County. The following year, the Dunkers organized congregations in both areas. The latter group chose for their minister Georg Conrad Beissel, who had only recently been baptized by Becker. Within a few years, significant differences developed between Beissel and the Brethren at Germantown, primarily over the importance of celibacy in the life of a believer, Beissel's claim of personal direct divine revelation, and his practice of observing Saturday as the Christian Sabbath. Beissel resigned his office with the Conestoga Brethren in 1728 but continued as the spiritual leader for a small group of followers. Seeking solitude, he moved a short distance away in 1732 to the Cocalico Creek in Lancaster County, where he established the famed Ephrata Cloister (p. 28).

Although Beissel retained many Brethren practices, such as trine immersion baptism, the love feast, and nonresistant pacifism, his charismatic leadership cast a wide net. At its height in the 1750s and '60s, there were perhaps 80 celibate residents at the Ephrata site, with its unique dormitories, chapels, and other buildings, and another 200 "householders" (married couples living on nearby farms) who looked to Beissel for spiritual leadership and worshiped with the community.

Ephrata's influence was felt in several German-speaking communities in Pennsylvania and as far south as the Carolinas. Ephrata was also an economic success, and the community became well-known for its mills, bread, and other products; fraktur (decorated manuscripts), choral music, and printing. Ephrata monastics translated (from Dutch into German) and printed for the Mennonites the important work of Anabaptist martyrology *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror* (1748-1751), the largest work published in colonial America.

While Mennonites benefited from a constant flow of migration to Pennsylvania, the only other significant



Brethren immigrant group arrived at Germantown in 1729. This party was led by Alexander Mack, the first minister of the Brethren in Europe. The future of the Brethren would thus not be influenced by the Old World as much as it would by their development in America.

The Germantown congregation prospered, eventually spinning off congregations in Philadelphia and at Indian Creek to the north in Montgomery County where some of the 1719 group had settled. Most Brethren followed the agricultural frontier west from Germantown into Lancaster, across the Susquehanna into York and Adams counties. From there they headed west across the mountains into the valleys of central and western Pennsylvania, or south following the "Great Wagon Road" through Maryland into the Valley of Virginia and the Carolinas.

### **An Amishman's captivity**

The first Mennonite and Brethren immigrants were weavers, millers, or workers in other trades. They shifted quickly to agriculture and farming, however. The Amish arrived in Pennsylvania already proficient farmers, preferring rural settlements in townships with other Germans rather than market towns. While Dutch Mennonites often played a major role in helping obtain ship's passage, Amish immigrants bypassed any significant contact with Germantown.

The first and most important Amish settlement in colonial America emerged in central Berks County in the 1730s. Centered along the Northkill Creek, this area had perhaps 200 Amish residents by 1750. Jacob Hertzler, the first known Amish bishop in America, arrived here in 1749.

While isolated, the Northkill settlement was also vulnerable to international conflict as the British and French sought to extend their control over America's vast inland regions. On the evening of September 19, 1757, the family of Jacob Hochstetler was attacked by Native Americans allied with the French during the French and Indian War. According to well-worn Amish tradition, the father ordered his sons not to retaliate with their hunting rifles. Rather the family acted out their nonresistant pacifist faith by hiding in the cabin's cellar.

The Indians eventually torched the cabin and the family was captured while attempting to escape. Hochstetler's wife, daughter, and son Jacob Jr. were killed. The father and two sons, Joseph and Christian, were taken prisoner and removed to French-controlled territory, but the sons were soon separated from their father. The following spring, Hochstetler was permitted to hunt for food alone and took the opportunity to escape. After two weeks he arrived at Shamokin on the Susquehanna River and eventually found his way back to an Amish community. His sons, still captives at the end of the war, were eventually released and reunited with him.

### **Pacifists in a revolutionary age**

Closer to Germantown, another Amish settlement developed at Malvern in Chester County during the 1760s. This community took the somewhat unusual step of building a schoolhouse, which was also used for Sunday worship. The Amish, like the Mennonites and Brethren, worshiped in the homes or barns of members, a tradition kept alive by Old Order Amish communities today.

The largest Amish community in Pennsylvania (and the second largest in North America today) at Lancaster did not begin until the Revolutionary era. It was originally located on the Berks-Lancaster border, near Morgantown, but was eventually absorbed by an expanding settlement on Pequea Creek, near Gordonville, which began around 1790.

The American Revolution was in many ways a time of testing for the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren. All were Christian pacifist groups who took literally Christ's teachings: "Blessed are the peacemakers"; "Turn the other cheek"; "Do not resist the evil one." Their faith also taught them to be obedient to governing

authorities, except in matters that conflicted with what they understood to be God's law. German immigrants after 1727 signed a declaration of loyalty to the British crown. They appreciated the religious freedom found in Pennsylvania and had prospered materially as well. When war broke out in 1775, these historic peace churches sought to remain neutral. That, however, proved difficult.

Recognizing their situation, a small group of Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish met with revolutionary authorities in Lancaster County in 1775. While they could not take up arms, they did agree to offer humanitarian aid. By 1777 Pennsylvania Revolutionary officials required citizens to take a loyalty oath (known as the "Attest"), but these groups also practiced "nonswearing," and thus could not in good conscience take such an oath. Many were required to pay double taxes, or more, for refusal to take a new oath of allegiance.

Many on the Revolutionary side, however, interpreted the stance of the peace churches as thinly veiled support for the British. For his refusal to allow a military officer to use his horse in 1779, Amishman Isaac Kaufman was arrested, tried, and jailed in the Berks county jail as a Tory. In Germantown, Brethren leader Christopher Sauer Jr., the influential printer and one of the wealthier men in the colony, was arrested and roughed up in 1778 for his refusal to take the Attest. While such incidents may have been relatively isolated, the hostile attitude of the patriot cause toward the German peace churches was not.

The Revolutionary victory left the peace churches drained and marginalized in some ways. During the war, voting rights in some areas were taken away, which many in these groups never sought to reclaim. A few Mennonites even took the opportunity to move to Canada, which they saw as more politically stable. For many, it also confirmed a preference to live away from towns and the English majority in a life of rural seclusion. On a deeper level, the challenges of war introduced a key question of identity. How sectarian, how nonconformist, how German, how American were they to be if they were to grow and prosper in the new Republic?

This challenge has shaped American Anabaptists ever since, coming to a head with particular force in the late 19th century (p. 37).

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## Outsider's Guide to America's Anabaptists

Making sense of the colorful, complex tapestry of Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren.

Steven Gertz

***Tourists in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania tend to assume that they are at the center of the Anabaptist world (not true—more Amish live in Ohio today than in Pennsylvania) and that the Amish are the largest and most significant group of Anabaptists (also not true—Mennonites and Brethren are actually more numerous than the Amish). As a service to the uninitiated, here are some key distinctives of these groups.***

### Amish

Conceived in a dispute between Swiss Anabaptist leaders in the 1690s (pp. 14- ), Jakob Ammann's following is in many ways the most conservative of the "plain groups." The Old Order Amish—roughly 180,000 strong or 16 percent of American Anabaptists—spurn motor vehicles, refuse public utilities, educate youth only up through the eighth grade, and meet in homes for worship. Most Amish dress in "plain" or uniform clothing to emphasize order, modesty, and humility in the community. Men are expected to grow beards, while women cover their heads. All of this is governed by the ***Ordnung***, a mostly oral set of behavioral expectations passed down through generations.

But over 15,000 Amish belong to branches (Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonites) that do use public electricity, worship in meetinghouses, and drive automobiles. These separated from the Old Order in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as they accepted mainstream Protestant forms of ministry (missions, Sunday Schools, etc.) and appropriated new technologies.

The Amish are also decentralized. Except for a loosely organized National Amish Steering Committee, they do not run bureaucratic organizations that oversee denominational programs. Individual congregations or "church districts" enjoy significant autonomy and exhibit variations in dress and practices. For example, Lancaster county Amish women prefer purple fabrics, while other settlements choose blue or red—though all are solid-colored. Amish children are dressed in traditional garb, though some teens opt for T-shirts and jeans until they decide to join the community.

### Brethren

Bigger yet, and much more "progressive," are the Brethren, who make up nearly 40 percent of American Anabaptists. Originating in Germany in 1708, Brethren mix Pietist belief and practice (pp. 14- ) with Anabaptist nonconformity and biblical pacifism.

This group tends to be more evangelical and individualistic in its approach to matters of faith and stresses the importance of loving relationships. After baptism, the most significant ritual is the love feast, which brings members together to take communion and enjoy a concentrated time of fellowship (p. 29). Unlike the Amish, contemporary Brethren have few reservations about technology. They place greater responsibility on the individual to refrain from activities that would compromise his or her faith, rather than expecting church leaders to enforce restrictions.

That's not to say they haven't struggled and split. The Brethren have held annual meetings since 1770 that served the function of the Amish *Ordnung* in shaping their identity and practice. The largest group, the Church of the Brethren, with about 135,000 members, is today a mostly mainstream denomination. But other Brethren have broken off, notably the Old German Baptist Brethren, who rejected "evangelistic innovations" in the late 19th century and wanted to retain "simpler practices" of plain dress and traditional rituals.

