

Anabaptists in the Netherlands

by John Christian Wenger

The sermon explores the lives and teachings of Meichior Hofmann, Obbe Philips, and Menno Simons, highlighting their contributions to Dutch Anabaptism and the development of the Mennonite church.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19

Topics: "Anabaptist History", "Church Reformers"

Description

John Christian Wenger preaches about the life and teachings of Meichior Hofmann, a reformer of the sixteenth century who was a furrier turned preacher. Hofmann's rare knowledge of the Bible and ability to move the masses to repentance and faith led to considerable excitement and commotion wherever he preached. Despite his disagreements with the Swiss Brethren on apocalypticism and the nature of Christ, Hofmann's influence on Dutch Anabaptism was significant, particularly in baptizing Jan Matthijs of Haarlem who later broke with him. The sermon also highlights the significant roles of Jan Matthijs, Obbe and Dirk Philips, Menno Simons, Leenaert Bouwens, and Gillis in the Dutch Anabaptist movement, emphasizing their contributions, struggles, and martyrdoms.

Transcript

Meichior Hofmann

One of the most enigmatical reformers of the sixteenth century was an ex-Lutheran preacher and free-lance Anabaptist named Meichior Hofmann. Born about 1495 in Swabian Hall, Meichior was by profession a furrier. Devout, able, sincere, and possessing a rare knowledge of the Bible, he was able to move the masses to repentance and faith. He wrote voluminously. A man of tremendous energy, he preached betimes at Strasbourg, Stockholm, Emden, Amsterdam. Everywhere he stirred up considerable excitement and commotion. Luther was at first kindly disposed toward him, but eventually became cool and critical, holding that Hofmann ought to return to his furrier's trade, for he was not competent to preach, nor was he called. Hofmann did not formally unite with any Anabaptist group until 1530. To the end he was critical of the Swiss Brethren, and they of him. In the disputation of 1538, held in Bern, Switzerland, the Brethren reported that he was not named a brother among them, and that they had resisted his teaching "with all earnestness."

Hofmann agreed with the Swiss Anabaptists on a number of points. He believed in freedom of conscience, in holiness of life, in believer's baptism, and in nonresistance. In his earlier period he rejected the oath unconditionally, but later gave it limited approval. His greatest difference with the Swiss Brethren,

however, was in two fields: (1) he was overwhelmed by apocalypticism, and wrote one booklet after another dealing with end-time events on which he thought his understanding was as clear as crystal, and which he announced were to break upon the world no later than 1534; (2) he conceived a strange theory to account for the human nature of Christ as well as his sinlessness: Mary, declared Melchior, gave birth to the Lord Jesus, and yet he did not partake of her nature. Christ was the Lord from heaven who was conceived of the Holy Ghost. Christ's body was in Mary but not of Mary. (This view later caused much difficulty in Dutch Anabaptism until its abandonment.) The final cleavage with the Swiss Brethren came when Hofmann decided to defer baptism of his converts for a couple of years, as well as to wait for the actual creation of a separatist church until a more propitious era. For the Swiss Anabaptists this program was plain cowardice, even sinful disobedience to the Lord Jesus, for it was he who had issued the Great Commission. The followers of Hofmann in the Netherlands-"Melchiorites" or Bontgenooten (comrades in the covenant) they were called-actually remained a small and secret party within the Roman Church, awaiting the day when Hofmann would be divinely led to move ahead with the establishment of a church.

The significance of Hofmann for Dutch Anabaptism lies in this fact: It was he who baptized one Jan Matthijs of Haarlem, and Jan in turn broke with Hofmann on his waiting two years to inaugurate baptism. Late in 1533 Jan sent out twelve "apostles" to preach and to baptize. Two of them, Bartel Boeckbinder and Willem Cuper, went to Leeuwarden in Friesland and baptized Obbe Philips in December 1533, and the next day ordained him as an elder. Obbe in turn baptized a converted priest named Menno Simons a little over two years later (1536), and Menno became the eponymous leader of the Dutch Mennists (or present-day Mennonites).

Hofmann's fanaticism meanwhile went from bad to worse. A visionary Anabaptist of the same stripe as he, a man of Friesland, prophesied that Hofmann would return to Strasbourg, be arrested, and lie in jail half a year, whereupon the Lord's Second Coming would take place. At that point, declared the Frisian seer, Hofmann would lead forth an Anabaptist procession over all the world! This was marvelous news, and in an expectant mood Hofmann hurried back to Strasbourg. When his imprisonment had not taken place after two months he himself solicited arrest. The council obliged him with a prompt imprisonment in May 1533. The poor deluded "Elijah" lay in jail for ten years, much of the time in a miserable state with no visitors permitted, and denied the use of paper, pen, and ink, and with his food supplied through a hole in the ceiling. He filled anything that would receive impressions with a record of his odd ideas, and some of the writings, recorded on twenty-four pieces of cloth, were preserved as archival material in Strasbourg until destroyed by fire in 1870. Death finally came to the poor man, honest but misguided soul that he was, in 1543. Christ had not come, and there were no 144,000 adherents of the truth ready to greet him. Hofmann believed that only he and his supporters had the truth. "Alas, what a terrible time is this," he wrote in 1531, "that I do not yet see a true evangelist, nor know any writer among all the German people who witnesses to the true faith and the everlasting Gospel."

