The Mennonites & Amish

Introduction: People of the Mennonite and Amish faiths are generally regarded more as a cultural curiosity than representatives of a religious denomination. The old Amish especially seem to be a people out of place in time. With their unusual clothing and grooming and their refusal to use many modern conveniences, they are typically sought out more by tourists than by seekers of spiritual truth. But make no mistake, the things we may regard as curious about the Amish and the Mennonites are in fact expressions of deeply entrenched religious faith.

We should also realize that this faith is held by more than just a few individuals in isolated rural areas. The Mennonites are located all over the world, although they are mostly concentrated in The United States and Canada. They claim to have over 1 million members spanning 60 countries, and according to statistics reported by the Mennonite World Conference in 1996, there were 415,978 baptized members in Canada and the U.S. alone. In addition to the Mennonites, the number of Amish worldwide was estimated to be 134,000 in 1996 (Melton, 1996). While some Mennonites ardently evangelize, much of the numerical increase in this movement in modern times is a reflection of the loyalty of generation after generation of large families.

For those of us interested in understanding and possibly teaching Mennonite and Amish people, several questions beg answers. Where did this system of faith get its' beginning? What are the reasons for the peculiar practices of its followers? Why are its followers so loyal? And, how does it differ from New Testament Christianity?
The Mennonite faith developed in Europe in the 16th Century when a small group of people began to challenge the reforms of Martin Luther and others during the Protestant Reformation. The two issues on which this group differed most from the Lutherans and Calvinists were baptism and the separation of church and state. Lutherans and Calvinists were firm believers in baptism at birth and in the idea of a united church and state, but this new group believed that baptism should only be for believers (adults) and that the church should not be guided by the government. The name "Anabaptists" means "rebaptizers" and it was given reproachfully to people in this movement because of the practice of baptizing adults who had already been baptized (sprinkled) as children. Anabaptists themselves, because they followed neither the Catholics nor the Protestant Reformers, often refer to their faith as the "Third Way."

The year 1525 is usually given as the official birth date of the Anabaptist movement. Ulrich Zwingli had begun a religious reformation in Zurich, Switzerland. By 1523 there began to be much debate between reformers and civic leaders there over baptism and the relationship between church and state. Early in 1525, the Council of Zurich issued decrees requiring that babies be baptized within eight days of birth and forbidding those with differing views from assembling or disseminating their views. In defiance, Conrad Grebel (a former disciple of Zwingli's) and several like-minded associates were baptized as adults on January 21, 1525. So, in the midst of controversy and immediate persecution, the Anabaptist movement was born. While the movement began to spread, and seemingly spring up on its own in some places, it was plagued from the beginning both by persecution from without and division from within.

Menno Simons was born in a little town in Holland around 1496; he became a Catholic priest, and served in that capacity for more than a dozen years. But Menno's Catholic persuasion and admittedly carnal lifestyle eventually underwent a change. This may have been prompted by the 1531 martyrdom of Sicke Freeriks Snijder, "a god-fearing, pious hero" who was beheaded by state authorities in a town near Menno's for the crime of rebaptism. "I examined the scriptures diligently," Menno wrote in his autobiographical Departure from the Papacy, "and pondered them earnestly, but could find no report of infant baptism" (Roth). In 1536, Menno Simons was rebaptized by Anabaptist leader Obbe Philip. He spent the remainder of his life preaching and writing extensively about his beliefs. "Wary of his contemporaries who
had allowed personal revelations and visions to transcend the authority of the written Word, Menno continuously defended Scripture as the foundation of the Christian life." (Roth)

Menno traveled widely, visiting towns and villages where pockets of fellow believers lived, often preaching at night to avoid detection. All the while he was considered a fugitive by an imperial edict issued against him by Emperor Charles V. Twenty-five years after his conversion from Catholicism, Menno died peacefully at the age of 66. Credited with saving the Anabaptist movement, it is in Simons' honor that Countess Anna of Friesland coined the name "Mennonites."

Mennonites were often the objects of persecution, both from Catholics and Protestants. It is estimated that between the years 1531 and 1597, over 1,500 Mennonites were martyred for their religious beliefs.

