

CHAPTER 1

The "Radical Reformers"

If you ever traveled the back roads of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio or Lancaster County Pennsylvania, you probably caught a glimpse of an intriguing world. Many tourists enjoy a leisurely drive through “Amish country” in hopes of sneaking a photo or two as they pass a horse and buggy, a schoolyard filled with barefooted children, aproned women hanging their laundry on the washline, or bearded men straining in the fields with their horse-drawn plows. Some travelers even take the time to stop at a local Amish grocery store to stock up on bags of dry soup mixes and snacks, or at a local Amish furniture shop where they marvel at the hand rubbed dining room tables and chairs. They may even hope to see the artistry of the \$1500 handmade Amish quilts that would certainly beautify any bed.

It takes little time to realize that this is a unique group of people who value hard work, appreciate the simpler things in life, and aren’t ashamed to look different from the rest of the world. After all, this is not your “normal” 21st century western culture. It’s almost like looking through a giant picture window into a living and breathing museum. And what makes the view even more intriguing is that all the people in this museum are alike. The men all wear beards and large rimmed black hats. The women walk around with their long dark dresses. The young ladies all cover their heads with white, starched bonnets, and the lads wear their un-parted hair cut exactly to ear length.

The more you see, the more you can’t help but ask the same questions that everyone asks. When did the clock stop? Why would anyone want to live this way? What would cause an entire society to resort to this radical way of life? Where did this old-fashioned culture begin, and how long can it possibly go on?

Finding answers to these questions is like putting together the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle. There certainly are questions—lots of them! But there are answers too. If we carefully study the puzzle pieces and place them together in the correct order, we will begin to see the complete picture of the Amish culture, a culture that is in the world, but not of it. It’s a fascinating journey that begins over 450 years ago, halfway around the world, with one simple incident—a baptism!

The Reformation Climate and Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483. Although the year may not be significant of itself, the era certainly was. The Middle Ages were nearing an end, and the civilized world was waking from a thousand year sleep. Little did anyone realize that it was about to

encounter a reformation that would shake its very foundations. For us today, it's hard to imagine the impact that Luther made that October 31 in 1517, when he stepped up to the Wittenberg church door and posted the Ninety-five Theses.

That moment sparked both a religious and social reform that would change the face of Europe. God's wheels of Sola Fide (by faith alone), Sola Scriptura (by Scripture alone), and Sola Gracia (by grace alone), were beginning to turn. For years the people of Europe had lived under the dark cloud of the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. These two powerful forces had joined hands in a religious-political siege that kept the masses in check for centuries. They ruled with an iron fist over Europe's social, religious, and economic culture. They dictated what was and what was not to be preached. They controlled the status of the people. They held the strings of the money bags that were filled with coins from taxes and indulgences. They were answerable to none, and they guaranteed that anyone who questioned their authority would be quickly silenced.

But the winds of reform didn't begin with Martin Luther. They started to blow many years before Luther was born. As early as 1176, Peter Waldo, a merchant from Lyon, France, attempted to lead people back to the Scriptures. He taught the people that the Bible was to be read, loved, and believed. His followers, the Waldensians, sold their property and devoted their lives entirely to God, a conviction that cost many their lives.

John Wycliff was another reformer in the 1300's. He took to the highways preaching that the Word of God should be accessible to everyone. This "Morning Star of the Reformation" began his career as a professor at Oxford University. He ended it as one of the great reformers of the church. His outspoken hatred for the sins of the clergy and papacy, and for the offensive sale of indulgences (documents sold to the people in return for a shortened term in purgatory) set him at such odds with the Catholic Church that after he died and was buried, his bones were exhumed, burned, and tossed into a river along with his books and other writings.

