

WHO ARE THE MENNONITES?

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Mennonites are a Christian faith group that began in the 16th century. Currently there are over one million members world-wide. Mennonite beliefs and practices vary widely, but following Jesus in daily life is a central value, along with peacemaking. Menno Simons was an early prominent leader and eventually the group became known as "Mennonites" because of his name.

The Anabaptists were people inspired by reforming ideas that were circulating in the 1520s in Europe, the time of the Reformation. A few were educated, but Anabaptism was above all a reform of the common people. They were called "Anabaptists" or "re-baptizers" because they insisted that water baptism should be reserved for adults only. This conviction led them to baptize one another as adults, even though they had been baptized as infants.

The baptism of believing adults was the most visible mark of the Anabaptist movement. The essential argument for adult baptism was taken from the "Great Commission" of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20. In those verses the Anabaptists read a clear command: First go forth and teach (proclaim the Word), then baptize. Following baptism, new Christians are to be taught to live in obedience to Christ's commands.

All Anabaptists rejected the idea that there was a bodily presence of Christ in the bread and wine. The bread, they said, was just bread and the wine was just wine. The Lord's Supper was a memorial to be celebrated by baptized and disciplined believers, not a re-creation of Christ's sacrifice done by priests on behalf of sinners. For the Anabaptists, Jesus' words "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11) indicated what the Supper was supposed to signify: It was a remembering of Jesus' death and sacrifice and a "showing forth" of his death until his return.

The Anabaptists were sure there had to be a connection between an inner, spiritual baptism and an outward baptism in water, between an inner faith in God and an outer walk of obedience, following in Christ's footsteps (Mark 8:34).

From the start there had been Anabaptists who were sure that following in Jesus' footsteps provided clear guidance: Disciples suffer with Christ, they do not inflict suffering on others through violence. The Anabaptists came to agreement that in questions of discipleship, the words and the example of Jesus were final, and could not be set aside until Jesus himself set them aside. Once this principle of discernment was accepted, it was clear to the Anabaptists that disciples of Jesus Christ must put away the sword, unconditionally, for three reasons:

1. The example of Christ himself, who prayed "not my will, but yours be done," and who allowed himself to be crucified. Disciples of Jesus, if faced with a similar choice of resisting Caesar, will not do so but accept death instead.
2. Jesus' clear command forbidding violence and even hatred of enemies; Jesus commanded love.
3. Participating in violence contradicted the principles of spiritual integrity, that believers who live by the Spirit of Christ will show forth the love of God in their daily lives. Christians wield spiritual weapons, not weapons of iron and steel.