Other groups, like the Dunkard Brethren, left the Church of the Brethren because it was "drifting away from apostolic standards and settling back into the world." The Brethren in Christ (originally called the River Brethren) technically did not break off from the Church of the Brethren but emerged from late 18th-century Mennonites living in eastern Pennsylvania who were attracted to Brethren beliefs.

The Old German Baptist Brethren, the Dunkard Brethren, and the Old Order River Brethren dress plain, but they allow patterned fabrics, and they do not press their children to wear traditional garb if they are unconverted. In these groups Brethren women wear head coverings, but these women have a keen sense of the coverings' scriptural origins (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13) and wear them as symbols their attitude toward the church body. As one woman explained it, "It's a point of submission to God, to my husband, and to the community." Plain dress was abandoned by most of the Church of the Brethren beginning in the 1920s.

## **Mennonites**

Mennonites, who number over 340,000 in several denominations—making up 43 percent of all American Anabaptists—may be the most diverse group of all. Some migrated from Germany and Switzerland starting in 1683, while others hail from 19th-century Holland and Russia. And in recent years, Mennonite missionaries have birthed churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Many Mennonites have embraced modern technology and evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity, but fully 30 percent of them hold, in some form, to traditional ways.

Old Order Mennonites, who comprise about 7 percent of the Mennonite population, have many of the marks of Amish traditionalists—rejection of higher education and technology, rural and separatist living. But even Old Orders themselves disagree over whether they can drive cars, and they have thus suffered divisions. On the other end, those belonging to the largest denominational body, the Mennonite Church, construct churches in urban and cosmopolitan areas as well as rural countryside, and few retain any vestiges of plain dress. This denomination supplies seminary education and Sunday school materials, and has numerous conference structures and gatherings to deal with issues demanding national attention. Other Mennonite bodies include the Mennonite Brethren Church, the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite.

Unlike Amish and traditional Brethren, Mennonite men have not traditionally worn beards. They have argued that a beard is a mark of fallen man after Adam's sin. Others do not wish to be associated with the modern hippy movement, and still others have argued that the beard would associate them with other plain people lacking any spiritual depth. One man simply objected, "Half the sincere Christians I know don't have beards. They're women!"

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## **Pilgrims and Exiles: Christian History Timeline**

Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren

### **STARTING YEARS FOR VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS**

**1693** AMISH

**1693** MENNONITES

**1708** GERMAN BAPTIST BRETHERN

**1780** RIVER BRETHERN

**1860** OLD ORDER AMISH

**1860** AMISH MENNONITES

**1862** BRETHERN IN CHRIST

**1872** OLD ORDER MENNONITES

**1881** OLD GERMAN BRETHERN

**1883** BRETHERN CHURCH

**1907** OLD ORDER AUTOMOBILE

**1907** OLD ORDER HORSE

**1926** DUNKARD BRETHERN

**1927** BEACHYAMISH

**1939** GRACE BRETHERN

**1960** NEW ORDER AMISH

### **OLD WORLD ORIGINS**

**1525** Conrad Grebel rebaptizes George Blaurock as the first convert to Anabaptism

**1527** Swiss leaders draw up the Schleitheim Confession, identifying seven distinctives of Anabaptist belief

**1529** Melchior Hoffman joins Anabaptists and proclaims Strasbourg the "New Jerusalem"

**1535** A second 'New Jerusalem —Münster— fails miserably, sparking widespread persecution of Anabaptists

**1536** Menno Simons leaves the Catholic Church to become the Anabaptists' foremost theologian

**1618-1648** Thirty Years' War rages

**1632** The Dordrecht Confession unites Mennonites around 18 articles of faith

**1660** Tieleman Jansz van Braght compiles the *Martyrs Mirror*

**1675** Philip Jacob Spener pens his *Plo Desideria*, giving new impetus to the Pietist movement

### **NEW WORLD ORIGINS: AMERICAN SETTLEMENT**

**1683** Mennonites and Quakers establish Germantown just north of Philadelphia at William Penn's invitation

**1693** Jakob Ammann breaks fellowship with Swiss Anabaptists over church discipline

**1698** Mennonites appoint William Rittenhouse to pastor the first Anabaptist congregation in America

**1708** Alexander and Anna Margareta Mack and others gather at the Eder River in Germany for baptism, birthing the Brethren movement

**1719** The first group of Brethren arrive in America aboard the ship Allen

**1732** Georg Conrad Beissel breaks off from the Brethren to establish the Ephrata Cloister

**1749** Jacob Hertzler becomes the first Amish bishop to arrive in America

**1775** American Anabaptists meet with revolutionary authorities to offer humanitarian aid rather than fight the British

### **MODERNITY: ASSIMILATION AND REACTION**

**1860s** Amish Mennonites split from Old Order; Amish over their determination to blend better with English' society

**1872** Old Order Mennonites reject changes brought about by contact with revivalism

**1881-1882** The Brethren split over revivalistic methods into Old Order German Baptist Brethren, conservative, and progressive factions

**1907** Old Order Mennonites split over adoption of the automobile

**1927** Moses M. Beachy refuses to shun those Amish who joined the Mennonite church, and thus parts from the Old Order Amish

**1946** Mennonite Mutual Aid is organized to help young men returning from Civilian Public Service camps

**1967** The National Amish Steering Committee forms to resolve disputes with the government over issues of nonconformity

**1972** In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the U.S. Supreme Court permits Amish youth to end their education in Amish-run schools after eight grades

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 84: Pilgrims & Exiles: Amish, Mennonites, & Brethren

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## Pure & Simple

Ever wonder what the plain people's churches look and feel like? Here's an insider account.

Stephen Scott

Our congregation gathered for worship on a beautiful September Sunday morning at the Conley farm in western Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. This was the fourth of a series of weekend meetings we call "love feast"—the high point of our church year. An intense spiritual experience, the series culminates on Saturday evening as the plainly dressed, bearded brothers and the sisters in their capes, aprons, and snow white head coverings wash one another's feet. Then, positioned around long wooden tables, they exchange the kiss of peace and pass the bread and cup of Communion in a complete circuit.

### "Having meeting"

All of this takes place in a spacious Pennsylvania "bank" barn, built in 1876. The barn had been merely an agricultural building until, a few days before the services, a crew of the brethren had attacked it with brooms and blowers, preparing it to house more than 200 worshipers. Now the congregation gathered here for four separate services of preaching, singing, and testimonies totaling more than ten hours. The heartily sung but slow *a cappella* melodies of the brothers and sisters rose to the rustic rafters. To many of those assembled, this was as inspiring as a trained choir in an ornate cathedral.

If asked, none of the members would say the barn had "become a church." Neither would they say they were "going to church" when they gathered for their regular weekly worship services. Instead they might say "the church was having meeting" in the barn. The brothers and sisters of like precious faith *are* the church, and not having a regular building for their worship accentuates this fact. Although this congregation has many of its meetings in their school close by, the families of the brotherhood take turns sponsoring the meeting, which includes providing a noon meal.

This small body of Christians is one of many independent "plain people" groups. They represent a version of Christianity that stresses simplicity in lifestyle, especially in dress and worship. There is no nonsense in their worship: no effort to entertain the members with special music, no dramatic lighting, grandiose art or architecture, or professionally trained ministry. The focus is the inspired Word of God, which, when preached, moves many to tears.

### Varieties of plainness

The people meeting at the Conley farm belong to the Old Order River Brethren. This group is often confused with the much larger and better known Old Order Amish, with whom they have much in common—plain clothing, beards, simple worship in houses and barns. But the Amish forbid car ownership and electricity from public utilities, and use German in their worship and Pennsylvania German in everyday life; all of which are not typical of the majority of Old Order River Brethren.

There are also numerous groups of conservative Mennonites close by, each with their own distinctive symbols and practices. All are "plain people." Most of the different plain groups associate and cooperate with each other in various ways (half the students in the Old Order River Brethren school are from conservative Mennonite families). Actually, distantly related groups who share common convictions on non-conformity to the world interact more with each other than with the mainstream groups from which they withdrew.



All of the plain elements of the Anabaptist family grew from a similar concept of the church as a visible body of believers, distinct from the world in almost every way. Many of these spiritual descendants of the 16th-century Anabaptists (Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites) adhere to a confession of faith drawn up in 1632 at Dordrecht, the Netherlands:

"We believe in and confess a visible Church of God, consisting of those who ... have truly repented, rightly believed, are rightly baptized, are united with God in heaven, and incorporated with the communion of the saints on earth. And these, we confess, are a 'chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation': who have the testimony that they are the 'bride' of Christ; yea, that they are 'children and heirs of eternal life,' a 'habitation of God though the spirit,' built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, of which 'Christ himself is the chief cornerstone'—the foundation on which his Church is built" (Article 8, "of the Church of Christ").

### **Bearing fruit, bearing witness**

All the plain churches emphasize *Nachfolge Christi*—following Christ in discipleship. They believe that true Christian disciples are the visible people of God, fully committed to faithfully serving Christ as they walk in newness of life. Christ is not just a Savior who gives forgiveness from sin, but the Lord of all life who will be lovingly obeyed. The fruits of the Spirit are evidence of a regenerated heart.