Following closely behind Waldo and Wyclif was John Hus. Also a university professor, Hus was outspoken in exposing the evils of the papacy and the immorality of the church. Hus was invited to a general council of the church in Constance in 1415. Although he was promised safe passage, at his arrival he was arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to death. From within the prison cell John Hus wrote, "It is better to die well than to live well. One should not flinch before the sentence of death. To finish the present life in grace is to go away from pain and misery."¹ Martin Luther knew the great sacrifice made by John Hus when he remarked, "In John Hus the Holy Ghost was very powerful."²

People in sixteenth century Europe continued searching for an escape from the political, social, and religious tyranny and control. Consequently many misguided people began to follow radical leaders. Some of these charlatans spent their time playing with

toys and babbling like babies claiming that Jesus commanded them to become as little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Others, like the Adamites, convinced their followers to run naked through the woods. The Free-livers boasted having several wives in common, and the Weeping Brothers held highly emotional prayer meetings.³

By the mid 1500's God decided the time was right to place a flamboyant Catholic professor named Luther at the entrance to the church of Wittenberg. Luther was about to make a bold stand before the nobles and the church hierarchy. Europe and the world would never be the same. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his proclamation of ninety-five statements regarding the sale of indulgences. He demanded a debate. He believed the church had overstepped its bounds and had miserably lost sight of the true light of God's grace. Luther respected the church, and wanted to see it return to the teachings of the apostles. He never wanted to destroy the church, but rather to open its eyes and to refocus its sight on the only path to heaven as found in the pages of Scripture. Little did Luther realize that on that crisp October day he was actually drawing a line that would one day divide the Roman Catholic Church from an increasing number of protesters.

From England to the Alps, from the Netherlands to Austria people discussed the growing climate of reform. Luther's arguments with the Catholic Church were welcomed and appreciated by many throughout Europe. Even the smallest burgs and hamlets buzzed with interest. At long last the people had a glimmer of hope to help them escape the church and state domination. Not coincidentally, shortly before this time God opened the mind of a brilliant inventor named Johann Gutenberg to discover the use of movable type. That single invention made it possible to print great numbers of books and pamphlets in a short amount of time. Printed media made Luther's Reformation the topic of the day. But Luther wasn't the only one engaged in reforming.

The Swiss Reformation

Ulrich Zwingli was born in 1484, two months after Martin Luther. He shared more with Martin Luther, however, than just a similar birthday. He too wanted to reform the church. Zurich, Switzerland was the stage for his reformation. A former Catholic priest, Zwingli, like Luther, preached against the depravity of the Catholic Church, claiming that indulgences, the mass, and monasticism were not scriptural. He is credited with founding the Swiss Reformed Church.

Zwingli was an avid reader of Luther's writings and was greatly influenced by his German counterpart. In 1518 he was appointed head pastor in the city of Zurich, where his popularity gained him support of the city council. This acceptance was significant because church practice, doctrine, and worship were all controlled by the council, not the

local church. In those days it was not unusual to hear the local officials discuss church business such as preachers, worship, and church building programs. After all, that was how a state church was conducted.

Zwingli's reformation would not have succeeded without the blessing of the local council. He knew he needed their support. What he didn't realize, was that at the same time he was succeeding with his reformation, another reformation was growing within the walls of his very own church.

Besides the churches begun by Luther, there was another child born to the reformation. This child claimed to be neither Reformed nor Lutheran. Its members were dissidents that arose from Ulrich Zwingli's own congregation. They were the Anabaptists, a group of "radical reformers" who traveled a different path in their reformation. Today in the United States we see the offspring of the Anabaptist movement in the churches known as the Mennonites, the Hutterites, and the Amish.

Anabaptism Is Born

CONRAD GREBEL
1489-1526

The son of a wealthy nobleman, Grebel studied in Vienna, Paris, and Zurich, and became a proofreader for Latin books. Grebel was at first a close acquaintance of Zwingli but later the two were at odds because of the issue of infant baptism. Grebel died of the plague at age thirty-seven.

The history of the Anabaptists is a sad journey that winds through the valleys and mountains of Europe where the Mennonites, Hutterites, and Amish were forced to make many painful trips in search of a homeland. Over the years these three Anabaptist groups headed in different directions, explaining why they share common roots of deep Anabaptist conviction and belief, yet they practice lifestyles that are quite different from each other. The ultra-conservative

ways of the Old Order Mennonites, the Hutterites, and the Amish seem to defy reason and common sense. Many view their way of life as a riddle. Yet the riddle can be answered by looking into their detailed history books.