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The Kingdom of Münster

The full tragedy of a degenerate "Melchiorism" was ushered in by Jan Matthijs of Haarlem, one of whose "apostles" baptized Obbe Philips. Jan was a deluded fanatic of the first water. As early as 1531 Münster in Westphalia was being influenced by a former priest named Bernt Rothmann who was now preaching Lutheran doctrine, and who had been both to Wittenberg and Strasbourg. In 1532 the Reformation in Münster grew by leaps and bounds, so that by August evangelical preachers occupied all the pulpits of

the city except the cathedral.

Gradually the reform movement of the city was divided into two wings, a conservative Lutheran group and a more radical wing which proved to be susceptible to the most fanatical and wild ideas. Münster had in it some peaceful Meichiorites, and by January 1534, some of the "apostles" of the foolish Jan Matthijs had arrived as well. As Dr. Christian Neff wrote in his article on the Münster Anabaptists in the *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, "Gradually peaceful Anabaptism grew into a caricature."

An opportunist named Knipperdolling became mayor of the city in February 1534, a few weeks after the radicals of the city had seized the city hall. Four days after Knipperdolling got control, believer's baptism was made compulsory; all who refused it were to get out of the city forthwith. Hofmann's wild apocalypticism, although peaceful in character in his own mind, had so confused the masses as to destroy their ability to recognize even a mad delusion. The consequence was that many severely persecuted Anabaptists fled toward Münster, believing that there, rather than Strasbourg, was to be the capital of the Lord's heavenly Kingdom.

Jan Matthijs tried to achieve a glorious victory, like an Old Testament military hero, and was promptly slain by the Catholic bishop's army which had laid siege to the city. The man who exploited the situation in his own favor was a former innkeeper named Jan Beuckelsz of Leiden, certainly the worst of the twelve "apostles" of Jan Matthijs. Beuckelsz had come to Münster in January 1534, and by the summer of that year he had gained control of the government and was reigning as an absolute despot.

In July he introduced polygamy, after executing those who withstood his plan. In September he took the title of king. With his harem he lived in ease and splendor, and he displayed genuine cunning in maintaining the morale of the city in spite of hunger. He was able to keep the bishop's army at bay until the night of June 24-25, 1535. The capture of the city brought a sudden end to King Jan's glory, and deliverance came to his starving subjects. The "king" was executed a year and a half later, along with two of his henchmen, and their corpses were hung in iron cages on the tower of St.

Lambert Church. The cages are still there. The damage done by the ultra-Meichiorism in the sick minds of the two Jans also remains unto this day, for the caricature of the Reformation which is known as the kingdom of Münster is in the minds of many people a sample of the meaning of Anabaptism. This is equivalent to pinning the blame for the Peasants' Revolt in Germany onto the great reformer of Wittenberg in Saxony!

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The Philips Brothers

Obbe and Dirk Philips were the illegitimate sons of a Dutch priest. As was mentioned before, Obbe was baptized in December 1533 by two of Jan Matthijs's "apostles," Bartel Boeckbinder and Willem Cuper (or Cuiper). Dirk Philips, a Franciscan monk prior to his conversion, was baptized by Pieter Houtzagher, an other "apostle," a week later, near the close of 1533. Both baptisms occurred at Leeuwarden in Friesland where the Philips brothers lived. The Matthijs "apostles" assembled about fifteen prospective converts at Leeuwarden, including Obbe Philips, and reported on the miracle-working power of Matthijs. Obbe was overwhelmed by the account, naively unaware of how deceptive false prophets could be. Best of all was the promise of the "apostles" that no blood would be shed in persecution, because God was about to clear the earth of all the godless tyrants and persecutors. Obbe had some inner anxiety as to whether this

promise was really true, but like the others he was afraid to speak his mind in opposition to the "commissioned" emissaries of Matthijs. The three Matthijs "apostles" who had baptized the Philips brothers believed their own testimony that they were immune to persecution, and in March 1534 they marched through Amsterdam crying out that the "new city" (the west side of Amsterdam where the Melchiorites gathered) was blessed, while the "old city" was cursed: "Woe, woe, to all the godless!" The proclaimers of woe were promptly arrested and were shortly "tortured to death" at Haarlem, along with about fifteen other Melchiorites. Obbe went to the place of execution and inspected the heap of severed heads and smoked and broken bodies to ascertain which were the three who had baptized himself and his brother Dirk. But the torture on the wheel, as well as the fire and smoke, had so changed the appearance of the dead as to make identification impossible.