The church's primary calling is to be a separated people of God, as expressed in Ephesians 5:27, "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." Those members who forsake the faith and fall into sin must be dealt with in order to maintain the purity and unity of the church. In disciplining those who stray, the church carefully follows the directives of Matthew 18. If the sinner, after every effort has been made at reconciliation, does not repent, he or she must be disciplined. The hope is that when this is done in the spirit of love, the wayward soul will see the seriousness of his or her sin and have a change of heart.

But discipline is not just for the offender. It is also seen as a protection for the whole church: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6). If the church tolerates sin, this affects the whole body. The purity of the church must be protected at all cost, regardless of any pain and distress experienced by individuals. The plain people see the excommunication of members who have fallen into sin as an act of love for the church, removing occasion for those outside the ranks to speak evil of her—and of Christ.

### **To prune or not to prune**

All Anabaptists believe that members who have been cut off from the body can be reattached if confession and repentance first occurs. Some of the groups, however, go to greater lengths to help this come to pass. The Amish and a few groups of Mennonites (Holdeman, Stauffer, Reformed) see Paul as teaching a kind of "tough love" in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15—"Do not associate with [the disobedient one], in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

These stricter Anabaptists interpret 1 Corinthians 5:11, "With such a man [a brother who has fallen into serious sin] do not even eat," quite literally. They believe the passage refers not just to the Lord's Supper but to any common table, and so they enjoin the disciplinary practice of "shunning," even within the family of the offender.

This is a strict measure, to be sure. But it is meted out not in the spirit of retributive punishment, but rather out of a desire to jolt the rebellious brother or sister back to their senses, as they taste the pain of separation from the body of believers and see that it will extend into eternity if they do not repent.

The early Anabaptists frequently charged the state churches with toleration of sin in their ranks, both among the clergy and laity. In return, Christian outsiders have often labeled the more conservative Anabaptists as "legalists." This was true even in Menno Simons's day, causing him to protest, "And should someone come who would in true and sincere love admonish or reprove them and direct them to Jesus Christ. ... and show that it does not become a Christian to carouse and drink, and to revile and curse, he must from that hour hear that he is a legalist."

If legalism is works-salvation that seeks to merit God's favor through human effort, then it cannot accurately be applied to American Anabaptists. Despite harsh accusations to the contrary, none of the plain people believe that their works of righteousness will gain them a home in heaven. Virtually every doctrinal statement of all conservative Anabaptist groups proclaim that salvation is through faith in the shed blood of Christ. The Dordrecht Confession states, "[Christ] purchased redemption for the whole human race; and has thus become the cause for the eternal salvation of all these who from the time of Adam to the end of the world shall have believed in him, and obeyed him."

### **Living in covenant obedience**

Belief in Christ is, however, inseparably linked to obedience to Christ. Yes, faith is held as the most essential element of salvation (the Dordrecht Confession opens with Hebrews 11:6—"Without faith, it is impossible to please God"), but plain people do not ignore the importance of James 2:20, "Faith without works is dead." They do not regard their outward separation from worldly society any differently than mainstream evangelicals view tithing or verbal witnessing. They believe that Christians will sacrifice all areas of their lives to the lordship of Christ, and that their visible symbols of nonconformity to the world are a constant witness and proclamation to the saving grace of God.

Just as the apostles determined the will of God in the controversial issues of their day (Acts 15), the plain people believe that it is the responsibility of the church to create scriptural standards of practice as new issues arise. The collective voice of the church is perceived through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as revealed through the convictions of individual members and the discernment of the leadership.

As part of the baptismal vows in most plain churches, each member promises to uphold the standards of the church and be yielded to the corporate voice of the brotherhood. Members who disobey individual directives of the church are often disciplined for a spirit of rebellion rather than the actual violation. Thus, when a member is disciplined for wearing a necktie, driving a car, or owning a television, the real problem is not necessarily the particular offense but the breach of promise in not upholding the collective order of the church.

The plain people take their relationship to their church very seriously. One's church affiliation is the primary identity of an individual, and others are often identified by their respective church affiliation, whether it be a "Wenger" Mennonite friend, a Church of the Brethren neighbor, a Lutheran postal clerk, or a Catholic mechanic. This identity involves much more than intangible doctrines or beliefs, but how these beliefs affect one's daily life, attitudes, and ethics.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 84: Pilgrims & Exiles: Amish, Mennonites, & Brethren

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## Holy Ground

One of the most visible practices among the American Anabaptists, the Brethren love feast exemplifies humility and community.

Frank Ramirez

When writer Phebe Gibbons caught a train to Lancaster County in 1871 to visit a Brethren love feast, she prepared herself to enter what she thought would be a strange world. As a reporter for a major magazine she intended to write about what would no doubt be an odd, perhaps even bizarre practice by an obscure religious sect.

What she experienced was the equivalent of a three-day slumber party.

### Surprised by love

The love feast was quite different from other religious practices of the day. It stemmed from the peculiar theological synthesis of the Brethren—part Anabaptist, part Pietist, and fully determined to implement those ordinances that they found in Scripture as the result of joint Bible study.

Their reading of John's version of the Last Supper mandated both a full meal and a footwashing service. John 13:14-15 indicated to the Brethren that Jesus had commanded they wash each other's feet. Moreover, the meal, therefore, did not precede or follow worship. It **was** worship, and was as essential to Communion as breaking the bread and drinking the cup. Finally, Paul's command to greet one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26) meant that men kissed men and women kissed women on the lips.

Gibbons was surprised by more than the kissing. First, she had thought of the Brethren as a homogenously German group. But the Lancaster love feast was multicultural: she was astonished to discover folks named Murphy back when the Irish were nearly as reviled as blacks. She was also surprised by the almost raucous good fellowship among these quiet "plain people." The plates of sweet pie and cups of hot coffee never stopped. Venerable patriarchs and matriarchs held court, to be sure, but infants suckled, teens courted, and children hollered during worship. ("Want pappy! Want pappy!" one toddler complained, while struggling to break loose from his mother's restraining arms.) Relatives, friends, and relative strangers mixed freely together as one family.

It was, in short, a feast founded on love.

Gibbons was also surprised to discover she was drawn into everything—hearty meals, sermons in German and English, inspiring hymn singing, good fellowship, and a giggly sleepover in the church attic with the women—the men slept only a few feet away beyond a partition.

In some ways Gibbons's description of a 19th-century love feast is just as true today. Some things are different, of course. Three days have become compressed to a single evening. You won't hear much German anymore, although Spanish is spoken now upon occasion. And the menu includes more fruit and vegetables than in the old days.

But after nearly 300 years, the love feast, based on John 13, remains an essential Brethren practice.

Though it is a movable feast, it is also Holy Ground—a place where all people can come together, remove their shoes, and meet Jesus.

## **A feast for the senses**

If you arrive at the love feast (usually held twice a year, often on Maundy Thursday and the first Sunday of October, to many known as World Communion Sunday), you will be welcomed at most congregations as a full participant. The evening will begin with a short service of examination, prayer, and meditation. Generally the congregation then moves to the room or rooms where the footwashing takes place, men with men, women with women, and children with whomever they choose to sit.

Never will you see such clean feet as those that are brought to the footwashing! One believer will gird him or herself with a towel, bend a knee, and wash the feet of another in a simple basin, drying the feet with the towel that is wrapped around the waist. The two will then rise and embrace, and sometimes (depending on the congregation) share the Holy Kiss, once again men with men, women with women. The person whose feet were washed will then don the towel and wash the feet of another, and so on. Throughout this time people sing, usually from memory.

After hands are washed, the meal follows. Generally it had been cooking all day, and the smell filled the church even as people arrived. Now the food is served. Often there is some form of beef and broth, with bread soaked and sinking into the soup.

In some churches there is a tradition of absolute silence, but at most love feasts the conversation is lively. This is a joyful occasion, a time spent with people who matter, which leads to many words and a good deal of laughter.

Finally, the bread-and-cup communion is shared. Communion bread is often thick and sweet like shortbread, a cookie really. Even in those congregations where children do not take part in the communion until they are baptized, it is normal to share the bread with them afterwards. It is considered a real treat.

The service engages all five senses—the sights of the tables, the smell of the meat, the taste of the meal, the sound of singing and praying aloud, the touch of water and feet as well as the feel of venerable old eating utensils still in use after decades or even a century of service.

Jesus turned the world upside down when he took on the role of a slave and washed the disciples' feet. The common meal of the early Christian church was just as revolutionary. The Roman Empire was every bit as our age: rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile, Roman and Celt. Yet the meal named Love crossed cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender lines. So it is today.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 84: Pilgrims & Exiles: Amish, Mennonites, & Brethren

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## Be Not Conformed

Why have American Anabaptists lived in protest against the modern world?

John D. Roth

The premise of "Amish in the City," a recent TV reality show, is simple. Ask a group of Amish youth to move into a Los Angeles "party house" with some hip urban teenagers and watch what results from the ensuing cultural clash.