FELIX MANZ
1498-1527

A native of Zurich, Mantz was a brilliant scholar in Latin, Hebrew and Greek. He often served as the "reader" at the meetings. Manz was drowned at age twenty-nine in the River Limmat that flows through the city of Zurich.

The vibrant and intellectual nature of Ulrich Zwingli's church often attracted gifted young scholars. In the early 1520's a handful of young men began to meet regularly for study of the Greek classics, including the Greek New Testament. Within a short time, the discussions began to center around various aspects of the church, especially the reformation. There were

three men in particular who shared this interest, Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, and George Blaurock. These young men made it known that they disagreed with the direction in which Luther's reformation was headed. They felt Luther did little to encourage a change

in the lifestyles of the people. Manz, Grebel and Blaurock believed that only those who applied the command to follow Christ and lived lives of self-sacrifice and deprivation could be truly considered Christian. They claimed it was necessary to sever all ties, not only with the established church but with the state as well, in order to be completely free and independent to live their lives in devotion to God. Accordingly, their hope was to create a society that would no longer be controlled by the church or by the state. Luther's reformation, they maintained, was only a partial reformation. Whereas Luther's energies were directed toward reform within the church, Manz, Grebel and Blaurock felt Luther stopped short of severing all ties with the state. "Luther", wrote the *Hutterian Chronicle*, "broke the pope's pitcher but kept the pieces in his hands. Luther and Zwingli acted like two men trying to mend an old kettle, while only making a bigger hole."⁴

Although the Anabaptists often paired Luther and Zwingli together because of their "lack" of social action, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli actually parted ways with one another over the doctrines of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Zwingli professed the Reformed view that the Lord's Supper merely represents the body and blood of Jesus and serves as only a reminder of Christ's suffering and death. Luther on the other hand held to the words of Scripture in which Christ says, "This 'is' my body and this 'is' my blood." The earthly elements neither represent (Reformed doctrine) nor become (Catholic doctrine) the body and blood of Christ. Rather Scripture maintains that body and bread, blood and wine, are all present in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli, who relied heavily on human reason, also doubted the validity of infant baptism. Moreover, Zwingli and Luther disagreed on the roles of the church and state. Whereas Luther felt the state was to provide peace so the church could function, Zwingli felt the state was there to be used by the church to accomplish its purposes.

GEORGE BLAURICK
1492-1529

Blaurock was a student of the Catholic Church, beginning as a monk and eventually a Catholic priest. A strong leader in the early Anabaptist movement, and highly regarded by the Mennonites., Blaurock was burned at the stake in the region of the Tyrol in 1529.

The Bible meetings in Zwingli's church, initiated by Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock, continued into the middle 1520's. They discussed many topics at these meetings, but infant baptism always seemed to demand the most attention. Both the Catholics and Lutherans agreed that Scripture declares that the Old Adam is passed down from generation to generation beginning with Adam and Eve. From the moment of conception the sinful nature is present in us, and therefore infants are indeed sinful

and need to be washed clean from their sins and be adopted into God's family. This washing is done through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. But the three maintained the view that nowhere in Scripture is infant baptism specifically commanded by God, and if it is not commanded, it should not be done. Instead, they said, baptism should be reserved

only for those who are mature enough to make a heartfelt pledge to daily take up their cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This way they could be assured of a pure church made up of true believers. They called it “believer’s baptism.” Conrad Grebel makes this point in a letter written to Thomas Muntzer on September 5, 1524: “We hold that all children who have not attained the knowledge to discern between good and evil and have not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge are surely saved through the suffering of Christ...In answer to the charge that faith is required of all who are to be saved, we exclude children and...that they will be saved without faith and that they do not believe...Infant baptism is a senseless, blasphemous abomination contrary to all Scripture.” (Edited by Leland Harder, 1985.)⁵

