



Menno Simons 1496-1561

Menno Simons early career did not suggest his later notoriety. Born in the Netherlands a few years before Luther posted his famous Ninety-Five Theses, he matured in an age of ferment. At his parents' wish he prepared for the Roman Catholic priesthood. His studies grounded him in Greek and philosophy, but not the Bible. Ordained when 28, he embarked upon a routine of masses, infant baptism, services for the dead – not to mention drinking, card-playing and other frivolities. But reformation hovered in the air.

Outwardly conformed to his church, he struggled inwardly to believe that bread and wine became Christ's literal body and blood. For two years he was in torment of mind. Finally, fearfully, he opened the Bible to see what it said. To his dismay he found no direct support for this doctrine of transubstantiation. In desperation he opened a forbidden work by Martin Luther who said no man would be damned for violating the commands of men. Relief flooded Menno's soul. He decided he would trust the Scriptures. Still he did not break with the church admitting he enjoyed comforts too much to make the break.

In 1525 a Zurich group concluded infants should not be baptized. Called Anabaptists they faced immediate persecution. Beheading and martyrdom followed for many. Menno saw men willing to die for their faith. He poured over his Bible, studying baptism, and concluded the Anabaptists were right, but he did not join them. Tragedy finally precipitated his break with Rome.

A group of radicals, one of whom was believed to be Menno's brother, took up swords and occupied an old cloister where they were eventually massacred by troops. His conscience smote him. These men were willing to die for a lie while he, Menno, would not suffer for the truth. He fell to his knees, pleading for forgiveness, and rose, determined to preach unadulterated truth. For nine months he spoke boldly from his pulpit before voluntarily resigning his priesthood.

Then for a year he lived in seclusion, studying the Bible, until brethren begged him to shepherd them. He was noted for his common sense and kept the Anabaptists from Northern Europe from degenerating into fanatical cults.

Charles V offered 100 guilders for Menno's capture, forbade the reading of his works, and made it illegal to aid or shelter him. He lived on the run. Friends were slain and some turned on him over doctrinal differences. In spite of these woes, Menno continued to lead his people. He wrote simple books to meet their spiritual needs. Unlike

others who bore the name Anabaptist, his followers remained law abiding. Eventually authorities saw the distinction and named his followers Mennonites.

He lost two of his three children while on the run and then his wife died. He became crippled, hobbling with a crutch. Yet he labored for Christ, urging others to repent and lead pure lives. He renounced war, called for separation of church and state, and pleaded for freedom of conscience. All people must accept Christ's sovereignty and the church must be a faithful witness for Christ.

Menno died in 1561, having eluded capture to the end. Not a great theologian, he was nonetheless a man of powerful influence, for he died as he preached. His ideas survive with the Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites, and influenced other Protestants such as the Baptists.

Here are the words from one of his writings regarding the new birth:

"Do you suppose, dear friends, that the new birth consists of nothing but in that which the miserable world thinks consists of being plunged into the water; or in the saying of, 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost?'" No, dear brother, no. The new birth consists, verily, not in water nor in words; but it is the heavenly living, and quickening power of God in our hearts which flows forth from God, and by which the preaching of the divine Word, if we accept it by faith, quickens, renews, pierces, and converts our hearts, so that we are changed and converted from unbelief to faith, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from evil to good, from carnality to spirituality, from the earthly to the heavenly, from the wicked nature of Adam to the good nature of Jesus Christ."

About 30 of Menno Simons' writings survive as well as several letters. His books include *Christian Baptism*, *The True Christian Faith*, and *The Cross of the Saints*.