The Amish these days have become positively chic—fascinating cultural anomalies in a world obsessed with high-tech gadgetry, marketing hype, and the ever-shifting tastes of fashion. How is it possible that a group who has lived in the United States for nearly two centuries continues to practice a way of life that looks as if it came straight out of the 18th century? Moreover, why would people deliberately choose to dress so oddly or reject the conveniences of the modern world?

The Anabaptists, forerunners of such groups as the Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren, emerged out of the yeasty ferment of the Protestant Reformation. Along with most of the Reformers, these "radicals" zealously promoted the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, and they rejected the authority of the pope and much of traditional Catholic theology. But the Anabaptists' radical interpretation of the New Testament quickly led Luther, Zwingli, and other early Reformation leaders to denounce the movement as a threat to the order of European society. The Anabaptists, for example, insisted that Christians could not swear oaths, or wield the sword, or serve as judges or magistrates. They emphasized a life of daily discipleship that included loving their enemies; and they envisioned the church as a voluntary community, separate from the state and from secular society.

Protestant and Catholic authorities alike responded to these unconventional teachings with imprisonment, torture, and even execution. For the Anabaptists, however, persecution only reinforced a theology of nonconformity that has been central to Amish, Mennonite, and Brethren identity ever since.

### The most radical journey

Anabaptists have always assumed that following Christ is a decision with life-changing consequences. Unlike most churchly folk, they did not believe infant baptism made one a Christian. Rather, they taught, each person must actively accept Christ's invitation to a life of discipleship. As Peter, James, and John discovered when they dropped their nets by the Sea of Galilee, following Jesus is a conscious decision to embark on a journey of faith that leads to a new way of life. The decision to follow Jesus has profound consequences—it is not child's play. Indeed, it could even cost you your life.

Disciples of Jesus, the Anabaptists believed, are called to let go of old habits and assumptions in order to reshape their entire lives around the model of Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus frequently reminded his followers of the radical nature of the Kingdom he was inaugurating. "You have heard it said," Jesus claimed repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, "**but I say unto you ...**"

In his Kingdom it is not the rich and the powerful who will be blessed, but the poor, the meek, the gentle, the persecuted, and the peacemakers (Matthew 5:3-10). In his Kingdom, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first (Mark 9:35); anyone who wants to save their life must be prepared to lose it (Mark 8:35). Here, disciples are called to love their enemies, to do good to those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44), and to repay evil with good (Romans 12:21). Jesus turned the assumptions of the world

upside-down. He invited his followers to choose a narrow path (Matthew 7:14) that was bound to be misunderstood by the world and arouse hostility from those in power.

Anabaptists believed that Jesus' disciples do not take that journey alone—in fact, that it is possible only within the context of a community of believers. This community was not so much an institution as it was an alternative society whose life reflects, albeit imperfectly, the Kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated. In their understanding, Christian faith always has a concrete, collective social form that is visibly distinct from the world around. Thus, the true church would be characterized by such radical practices as economic sharing, mutual accountability (discipline), and a love for others that extended to even the enemy. "Love not the world," 1 John 2:15 instructs, "or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

The Anabaptist Brotherly Union of 1527—sometimes called the "Schleitheim Confession"—expressed this conviction with simple clarity: "Truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who have come out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other" (Article IV). The true church is therefore a light on the hill, shining in a world of darkness, inviting those who are lost to find their way to refuge.

### **The cost of being different**

Although martyrdom had largely ceased by the end of the 16th century, descendants of the Anabaptists continued to experience other forms of persecution. Mennonites in the Netherlands, for example, could not proselytize and were forced to meet in "hidden" churches. In the territories of southwest Germany, Mennonites had to pay a special "recognition tax," they could not enter the professions, and they generally could not own property. And the Brethren met with hostility from state church authorities from their beginnings in 1708.

This situation changed dramatically in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries as waves of Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren began to migrate to the United States and Canada. Lured by the promise of cheap land, economic opportunities, and religious freedoms, descendants of the Anabaptists gradually established flourishing communities. Here they were free to build their own meetinghouses and to practice their faith on the same footing as their Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed neighbors.

No longer persecuted by a hostile world, Anabaptist groups in America were now challenged to define the boundaries between the church and world in a more self-conscious way. Although not all groups agreed on precisely where those boundaries should be drawn, several themes emerged. Most Mennonite, Amish, and Brethren groups, for example, emphasized the virtue of Christian humility—expressed in simple speech, reticence to self-promote, and reluctance to define Christian faith in the sharp-edged language of doctrinal orthodoxy.

Most groups also developed standards of dress—emphasizing simplicity, modesty, and uniformity—as a way of reinforcing the boundaries of group identity. Over time, the Amish maintained these visible markers of nonconformity more rigorously than did the Mennonites and Brethren. But all three groups struggled throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to retain a clear sense of separation from the world.

The principle of nonconformity has been tested most sharply during times of war. Mennonites and Amish have been especially hesitant to serve in the armed forces or to support the war effort, in the conviction that Christians are to demonstrate God's gracious and generous love to all people.

At times, hostility toward nonresistant Christians has spilled over into outright violence against them, especially during World Wars I and II. In the summer of 1917, my grandfather was ordered to appear at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio, for basic training. Like others from his Mennonite community, he reported to camp but refused to wear a uniform or participate in military training exercises. One night,

he and several other men were awakened, given shovels, and told to dig their own graves in preparation for their executions at sunrise. Other friends told of being forced into cold showers and then surrounded by men who scrubbed their skin raw with heavy brooms. Some 60 years later, he could vividly recall the scornful taunts directed at him: coward, slacker, traitor, yellow-bellied parasite.

### **The persistent challenge**

The principle of nonconformity has occasionally been problematic for Anabaptist groups in other ways as well. Sometimes an earnest desire for ethical consistency can become legalistic and oppressive. Disagreements within the fellowship over the appropriate boundary lines between the church and the world have frequently led to divisions within Anabaptist groups, so that the Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren are all sub-divided into smaller groups, some of whom refuse to have fellowship with others. At times, a desire to be "separated from the world" has overshadowed the higher ideal of being "separated unto God."

Despite these challenges, the Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren continue to regard nonconformity as an important—indeed, inevitable—expression of their Christian faith. For the Amish, conscious restrictions on dress, transportation, and technology bear visible witness to their conviction that followers of Jesus walk a different path. Contemporary Mennonites and Brethren, by contrast, are more likely to express nonconformity in their commitment to simple living, voluntary service, peacemaking, and a faith perspective that challenges the modern tendencies toward individualism, nationalism, and cultural conformity.

Though nonconformity takes many different expressions among Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren today, all share a common conviction that Christian faith must find tangible expression in daily life. Each regards the voluntary church as a countercultural alternative to modern secularism; and each testifies to the radical power of Christ's love as an active, transformative reality in a broken and needy world.

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## From Mutual Aid to Global Action

How the Anabaptist emphasis on practical acts of love led a tightly knit enclave to reach out to the world.

Gari-Anne Patzwald and William Kostlevy

A woodcut in the 17th-century Anabaptist *Martyrs Mirror* shows Dirk Willems, an early Dutch Mennonite, saving the life of a "thief-catcher" who has fallen through the ice on a lake. The "thief-catcher" had been pursuing Willems at a burgomaster's behest, to bring him to trial and execution for his Anabaptist beliefs. After his act of mercy, Willems was nonetheless recaptured (over the protests, the *Mirror* notes, of his rescued pursuer) and burned at the stake.

This story is intimately familiar to most Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren (the Amish still give the *Martyrs Mirror* as a wedding present). It celebrates their sense that to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, one must serve others as he did and taught. This sense of compassionate human responsibility has borne fruit in a long history of Anabaptist mutual aid and service ministries.

### Fire-forged bonds

During the intense persecutions of the 16th and early 17th centuries, adherents drew together for protection and sustenance in close-knit communities. But after the persecutions ended, the tendency to act in concert persisted. In Europe, especially Russia, where Catherine the Great permitted Mennonites great freedom to develop their own way of life, Anabaptist agricultural communities operated as cooperatives, with equal distribution of arable land and commonly held animal herds. They also grew used to sharing the workload—an ethos demonstrated most visibly today in the traditional Amish barn raising. Such cooperative efforts have allowed the Mennonites and related groups to achieve what one writer has called "reasonable prosperity for the group rather than for only a few within the group."

In America, early Mennonites continued the practice of providing for persecuted brethren in Europe and helped Mennonites who were driven from their homes in Europe relocate to America. A few communities in North America, past and present, have practiced community of goods, such as the Ephrata Community in colonial Pennsylvania, the Hutterites of the Midwestern U. S. and Canada, and the Hutterian Brethren (Bruderhof) of the Eastern U. S. and Europe, but most groups have stopped short of total community ownership of resources.

One expression of mutual aid among Anabaptists has been in the unlikely area of insurance. As early as the 17th century, Mennonites provided one another with insurance protection. In 1663, Mennonites in West Prussia organized a fire insurance company, and similar efforts to insure against losses have characterized American Anabaptists as well. True to the Anabaptist view that the community is responsible for meeting the needs of its members, many of the early fire insurance programs did not involve the payment of premiums in anticipation of loss, but rather in the levying of payments on the whole community, based on ability to pay, to meet the needs of those who had suffered losses.