< The Amish Point of Departure >

Although the Mennonite movement has been plagued with several internal disagreements, a most notable division occurred in 1693. In that year, Jacob Amman, a Swiss Anabaptist leader, believing that the church leaders were not holding to strict separation from the world, determined that a spiritual renewal was needed. Amman did not believe that the ban or shunning (i.e. withdrawal) was being practiced as it should be. He also felt that foot washing should be practiced by all the congregations and that the communion should be observed twice per year instead of just once. Amman separated from the Swiss Anabaptists over these issues and his followers were nicknamed "Amish." Amman encouraged more separatist ways upon his followers, and today some practices among the Amish include: untrimmed beards, hooks and eyes in place of buttons on outer garments of the men, horse and buggy transportation, horse-drawn implements for farming, plain and distinctive dress patterns and no electricity in homes (Third Way Café, 2001)

As a result of persecution, the Amish began to immigrate to North America, especially Pennsylvania, because it had become a haven for other persecuted religions. Many Amish groups settled in Lancaster County, which is still today one of the most famous Amish communities.

During the 19th century, the Amish community experienced several divisions over different interpretations of the Ordnung, or the traditional rules of life for the Amish.
In many communities there were separations between conservative Amish and more progressive Amish. For the conservatives, the Ordnung were the proper way to give "physical expression to biblical teachings and virtues". But for the progressive Amish, those teachings and virtues could be expressed in other ways as well. It was from this time that the terms "Old Order Amish" and "Amish Mennonite" came to be used to distinguish between the conservative Amish and the Progressive Amish (New Religious Movements, 2001)

< General Points of Mennonite Belief & Practice >

This list of beliefs reflects the thinking of nearly all of those whose faith is in line historically with the Anabaptists, from the progressive Mennonites to the old Amish.

1. The Authority of Scripture. The following statement from the Mennonite Confession of Faith well expresses what Mennonites and Amish claim to believe regarding the Scriptures. "We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture."

2. Truthfulness, oath taking. According to a Mennonite web site, "We are committed to telling the truth, to avoid the swearing of oaths, to live in faithful stewardship of all that God has given us." (3rd Way Café)

3. Non-violence. In 1539, Menno Simons said, "The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife. They are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks&ldots;" (Eerdman's, p. 402). This continues to be the position of all in the Anabaptist/Mennonite/Amish faiths.

4. Baptism. Baptism of adult believers with water is regarded as a sign of cleansing from sin and a pledge to walk in Jesus' way. Baptism is typically performed by pouring.

5. Communion. The Lord's Supper (Communion) is regarded as a sign by which the church remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death.

6. Foot washing. Foot washing is usually practiced religiously, or least held in high regard as a legitimate expression of worship and humility.
7. Church Discipline. There is a great amount of emphasis placed on church discipline, although the extremity of the measures taken varies from group to group.

<Unique Points of Amish Belief>

The following list of uniquely Amish beliefs and practices is taken primarily from B.A. Robinson.

1. The Ordnung. The Ordnung is an oral tradition that regulates the Amish way of life. Details of the Ordnung differ among various church districts. And since each district is autonomous, and there is no centralized Amish organization, the specific regulations for daily living among the Amish vary from place to place.

2. Shunning. Meidung, also called shunning or the ban is the practice of the Amish community to withdraw association from members who have been excommunicated. Jacob Amman's interpretation and practice of Meidung was even stricter than that of the Anabaptists. He told his followers to shun all members that leave the Amish church and those who marry an outsider. He also preached that one should not buy from, sell to, or even eat at the same table as the excommunicated individual. [Note: Most observers agree that the threat of being shunned is the primary reason so few ever leave the Amish faith.]

3. Evangelism. The Amish do not try to recruit members from the outside world because that would be seen as consorting with those that are shunned. They have traditionally avoided attempting to seek converts.

4. Education. Members usually speak a German dialect called Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch). High German is used during worship. They learn English at school. Schools are one-room buildings run by the Amish. Formal education beyond Grade 8 is discouraged, although youth are given further instruction in their homes after graduation.

5. Attitude toward modernization. Members do not own or use automobiles or electricity. The basic rule is that if a modern invention does not help one become closer to Christ or the Amish community, it is banned from being used.

6. Marriage. Marriages outside the faith are not allowed. Couples who plan to marry are "published" in late October. They are married in one of their homes during November or early December.
7. Dress and grooming. Men have beards in keeping with what is believed to be the practice outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures. They do not, however, grow mustaches because of the long association of mustaches with the military. Men usually dress in a plain, dark colored suit. Women usually wear a plain colored dress with long sleeves, bonnet and apron. Women wear a white prayer covering if married; black if single. At death, a woman is usually buried in her bridal dress, which is often blue or purple.

8. Worship. Religious services are held in the homes of members biweekly on Sunday. They meet in a different home each week. Just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the last supper, the Amish wash each others' feet at the observance of communion.

9. Photographs. The Amish do not take photographs. This is based on the prohibition in Exodus 20:4 not to make any graven images.

Cross-points
The following points of difference between the Mennonite/Amish faith and the Scriptures show clearly the difference between the two. Some of the statements of Mennonite beliefs are taken directly from The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, which itself states that one of its purposes is to "help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths."