Zwingli became increasingly concerned with the growing popularity of these three young men and soon severed ties with them, siding with the city officials. (At first Zwingli agreed with the radicals not to baptize infants, but later he changed his mind.) In August, 1524, the Zurich Council issued a proclamation that only infant baptism was tolerated and anyone who withheld a child from the Sacrament of Baptism would be fined and punished. Furthermore, they demanded that the Bible study meetings led by these three men were to be disbanded. The city council asked Zwingli to meet with “The Swiss Brethren” (*Schweizerische Bruder*), as they now began to call themselves, with the hope of changing their minds. Several meetings were held in January of 1525, but they failed to resolve their disputes—especially regarding the question of infant baptism. The Swiss Brethren held fast to their conviction that baptism should be reserved for adults who could promise a lifelong commitment to the Lord.

January 21, 1525, was a historic night. Anabaptists maintain this was the date that their church was founded. The *Hutterian Chronicle* describes what took place that evening in the house of Felix Manz:

“When the reformers were meeting, fear came upon them and they fell to their knees and prayed with all their hearts to the almighty God of heaven. They asked God to have mercy on them for what they were about to do. They were well aware that this could lead to suffering and punishment. After the prayer ended, George Blaurock stood and asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him. As he said this, he knelt down and was baptized by Grebel since there was no pastor in the room. Then the others present asked Grebel in turn to baptize them as well. And so, in the fear of God, these men surrendered themselves to the Lord. Some present were commissioned to teach and to spread the gospel message. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways.”⁶

At first glance it might seem that this small band of religious “radicals” secretly baptizing one another was hardly significant. That couldn’t be further from the truth! This was sixteenth century Europe. By this single act these men defiantly severed all ties with both

the established Roman Catholic Church and the emerging Protestant reformers by their reinvention of baptism. But that was not all. This baptism carried with it significant political importance as well. Not only were they declaring a basic church teaching invalid, but it was through baptism that a child's name was placed on the public roles for them to be eventually taxed and enlisted into the military. Abolishing infant baptism put a swift end to this practice. January 21, 1525, laid the foundation of a wall that would separate the Swiss Brethren from the Roman Catholic Church, the young Lutheran Church, the Reformed Protestant churches, and the city of Zurich. In essence these men claimed that no one maintained any more control over their public or private lives. They declared themselves free to think, believe, worship, and do as they wished. A church could no longer dictate beliefs, and a state could no longer control their actions. Is it any wonder that before long both the church and the state aimed their wrath at this small group of upstarts who were trying to create their own Radical Reformation with its own form of "heresy"?

Soon the Swiss Brethren were given the distasteful title of "*Wiedertäufer*" ("rebaptisers"), or the name still used today, "Anabaptists" ("*ana*" is Greek for "again"). State and church leaders attempted to bring a swift end to this newly formed church. They were not about to be upstaged by a band of young radicals and their handful of misguided followers. Within four months the first Anabaptist was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death.

Public records show that two years after the Zurich meeting, twenty-nine year old Felix Manz was arrested, sentenced, and drowned in a Zurich river. George Blaurock was burned at the stake in 1529. However instead of putting out the flames of this movement, the persecutions caused the radical reformation to spread faster than could be imagined. Disciples were fleeing for refuge throughout Europe. Germany, Moravia, and the Netherlands became the scenes of many secret Anabaptist meetings and worship services. This geographical movement would later result in the three major divisions of Anabaptism—the Hutterites, the Mennonites, and the Amish. Church and civil authorities took drastic measures to destroy this "menace". It was about time for one of history's bloodiest persecutions.

The Martyrs

The *Martyrs Mirror* is a collection of accounts and court records of those who died in the great persecution. (The proper title is *The Bloody Theater or Martyr's Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*.) Compiled in the mid 1600's by a Dutch Mennonite minister, its object was to remind future Anabaptists of the carnage and terror experienced by the early Anabaptists. This already huge volume was amended in the

later 1600's when Mennonite artist Jan Luyken added 104 copper engraved illustrations. The 1100 pages of the *Martyrs Mirror* are stained with the blood of more than 600 martyrs from the Netherlands and nearly 200 more from other parts of Europe, all executed for their unwavering beliefs in the Anabaptist teachings. Even today this book is found in most Amish homes and Anabaptist ministers still frequently refer to it in their sermons. Page after page of the *Martyr's Mirror* tells the story of pacifist martyrs who were tortured by dismemberment and branding, and killed by fire and drowning. The carnage was rampant throughout Europe –from Salzburg to Augsburg, from Brussels to Cologne, from Venice to Amsterdam. Here's how the *Martyr's Mirror* reads: (From the 25th edition by Herald Press, 2004.)