Anabaptists were slow to adopt life insurance and retirement annuities, assuming that other members of the religious community would care for those who became dependent. However, today Anabaptists have developed their own insurance programs, such as the Church of the Brethren Benefit Trust and Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA). MMA, which also serves the Brethren in Christ and the Church of the Brethren, sells products that are common among insurance companies today—life insurance and retirement annuities. While to the casual observer, MMA appears to be like any wholly secular insurance company, it remains



true to its Anabaptist roots, providing "Sharing Fund grants"—matching grants to churches to help members with such things as exceptional medical expenses and the costs of adopting children—and maintaining a scholarship fund. Some conservative Mennonite groups, most Amish, and the German Baptist Brethren are still opposed to life insurance and retirement accounts.

## **A widening embrace**

Their strong adherence to the principle of separation of church and state has led Mennonites and groups in the German Baptist Brethren tradition to provide services to members for which others look to government agencies, such as aid to widows and orphans and support for the elderly. Mennonites and Brethren have also maintained hospitals and homes for the aged that serve not only members, but the general public as well.

On the American landscape, not all Anabaptist service has remained inward-turned, however. As an expression of biblical neighbor-love and as a pragmatic solution to the need for ways for their pacifist members to provide alternative wartime service, Anabaptist groups began in the 20th century to develop of a network of aid organizations that provide services, especially in times of emergency.

Just days after Hurricane Charley struck Florida on August 13, 2004, the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) began to set up a staging area in Arcadia, Florida to which volunteers could come to provide recovery services to the victims of the storm. Unlike many groups that provide immediate aid and then leave, the MDS and its Church of the Brethren counterpart, Emergency Response/Service Ministries, provide long-term service, including repair of buildings and emergency child care. Although a small segment of the less conservative Amish community operates its own disaster relief service, Christian Aid Ministries, most Amish groups participate in MDS programs. It is not unusual to see a van load of Amish carpenters working alongside a group of highly acculturated urban Mennonites on a home repair project.

## **Committee of compassion**

In 1920, Mennonites banded together to relieve their brethren in the Ukraine who faced starvation in the wake of World War I and the subsequent Russian Civil War. Out of these efforts emerged the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an umbrella organization for domestic and international relief and development programs, sponsored by Mennonite churches in North America and the Brethren in Christ. The 1921 death of popular Goshen College student Clayton Kratz while serving as a relief worker in Russia cemented MCC in the Mennonite imagination while MCC's skillful lobbying of the Soviet government resulted in permission to legally function in the Soviet Union. By 1924 MCC had distributed over a million dollars in aid, including tractors and horses, to help rebuilt rural Mennonite communities. In the process, MCC saved the lives of an estimated 9,000 Russian Mennonites.

Under the direction of Orie Miller, MCC executive secretary (1935-1958), MCC increasingly focused its ministry to aid non-Mennonites. As Miller insisted, MCC policy should be non-partisan and should be extended without preference as to race and nationality but with special attention to relief needs among women and children suffering the hardships of war.

Among Miller's successors, the focus of MCC's ministry is the promotion of peace and justice. Since it does not engage in church planting (which it believes to be the responsibility of mission boards), it has been accused by conservative Mennonites of providing service and material aid at the expense of preaching the gospel. MCC emphasizes that all of its workers must be Christians, although not necessarily Mennonite, and if they are not involved in preaching or teaching on the mission field, they must model the Christian lifestyle through their actions in accord with the message of Matthew 25:35-36. In 2003-2004 MCC supported 1,400 workers in 55 countries with 69 million dollars in funds and materials.

One of MCC's most popular programs, which receives support from the general public as well as non-

Anabaptist churches, is a network of 180 "Ten Thousand Villages" stores throughout North America. These stores sell handcrafted items made by Third World artisans at prices that provide sustainable incomes for people who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed.

## **Opportunities for all**

Anabaptist volunteer service programs began during World War II, when Mennonites and Brethren in Virginia and Indiana faced hostility for refusing to support defense programs they deemed militaristic. Today Brethren Volunteer Service, Mennonite Mission Network, and the more conservative Eastern Mennonite Mission and Rosedale Mennonite Missions provide service opportunities in North America and abroad lasting from a few weeks to several years. In 2004 the largest of these, the Mission Network, supported approximately 170 workers in over 55 countries, in ministries ranging from victim-offender reconciliation in California to reforestation in Mongolia.

Anabaptist denominations have also created several private organizations that provide services consistent with the Anabaptist vision. These organizations receive considerable financial support from Anabaptists and provide opportunities for participants in church-sponsored volunteer service programs.

Among the most prominent of these is Heifer International (formerly Heifer Project), founded by Church of the Brethren member and Indiana farmer Dan West. West sought to end hunger permanently by providing rural families with livestock and training. In 1944, the first 17 heifers were shipped from York, Pennsylvania to Puerto Rico. Since 1944, Heifer International has provided sources of food and agricultural training (not just temporary relief) to the poor in over 110 countries.

The best explanation for the flourishing of Anabaptist service ministries may be these words of historian Harold S. Bender: "The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society, but the Brethren did believe that Jesus intended that the kingdom of God should be set up in the midst of the earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith. ... We shall practice what He taught, believing that where He walked we can by His grace follow in His steps."

***Gari-Anne Patzwald and William Kostlevy served as volunteers through the Mennonite Board of Missions, 1981-1983. Patzwald is the author of Waiting for Elijah: A History of the Megiddo Mission.***

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## Negotiating with the Modern World

In the late 19th and early 20th century, modernity caught up with the Anabaptists.

Donald B. Kraybill

Under the cover of a dark September night in 1889, three children of Martin W. and Anna Zimmerman crawled into the newly constructed Lichty Mennonite Meetinghouse in Eastern Pennsylvania. Sent by their parents, they quietly tore out a newly installed pulpit and replaced it with a traditional small preacher's table, constructed by their father. Their mischief remained hidden for nearly nineteen years until Martin's wife Anna confessed their sins ten years after his death.

Meanwhile, the pro-pulpit and anti-pulpit factions boiled with anger. Traditional Mennonite habits of humility kept the feet of their lay ministers on equal footing with other members. For a number of years, a few Mennonite churches following Protestant patterns had added simple pulpits that raised their preachers six inches or so above the crowd. The three-member building committee in the Lichty congregation installed the innovative pulpit without consulting the congregation, igniting controversy and encouraging conservatives to argue that it was fair play to rip it out without consent.

### Tearing the Fabric of Love

The pulpit fiasco was but one of many controversies that strained the love of North American Mennonites in the last quarter of the 19th century. Final ruptures tore the fabric in Indiana (1872), and then Pennsylvania (1893), Ontario (1889), and Virginia (1901), as Old Order Mennonites formed separate communions to protect old practices and protest innovations—Sunday schools, revival meetings, and preaching in English. During the same era, Old Order divisions splintered not only Mennonites, but also Amish, German Baptist Brethren, and Brethren in Christ groups.

Imbibing progressive Protestant emphases of the late 19th century, forward-looking leaders called for mission outreach, publications, institutes of higher education, and a more aggressive pace in the life of the church. The emerging Old Orders clung to the more informal, familial, rural, and community-based patterns of faith that were threatened by the vibrations of industrialization. The key issues were not technological at this stage but ecclesiastical—would Anabaptists and Pietists preserve their meek and mild manners of non-resistance and non-conformity from the world, or would they embody more mainstream Protestant values and styles?

### Choosing Sides

The assimilationist voices won the day, as sizable majorities in all the groups stepped up in American society and moved over toward Protestant patterns of piety, leaving the Old Order Amish, the Old Order Mennonites, the Old German Baptists, and the Old Order River Brethren to guard old ways in the face of a rapidly modernizing society.

Despite their conservative bent, the Old Orders soon struggled with changes in their own ranks. In 1927, Bishop Mose Horning was surprised by a boycott of a Holy Communion service that normally celebrated the peace of the congregation in Anabaptist circles. He knew that many members of his Old Order Mennonite congregation were agitating to buy automobiles, which had been strictly forbidden by the church. Trying to flex with the flow of history, he decided to offer the cup of Holy Communion to those who were driving cars. In a dramatic boycott, the majority of members shunned the cup of wine he

offered on that October morning, tearing the fabric for a new division—one that lined the horse-and-buggy drivers up on one side of the road and car owners on the other.

As the 20th century unfolded, Old Order groups who worried that the avalanche of technology would tear their communities asunder and connect them too directly with the outside world placed taboos on public electricity, tractors in fields, modern appliances in the kitchen, and of course—when it arrived—television. Meanwhile, the larger and more assimilated Mennonite, Brethren, and Brethren in Christ groups began looking and acting more like other Protestants. Dropping their plain dress, they adopted more Protestant styles of preaching and worship, employed seminary-trained pastors, built steeples onto some meetinghouses, and organized adult choirs.