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<tr>
<th>The Mennonites</th>
<th>The Bible</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Purpose of Baptism. &quot;Baptism by water is a sign that a person has repented, received forgiveness, renounced evil, and died to sin&quot;;&quot; (Confession of Faith, Article 11) &quot;We believe that baptism of believers with water is a sign of cleansing from sin;&quot; (3rd Way Café).</td>
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<td>2. Baptism and the church. &quot;Thus, baptism should always be done by the church and its representatives, if possible in the presence of the congregation. It should be public because baptism means a commitment to membership and service</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Purpose of Baptism. Baptism was done in the Scriptures &quot;for the remission of sins&quot; (Acts 2:38) and to &quot;wash away&quot; sins (Acts 22:16), not as a sign that one has already received forgiveness.</td>
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<td>2. Baptism and the church. &quot;Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of</td>
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in a particular congregation." (COF, Article 11)

3. Capital Punishment. "We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations, hostility among races and classes, abuse of children and women, violence between men and women, abortion, and capital punishment." (COF, Article 22)

4. Foot washing and Communion. "Congregations are encouraged to practice foot washing when it is a meaningful symbol of service and love for each other." (Article 13) "The Amish follow a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible, and just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the last supper, the Amish wash each others' feet at the observance of communion" (New Religious Movements).

3. Capital Punishment. "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil dots; For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." (Romans 13:3-4).

4. Foot washing and Communion. Whatever the New Testament requires regarding foot washing is required of individuals, not congregations (John 13:14-15; 1 Timothy 5:10). 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 contains the instructions a congregation is to follow in keeping the Lord's Supper as Jesus taught the night he was betrayed. [Note: John 13 says nothing about the communion, and 1 Corinthians 11 says nothing about washing feet].

< Points of Weakness >

The faith of the Mennonites and the Amish has much in it that is attractive to spiritually minded people. Its' serious appeal to the Scriptures, its' sense of community, and the willingness of its members to live simple and quiet lives speaks...
well of it. However, there are some rather glaring internal inconsistencies that reveal the weaknesses of this religion.

1. Reliance on Confessions of Faith and the Ordnung. While claiming to accept the Scriptures as their only guide, both the Amish and the Mennonites rely on expressions of faith or statements of religious law other than the Scriptures. The Mennonites assert that their Confession of Faith provides "guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture." Yet they say, "At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible" (Confession of Faith). This is at least confusing, and sounds a lot like double talk and equivocation designed to justify the existence of a denominational, extra-Biblical, man-made creed.

The Amish use of the Ordnung as a guide to daily life is an even more obvious abandonment of the claim to rely solely on the Scriptures. Ordnung is nothing more than personal opinion, passed down in the traditions of men, and made into religious law. It may be that an individual could choose not to use electricity because he did not think it helped him serve the Lord better, but to make non-use of electricity a religious law amounts to doing exactly what Jesus condemned the Pharisees for in Mark 7:8. "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

2. Unwillingness to adjust to the culture of others. The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22 "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 20and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; 22to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Plainly the apostle was willing to adjust his own practices in areas that did not involve sin so that he could fit in to the culture of and evangelize others. This is exactly opposite from the Old Amish in particular. A religion that does not evangelize because its members avoid contact with outsiders has its priorities confused.

3. Calling themselves after men. While claiming not to be like either the Protestants or the Catholics, the Mennonites and the Amish have followed the example of many Protestant groups in calling themselves after men's names (i.e. Menno Simons and Jacob Amman). This practice is specifically condemned in passages like 1 Corinthians
1:12-13,"Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Review Questions on the Mennonites & Amish

1. On what two issues did the Anabaptists most strongly disagree with the Lutherans and Calvinists?

2. What does the name "Anabaptist" mean?

3. Who was Menno Simons and what role did he play in solidifying the Anabaptist movement?

4. What were the main disagreements Jacob Amman had with the Swiss Anabaptist leaders of his day?

5. Which belief or practice (if any) on the list of "General Points of Mennonite Belief and Practice" do you believe to be in error according to the Scriptures? Why?

6. In light of Romans 14, discuss the difference between a persons' individual religious choice (e.g. not to eat meat or not to use electricity) and the binding of that choice on others. Specifically, would it be all right for an individual to decide that in his personal life he would forego using electricity or automobiles?

7. What do you think is the plainest contradiction between Mennonite/Amish faith and the Bible?

8. What do you see as the greatest weakness in the Mennonite/Amish faith?

References on the Mennonites & Amish

Books & Publications


Web Sites


The Third Way Café, ThirdWayCafe.com