JACOB DE MELSELAER, A.D. 1558

In the year 1558, Jacob de Melselaer, a brother, was apprehended at Antwerp, for living according to and keeping the Word of God; who, after much examination and torment, as he would not renounce or apostasize, was condemned to death, and brought forth into the marketplace, with a gag in his mouth, to prevent him from speaking. Nevertheless, he went to death with boldness, and valiantly testified with his blood to the faith he confessed.

FRANS TIBAN AND LITTLE DIRK, A.D. 1558

Two brethren named Frans Tiban and Little Dirk, were apprehended for their faith at Antwerp, examined, tortured, afflicted with much torment, and, finally, as they would in no wise apostasize, condemned to death, and beheaded in prison.

GRIETGEN, TANNEKEN, LIJNTGEN, AND STIJNTGEN OF AIX-LA-CHAPELLE, A.D. 1558

Four sisters, named Grietgen, Tanneken, Lijntgen and Stijntgen of Aix-le-Chapelle were apprehended at Antwerp, on account of their faith, and severely examined; but as they could in no wise be moved therefrom, and fought as heroines for the name of Christ, always firmly adhering to the truth, they were finally tied crooked and drowned in prison.⁷

Although numbers are somewhat vague, it is estimated that between 1525 and 1580 nearly 4000 Anabaptists lost their lives because of their faith. Even the *Ausbund*, the hymnbook still used today in Old Order churches, contains fifty-three hymns penned by imprisoned Anabaptists.

Another account is of Gerritt Hazenpoet, a young tailor who lived in the Netherlands. Gerrit was arrested when he tried to secretly return home to visit with his wife and

children. Prior to his execution the authorities held a mock banquet, a common occurrence. Court records list the costs connected with his execution:

1. Police to capture him
2. Executioner to torture him
3. Rope for torture
4. Wine for the executioner and local lords
5. 24 days worth of food for the prisoner
6. Supply of fuel, straw and hay
7. Court proceeding
8. Payment to a doctor and church prior who attempted to get him to recant
9. An executioner to kill him

Total spent: 37 guilders (\$70 today)⁸

Again we read in the *Martyr's Mirror*:

"Some were racked until the sun could have shown through them, so that some were torn and died, some were burned to ashes under the name of heretic, some roasted on pillars, some torn with glowing tongs, some locked in houses and all burned together, some hanged to trees, but some executed with the sword, killed and cut to pieces. Many were gagged or had their tongues tied so that they should be unable to speak or defend themselves, and were thus led to their death...Like lambs they were led to the slaughter in droves and murdered according to Satan's kind and nature."⁹

But Anabaptism was far from being destroyed. The flames that consumed the innocent martyrs only ignited the faith and perseverance of the survivors. Those who silently died for their beliefs went proudly to their graves believing they had presented their Lord with the ultimate sacrifice.

In their quest to find a peaceable homeland, one small band of believers headed in the direction of Austria - the future Hutterites. Another group still sought freedom in the Netherlands - the Mennonites. A third band moved into Switzerland and France and would eventually break away from the Mennonite community—the Amish.

1. Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, p. 26.
2. L. Fuerbringer, *The Concordia Cyclopedie*, p. 341.
3. John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, p. 26.
4. www.anabaptistchurch.org/chronicle2.htm

5. Edited by Leland Harder, www.anabaptistnetwork.com
6. www.anabaptistchurch.org
7. Excerpts taken from *Martyrs Mirror*.
8. John S. Hoyer, *Mirror of the Martyrs*, p. 21.
9. www.mhsc.ca/encyclopedia/contents/M37857.html