Underneath the external changes, a seismic occupational shift was underway. By mid-century, swept up by increasing rates of higher education and urbanization, many members had left their plows for professions. A growing interest in missions and service activities marked all of the mainstream Mennonite and Brethren groups in the first half of the 20th century. Pushed into the larger world through alternate service by World War II, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War, many Anabaptists began acting like mainstream citizens.

Not everyone in the mainstream groups, however, welcomed all the changes. Especially disturbing to some were the loss of plain clothing and the women's prayer veiling, the ordination of women, the growing acceptance of television, and liberal theological views on Scripture. These and other issues prompted numerous plain-dressing groups to withdraw from the mainstream groups in the last half of the 20th century. During this time, the Brethren Revival Fellowship and some two-dozen conservative Mennonite groups formed in protest of various "liberal" trends.

### Three Clusters

By the end of the 20th century, some 100 Anabaptist groups spanned a wide social spectrum in North America. Some members read by gaslight, while others surfed on the world wide web. Some shunned credit cards, while others traded stocks on Wall Street. Thousands studied in one-room schools, while others taught at leading universities. Some were recent immigrants from Asia, and others claimed nine generations of German stock. A truly diverse company had gathered under the Anabaptist canopy.

Struggling with the powerful forces of modernization, Anabaptists and Pietists sorted themselves into three clusters. The **traditional** groups try to preserve religious practices and make little effort to engage the dominant culture. At the other end of the spectrum, **transformational** groups seek to change—to transform—the larger world. The **transitional** groups, of course, lie in the middle—trying to preserve their traditions, yet reaching out as well.

The **traditional** groups emphasize the moral authority of the church over the individual. They are predominately rural, although many are not farmers; most are satisfied with an eighth-grade education, and they do not engage in evangelism. With large families, these groups grow through "biological evangelism" rather than new recruits. They are more interested in preserving religious practices than in changing the larger world. With minimal bureaucracy, traditional groups emphasize informal social relationships—fellowship above policy, oral over written communication, friendship over proper doctrine.

In broad strokes, the **transitional** groups come from two directions. Some have left Old Order roots, but others have withdrawn from transformational groups. Roughly 13 percent (70,000) of the Anabaptist world straddles transitional ground. The transitional groups speak English and own automobiles, but they require their members, especially women, to wear distinctive clothing. Although transitional groups share a conservative worldview with traditional groups, they generally interact more with the outside world and are more likely to engage in mission activities.

Unlike traditional groups, transitionals have Sunday schools, youth meetings, and formal programs of Christian education. Their church buildings tend to be fairly plain and they rarely use musical instruments in worship. Lay ministers are usually selected from within the local congregation and do not have professional training or receive a salary.

These churches permit new technology but typically forbid television; some limit world wide web access to business uses only. Many members complete high school but higher education is discouraged. Children from these groups typically attend private church schools.

Virtually all of these transitional groups forbid divorce, the ordination of women, military service, and holding political office. Like the more traditional groups, these churches will excommunicate members who violate their standards. They seek to change the world through mission efforts without discarding their distinctive plain dress.

## **Reaching out**

Plain dress creates a big divide in the Anabaptist world. When Anabaptists shed their plain clothing, they trade their public identity as a distinctive group for greater access into the broader society.

**Transformational** groups seek to transform the larger culture in a variety of ways, including personal evangelism, church planting, overseas missions, prison ministries, international relief and development, social justice, peacemaking, and conflict mediation.

Transformers work in a wide array of jobs as surgeons, mechanics, nurses, lawyers, educators, carpenters, therapists, stockbrokers, managers, and business owners. Most of the members of these groups have televisions and use the world wide web as well as other forms of mass media. About two thirds (360,000) of the Anabaptists in the United States are in the transformational camp.

Transformational groups show many different expressions of Christian faith and piety. They usually grant individual conscience priority over the collective authority of the church. Reflecting the plurality of modern culture, these groups differ on a host of issues—the ordination of women, homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment, political involvement, peacemaking, and others. Some groups are ardent evangelicals, while others accent peacemaking and social justice. Still other churches try to weave all these strands together.

Many transforming congregations employ professional staff—pastors, musicians, Christian educators, and youth leaders. Some of them meet in modern facilities with well-appointed sanctuaries, fellowship halls, and multiple-purpose gymnasiums. Transformational groups also operate national programs and organizations with bureaucratic features—publishing houses, mission boards, colleges, and service agencies.

## **The big divide**

There are fundamental differences between traditional and transformational Anabaptist groups—divergent worldviews, different understandings of the self, of salvation, and indeed of the nature of the church itself. The traditionalists accent the past and value tradition as much as change. The transformers welcome change, innovation, and strategic planning. Traditional groups have not absorbed many of the assumptions of modernity that transformational groups often take for granted.

The transforming groups accent the individual—conscience, choice, and freedom. Many of them emphasize personal salvation, personal Bible study, and personal evangelism. By contrast, traditional groups stress the communal dimensions of salvation, place more restrictions on the individual, and grant greater authority to the church.

Different understandings of the mission of the church also stretch across the spectrum. Some transformers seek to change society by evangelizing individuals and bringing them into the church. Other transformers focus on changing social structures that perpetuate economic injustice, racism, sexism, and poverty. Still others seek transformation through creative contributions in the arts, mental health professions, and civic endeavors. Regardless of mode, transformers share the conviction that the gospel's good news should create change—whether at the individual level, the societal level, or both.

The traditionalists, on the other hand, argue that their communities are beacons on a hill—a light to the world. Their first priority is to live faithfully within their community in ways that give witness to their faith. Although they will reach out to needy neighbors who face disaster, the primary mission of the church, as they see it, is to faithfully practice the gospel in daily life. A pure church, unstained and unspotted by worldly contamination, is the best and most enduring witness to the larger world.

Old Order communities have little interest in trying to be relevant to the world; rather they seek to live faithfully in community, leaving the effectiveness of their witness in the hands of God. One of the interesting ironies is that groups like the Old Order Amish have attracted enormous public attention without any attempts to evangelize. Transformers, of course, might argue that stirring the curiosity of tourists is interesting but does not change the world for Jesus Christ.

## **Global Growth and Diversity**

By the dawn of the 21st century, mission efforts had dramatically transformed the complexion of the Anabaptist face. Within the United States, the monochrome European culture had dissolved into a kaleidoscope of new cultures. Mennonites in Philadelphia or Los Angeles were not driving horses or speaking German; they were commuting to work on subways and worshipping in more than a dozen languages, including Korean, Chinese, Spanish, and Japanese. These urban congregations of color brought not only cultural distinction but also creative and noisy forms of worship that seem centuries away from the somber, slow pace of Old Order singing.

But despite their quiet Germanic ways, the traditional groups are flourishing. The Old Order Amish, for example, doubling every twenty years, grew their small flock of 5,000 in 1900 to some 180,000 today. Indeed, the traditional communities and the new immigrant groups show the most robust rates of growth. In any event, the modernizing experience has dramatically diversified the monocultural German heritage that many Anabaptists had brought to Germantown.

Diversity also thrives beyond the United States, as the mission efforts of the mid-20th century sowed the seeds of Anabaptism in new societies around the world. The degree of Anabaptist identity varies enormously among rapidly growing overseas churches, but one thing is clear—the Anabaptist family of faith stretches far beyond white, sauerkraut-eating Pennsylvania Germans. Indeed, the Mennonite World Conference counts some 1.3 million members in 200 church bodies in sixty-five countries—singing and praying in dozens of languages.

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## **Traits of traditional, transitional, and transformational groups**

### **Traditional**

- Use horse-drawn transportation
- Speak a German or Swiss dialect
- Consider themselves Old Order
- Preserve Old forms of religious ritual

- Selectively use technology
- Emphasize informal/communal practices
- Practice nonresistance
- Accept the authority of the church
- Wear plain clothing

### **Transitional**

- Accept individual religious experience
- Emphasize rational, formal, written doctrine
- Engage in evangelism
- Use technology except television
- Forbid divorce\*
- Forbid the ordination of women\*
- Discourage higher education\*
- Ordain lay pastors\*
- Practice nonresistance
- Wear plain clothing

### **Transformational**

- Support higher education
- Engage in diverse forms of ministry
- Hold professional jobs
- Hire professional, salaried pastors
- Use all forms of technology
- Practice peacemaking
- Accept individualism
- Participate in mainstream cultural groups
- Operate large church organizations
- Participate in local, state, and national politics

***Note: A particular group may not necessarily exhibit all the traits of a category. Traits marked with an asterisk apply to both traditional and transitional groups.***

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Pilgrims and Exiles: Recommended Resources

More Anabaptist insider information

Steven Gertz

Although the Anabaptists have valued humility and privacy highly, they have attracted a lot of attention from curious tourists and serious students alike. In whichever category you may fall, you will find in the following resources a wealth of carefully researched information and interpretation on the Anabaptists.

Anyone interested in learning about the origins of Anabaptism would do well to start with William Estep's *The Anabaptist Story* (3rd edition, Eerdmans, 1996). Estep covers the heady days of the Radical Reformation in engaging prose, from Conrad Grebel's and George Blaurock's courageous baptism through the spread of the movement into Holland, where Menno Simons assumed the mantle of leadership, and then finally over the Atlantic where the movement took root in America.

Next to the Bible, no book is held dearer by Anabaptists today than Thielemann J. van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* (Herald Press, multiple editions). Originally published in 1660, the book traces a terrifying yet venerable tradition of Christian martyrdom beginning with Christ and his disciples and quickly moving to Anabaptists who died at the hands of Catholics and Protestants alike. Today the *Martyrs Mirror* serves as a reminder to American Anabaptists of the price they paid in Europe for nonconformity. The complete set of 104 etchings added to the 1685 edition by Jan Luiken may be viewed at <http://www.bethelks.edu/services/mla/images/martyrsmirror/>, which also provides a link to the full English text of the *Mirror*.

Donald Kraybill is one of the foremost historians and interpreters of the Anabaptists today. The reader new to Anabaptist studies would do well to begin with almost any one of the more than 18 books Kraybill has authored. In *On the Backroad to Heaven* (Johns Hopkins, 2001), Kraybill attends to the nuances of faith and practice in the "Old Order" branches of the Amish, Brethren, Mennonites, and Hutterites (a communal group not included in this issue). In the concluding chapter he sagely maps out the challenges facing American Anabaptists with the collapse of modernity and the rise of post-modernity.

A handy reference and a quick but comprehensive read on American Anabaptists is Donald B. Kraybill and C. Nelson Hostetter's *Anabaptist World USA* (Herald Press, 2001). This handbook includes summary descriptions and statistics for all major Anabaptist groups, along with historical, cultural, and demographic charts that illumine complex social patterns and theological distinctives.

In *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Johns Hopkins, 1989, 2001), Kraybill addresses why the Amish have neither declined nor fallen into irrelevance over the course of the 20th century, but have continued to grow and flourish. He also masterfully disentangles for the reader puzzling inconsistencies in Amish attitudes and policies that arose during the initial encounters with modernity and technology.

For a comprehensive history of the Amish, Steven M. Nolt's *A History of the Amish* (Good Books, 1992, 2003) is an excellent choice. Nolt returns to the Reformation to set the scene for Jakob Ammann's split with Swiss Mennonites in 1693, then follows the first wave of emigration to Holland and finally to Pennsylvania in the early 18th century. Nolt is careful to note that not all Amish fled to America at first; the last to leave Europe did not emigrate until 1914.

How much of our perception of the Amish draws from facts on the ground, compared with stereotypes imposed by the American mainstream? In *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Johns Hopkins,



2001), David Weaver-Zercher follows the attempts of American media to portray the Amish—from early 20th century Helen Reimensnyder Martin's novels lampooning the "Pennsylvania Dutch" to Peter Weir's redemptive Amish widow in his 1985 movie *Witness*. Weaver-Zercher concludes that American representations of the Amish tell us as much about ourselves as about the Amish.

Part of the series Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, Ervin Beck's *MennoFolk* (Herald Press, 2004) brings to our attention a different source of "insider information" on Anabaptist theology and culture: their own folklore. Having collected a trove of trickster tales, jokes, and urban legends told by Mennonites and Amish (as well as mainstream American culture), Beck sets these stories—for example, the "Reggie Jackson urban legend" that once circulated among many Anabaptists—in their cultural context, and takes great delight in them along the way.

Finally, for a detailed but easy-to-read set of guides to the details of "plain" lifestyle and culture, see the *People's Place Books* (Good Books). This series explores subjects as diverse as Anabaptist buggies, recipes, plain dress, and even weddings.

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## Bride of the Reformation

Edwin Woodruff Tait

Basel, on the Rhine where France, Germany, and Switzerland meet, was a bustling hub of commerce and culture in the early 16th century. From all over Europe, students flocked to its university and writers brought their books to its presses. Chief among the intellectuals of Basel was the reformer Desiderius Erasmus. At Basel, in 1515-16, Erasmus produced his famous edition of the Greek New Testament, assisted by younger scholars such as Johannes Oecolampadius, a priest who was working for the Froben printing house, and Wolfgang Capito, preacher and theology professor.

### A marriage of penance?

Also in Basel were Margareta Rosenblatt—a military wife—and her daughter Wibrandis, who would play an important role in the lives of both Oecolampadius and Capito. The two Rosenblatts moved in university-educated circles, from which Wibrandis picked up German, Latin, and a husband, Ludwig Keller, whom she married in 1524 at the age of 20. Two years later Keller was dead, leaving her with a daughter also named Wibrandis.

Both Wibrandises returned to live with Grandmother Margareta, and for two more years they lived in poverty. Meanwhile, they became attracted to the evangelical teachings being proclaimed by Oecolampadius. The former printer's assistant was back in Basel as cathedral preacher after a stint as preacher in Augsburg (1518-20), two years in a monastery (1520-22), and several months as chaplain to the outlaw knight Franz von Sickingen. Capito, meanwhile, had left Basel in 1520 for a job with the Archbishop of Mainz, in which capacity he attempted to stall the case against Luther.

Erasmus, still in Basel, feared that the "evangelicals" were tearing the Church apart. He therefore took full advantage of the possibility for satire when the 45-year-old Oecolampadius married the 24-year-old widow Wibrandis Keller. Oecolampadius, Erasmus quipped, had married an attractive girl as his Lenten penance. In Oecolampadius's own account, Wibrandis was a bit too young, but she was a good Christian, of respectable family but not too rich, and had "several years' experience bearing the cross." He wrote to Capito the year after the wedding: "My wife is what I always wanted ... She is not contentious, garrulous, or a gadabout, but looks after the household."

### Oecolampadius's fate

In 1529, Oecolampadius and a Protestant mob succeeded in destroying the images in Basel's churches and reforming the Lord's Supper according to Protestant doctrine. Meanwhile, similar changes had taken place in Strasbourg, where Capito had overcome his last qualms about the divisive potential of Protestantism and was working zealously alongside the ex-Dominican Martin Bucer. Throughout southern Germany and Switzerland, a like-minded group of theologians took control of the religious life of some of the region's most important city-states. They and their wives formed not only a theological but a social circle. Capito had married a local magistrate's daughter, Agnes, at the urging of Bucer. And in turn, Capito had urged Oecolampadius to take a wife. Both Elisabeth and Agnes corresponded with Wibrandis, as did Anna Zwingli.

This network of friendship would be sorely needed. The Reformation had triumphed in much of Switzerland, but the warlike "Forest Cantons" remained Catholic, and in 1531 civil war erupted. On Oct. 11

Zwingli was killed in battle at Kappel, and Basel's attempt to help Zurich and Bern resulted in a second defeat. Oecolampadius had defended the legitimacy of war, but he saw the military disasters as a sign that Christians should trust in God alone. Weak and discouraged, Oecolampadius died on Nov. 23, 1531. Bucer commented, "We have no greater theologian."

Meanwhile at Strasbourg, Capito's wife Agnes had died of the plague, leaving him a widower with several children. In the 16th century, this situation obviously called for immediate remarriage. Bucer was afraid that Capito might marry the widow of a martyred Anabaptist leader (a self-proclaimed "king"). Capito had Anabaptist leanings and was, in Bucer's view, an impulsive sort. He needed a practical wife who would put up with his eccentricities, provide for his needs, and link him more firmly to the evangelical mainstream. Wibrandis fit the bill, and Bucer hoped the plight of Oecolampadius's widow and three children in Basel would distract Capito from the Anabaptist "queen" in Augsburg.

Bucer's plans worked. Capito (over 50 at the time) proposed to Wibrandis and brought her back to Strasbourg. Once again, Wibrandis found herself living in a major center of the Reformation. Strasbourg, even more than Basel, was between worlds—between France and Germany culturally, and between the Reformed and the Lutherans theologically, while it also (for a time) served as the haven for Anabaptists and other radicals. Bucer was the dominant figure at this point, negotiating (successfully) for reconciliation with the Lutherans, and (unsuccessfully) for the formation of a national church where Protestants and Catholics could join in worship as the Gospel slowly transformed society. These efforts culminated at the ill-fated Regensburg Colloquy in 1541, and Bucer returned home to find plague sweeping Strasbourg. In the months that followed he watched four of his five children die, while the Capitos lost two of theirs, besides Wibrandis's son Eusebius Oecolampadius. Then Capito himself and Bucer's wife Elisabeth were both stricken.

As Martin and Wibrandis stood by Elisabeth's deathbed, she made them promise to marry each other in order to provide for the children of both families. "We could not answer except by tears," Bucer recalled later.

### **A very Reformation household**

In March of 1542, the 51-year-old Bucer fulfilled his wife's dying wish. Bucer was one of the most respected theologians of the Protestant world at this point, and traveled frequently. Wibrandis, in weak health, managed the household, took care of the children (two surviving from Oecolampadius, two from Capito, and two from Bucer, besides her stepson from Bucer's first marriage) and entertained a wide variety of guests. The couple also adopted needy children and gave shelter to students and refugees living in Strasbourg. The Italian reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli spoke glowingly of the piety and order of Bucer's household.

Like Oecolampadius and Capito, Bucer was restrained in his own comments on his marriage to Wibrandis. He once said that she was perfect in every respect except that she did not rebuke him as much as Elisabeth had done, and that he now felt the need of Elisabeth's plain speaking.

Meanwhile, in 1546, Emperor Charles V mustered his forces and dealt a decisive defeat to the Protestant forces. Forced to sue for peace, the Protestants found themselves saddled with an imperially mandated compromise, the "Interim." They were allowed to continue to preach freely, but they had to give back several churches in each city to the Catholics, and the remaining Protestant churches had to reintroduce certain Catholic ceremonies.

### **On to England**

Some Protestant theologians believed that they could conform to this in good faith. Bucer did not. He would not have been given the choice anyway. The emperor regarded him as one of the principal

troublemakers, and Bucer's exile was a condition of the peace treaty with Strasbourg. In 1548, then, he set out accompanied only by his assistant Fagius for Protestant England, where he had been offered a post as theology professor at Cambridge.

Bucer arrived in England lonely and discouraged. He was convinced the failure of German Protestantism was due to the sinfulness of the Protestants and their failure to practice Christian discipline. He proclaimed this message to his English students with a dour prophetic insistence that some of them found daunting. Meanwhile, he found the English winter bitterly cold, and a special German-style stove was constructed for him. The food, he complained to Wibrandis, was nothing but meat.

Wibrandis came to England, looked at the situation, and decided that everyone should emigrate. She went back to Strasbourg to make arrangements, where she narrowly escaped being summoned by a Catholic official who was trying to confiscate her property (she admitted that if she had gone she might have "said something hot" which would not have been a good idea). By the end of 1549 she had herded the whole family to England, in time to nurse Martin through two more difficult winters. In 1551 Bucer died, worn out by his endless activity, discouraged by the apparent failure of his work, and weakened by the climate. It was left to Wibrandis to organize the Bucer household for the return trip to Strasbourg. But Strasbourg was no longer a haven. The Interim was still in force (though not for much longer) and the family of a prominent heretic was not safe there. Wibrandis and her household therefore returned to Basel, where she lived for more than 10 years as a much respected matriarch until her death (in yet another plague epidemic) in 1564.

### **A decisive—if supporting—role**

Though Wibrandis never wrote or spoke publicly, and her husbands spoke little of her except to praise her virtue and gentleness, her threat to "say something hot" to the intrusive Strasbourg official shows another side. The details of the move to England also show her to have been decisive and capable, sometimes overruling her ailing husband.

For the most part, Wibrandis stood in the background—but what a background! From the heady beginnings in Basel to the stress and bustle of Strasbourg to the wintry gloom of Edwardian England, Wibrandis played a key (if supporting) role in the unfolding Reformation. The men she married were among the most moderate of the Protestant leaders. They combined learning with reforming fire, and against great odds they struggled to hold the Protestant movement together and make it a genuine renewal of the Church.

That all three men saw Wibrandis as the ideal helpmate says something about the kind of woman she must have been.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Grace at the negotiating table

Bruce Heydt

As Colman, Bishop of Lindisfarne, looked out over the North Sea from the cliff top where Whitby Abbey stood, the familiar verses from the Apocalypse may well have leaped to mind: "And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea."

By the middle of the 7th century, England had felt the wrath of more than one beast from across the sea, and to Colman, the traditions practiced by the Church of Rome must have seemed no less threatening to his cherished Celtic way of life.

Several waves of missionaries had evangelized England during the church's early centuries. According to tradition, Joseph of Arimathea himself had introduced the Gospel to British shores at present-day Glastonbury.

Christianity's early gains in the south were reversed, however, when pagan Jutes, Saxons, and Angles (from whom Angle-land eventually took its name) overran most of the island in the 5th and 6th centuries, pushing the native Britons into Wales and Cornwall.

But while the Britons fell before the pagan invaders, the pagan gods gave way to the gospel of Christ. In 597 AD, Pope Gregory the Great sent a missionary to England to promote the gospel among the heathen. His representative, Augustine, received a cordial if unenthusiastic welcome from the Saxon King Ethelbert, whose wife, fortuitously, was Christian. From the church Augustine founded at Canterbury, Roman Christianity began to spread across southern England.

### Bumping heads in Northumbria

At about the same time, another missionary movement gathered momentum in the north, flowing outward from the Scottish island of Iona, where the Irish monk Columba had established a religious foundation based on the Celtic Christian traditions that still held sway in Ireland. Both the Augustinian and the Columban branches of the British Church thrived and expanded until, inevitably, the two traditions bumped heads.

The bump occurred in the Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria. The Northumbrian King, Oswy, embraced the gospel, but his counselors were divided over which of the two conflicting traditions deserved his allegiance. He therefore called a council of the Northumbrian clergy to decide the momentous question of whether to embrace the Celtic or the Roman styles of worship.

Colman championed the Celtic traditions as the more endemic, "British" brand of Christianity, with roots dating back to pre-Saxon days. He, along with Hilda, Abbess of Whitby Abbey, where Oswy had chosen to convene his "Synod," looked upon the Roman ways as foreign to Britain, as another beast from across the sea threatening to overrun Britain once again.

Yet the differences between the Celtic and Roman practices, at least insofar as they were debated at Whitby, were trivial. Only two main issues divided the Northumbrian clergy. One concerned what kind of

haircut monks should wear—the Romans' circular hairless spot shaved on the top of the head or the Celtic semi-circular hairless arc on the forehead. The other involved the method of setting the date for Easter. On these issues, the future of Christianity in Northumbria turned.

An Anglo-Saxon monk, the Venerable Bede, writing 60 years after the event, penned one of only two known accounts of the Synod of Whitby. According to Bede:

### **Which is the True Easter?**

"King Oswy first observed, that it behooved those who served one God to observe the same rule of life; and as they all expected the same kingdom in heaven, so they ought not to differ in the celebration of the Divine mysteries; but rather to inquire which was the truest tradition, that the same might be followed by all; he then commanded his bishop, Colman, first to declare what the custom was which he observed, and whence it derived its origin. Then Colman said, 'The Easter which I keep, I received from my elders, who sent me bishop hither; all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are known to have kept it after the same manner.'"

Among these forefathers to whom Colman referred, he appealed most notably, if rather counterproductively, to the authority of Columba, the respected Irish monk who had established the monastery on Iona: "Is it to be believed that our most reverend Father Columba and his successors, men beloved by God, who kept Easter after the same manner, thought or acted contrary to the Divine writings?"

When Colman finished speaking, the cleric Wufrid addressed King Oswy. Wufrid had been raised in the Celtic tradition but had conformed to the Roman customs, after studying in France and Italy. "The Easter which we observe," Wufrid countered, "we saw celebrated by all at Rome, where the blessed apostles, Peter and Paul, lived, taught, suffered, and were buried; we saw the same done in Italy and in France, when we traveled through those countries for pilgrimage and prayer. We found the same practiced in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and all the world, wherever the church of Christ is spread abroad. ... And if ... Columba ... was a holy man and powerful in miracles, yet could he be preferred before the most blessed prince of the apostles, to whom our Lord said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and to thee I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven?'"

### **A healthy alternative**

Wufrid's appeal to St. Peter proved decisive. "When Wufrid had spoken thus," Bede wrote, the king said, "Is it true, Colman, that these words were spoken to Peter by our Lord?" He answered, "It is true, O king." Then says [Oswy], "Can you show any such power given to your Columba?" Colman answered, "None. ... " Then the king concluded, "And I also say unto you, that [Peter] is the door-keeper, whom I will not contradict, but will, as far as I know and am able, in all things obey his decrees, lest, when I come to the gates of the kingdom of heaven, there should be none to open them, he being my adversary who is proved to have the keys." The king having said this, all present gave their assent and resolved to abide by the Roman practice.

And that was that. Although commentators ever since have regarded it as a pivotal moment in ecclesiastical history, the Synod was, in truth, simply a local event convened to decide the mechanics of church ritual in Oswy's own small kingdom. The king's decision had no power to affect Church policy anywhere else throughout Britain—let alone the power, as many have claimed for it, to suppress Celtic Christianity. The Celtic traditions held sway in Cornwall and Devon for another 300 years, until those churches, too, voluntarily adopted the Roman practice.

Whitby's true and lasting significance, it seems, is to provide a brilliant example of Christ-like submission to authority in disputes that have little bearing on the fundamental tenets of the common faith. Colman, still firm in his conviction of the superiority of the Celtic tradition, returned to his home in Ireland, where he was free to practice it. Before he left, Oswy honored his request to appoint his student, Eata, as the new Bishop of Lindisfarne. Hilda, the abbess of Whitby, though equally strong in her preference for the Celtic custom, nonetheless abided by the King's decision.

Scholar of Christian spirituality Arthur G. Holder aptly notes: "Perhaps it is possible, after all, for controversies to be adjudicated with some degree of civility and grace, preserving respect for those with whom we disagree. The outcome of Whitby offers ... a healthy alternative to burnings at the stake."

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