It was probably early in 1534 that Obbe ordained his own brother Dirk to the office of bishop ("elder") in the Dutch Anabaptist brotherhood. Great confusion then obtained among the Anabaptists of the Low Countries. Who was right, Meichior Hofmann with his mild message of repentance, nonresistance, and holiness? Or the revolutionary fanatics who thought that God wanted the saints to take the sword against the godless, the movement which came to full fruition at Münster? Obbe and Dirk resisted the revolutionary tendencies. The execution of the men who had baptized them, and who had ordained Obbe as elder, also served to disillusion the Philips brothers. Their eyes were opened to the unreliable character of the apocalypticism preached by the Melchiorite "apostles." Obbe and Dirk took up in 1534 the task of shepherding the peaceful wing of the Melchiorites. Three years later, early in 1537, Obbe ordained the converted Roman priest, Menno Simons of Witmarsum in Friesland, to the office of "Obbenite" elder, the service taking place in the Dutch province of Groningen.

At an early date a marked difference in program between Obbe on the one hand, and Menno and Dirk on the other, became painfully apparent. Obbe's emphasis fell increasingly on a sort of individualistic piety in which each man was to concentrate on attaining for himself a vital spiritual life of deep communion with God. Menno and Dirk, however, were congregation-centered in their thinking; they were determined to set up a fellowship of truly converted people, each group to be a well-disciplined unit of love and fellowship, obedient to Christ and his Word, especially to the New Testament. Which emphasis was to triumph-Obbe, or Dirk and Menno? It turned out that it was the strict congregationalism of Dirk and Menno, in contrast with the individualism of Obbe, which was destined to be victorious. The consequence was that Obbe abandoned the movement by 1540, sick at heart over his questionable commission by such fanatics as the "apostles" of Matthijs. But Menno and Dirk moved vigorously forward and established a chain of congregations in the Netherlands and North Germany, each exercising a strict biblical discipline over the members. Dirk finally settled in Danzig, although he traveled about much, as he sought to build up the congregations against all the obstacles which they faced: persecutions from without and problems of unity within, problems often associated with how strictly to apply the ban and shunning. (Strange as it may seem, Obbe had inaugurated shunning or avoidance-the breaking of all social fellowship with excommunicated persons-to keep his followers safe from the revolutionary and fanatical Münsterites. A few small bodies of American Mennonites, especially the so-called Old Order Amish, still shun excommunicated members.)

Both Obbe and Dirk Philips left writings for their followers. About the year 1560 Obbe, a rather weary and bitter old man, wrote his booklet, *A Confession*, which has recently been published in English.¹ Dirk died in 1568, leaving behind a number of books and booklets which were published as a single volume in five Dutch editions from 1564 to 1627; seven German editions, 1715 to 1917; and one English edition, 1910,

entitled, Enchiridion or Hand Book of the Christian Doctrine and Religion.[2]

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Menno Simons, Christocentric Churchman

About the year 1496 there was born to a Dutchman named Simon a son whom he named Menno. In accord with the custom of the time and place the child was called Menno Simonsz (for Simon's son), or simply Simons. As a young man Menno prepared for the Roman priesthood, and in 1524 he was consecrated as priest. As a student he learned Latin, church history, patristics, and the like, but no Bible. Indeed, he had never read in the Bible at all by the time he began in his first parish, Pingjum, in 1524.

Up to this point Menno was a convinced Catholic with no notion that he would ever turn to an evangelical faith. Three incidents drove him to change his mind. (1) During the first year of his priesthood, while engaged in the celebration of the Mass, the thought suddenly struck him that perhaps the doctrine of transubstantiation was after all not true. Menno was shocked at this attack from the devil-for so he interpreted the idea- and he sought to dismiss it from his mind. It turned out that he was unable to do so.

He went to the confessional. He sought help from his superiors. But all in vain. The idea would not down. In desperation he took up the New Testament and was amazed to learn that it did not seem to uphold the Roman view of the sacrament. He also turned to Luther's writings and by 1528 was fully convinced by the Wittenberg reformer that the rejection of a human doctrine could not lead to eternal death. (2) In 1531 a second incident disturbed Menno; he heard of the execution of a man named Sicke Freerks Snijder for being rebaptized.

Never in all his life had Menno heard of anything like a second baptism. He began to wonder whether the Catholic Church might have an unbiblical view of baptism as well as of the sacrament of communion. He could find nothing to satisfy him on the question of why infants should be baptized, either in the New Testament or in the writings of the Protestant Reformers. Still Menno continued as a Roman priest, baptizing babies, hearing confessions, and celebrating the Mass. (3) In 1535 his own brother was swept along in the Dutch whirlpool of revolutionary Anabaptism and lost his life in a struggle with the authorities.

His blood lay hot on Menno's heart. His poor deluded brother was man enough to die for what he thought was the truth, while Menno knew the truth and did not follow it! A conscience-stricken priest gave up to God in repentance that was deep and sincere. He utterly yielded to Christ, and felt that he received forgiveness, cleansing, and healing from his Lord. He seems for about nine months to have remained in his Roman appointment, no doubt hoping to lead his people to an evangelical faith and experience.

But on Sunday, January 30, 1536, he publicly renounced his Roman faith and post and turned to the peaceful wing of the Melchiorites led by the devout and nonresistant Obbe Philips. He was baptized by Obbe, and early in January 1537 he was ordained as an "Obbenite" elder by Obbe in the Dutch province of Groningen.

Menno served his Anabaptist Brotherhood for twenty-five years. For about seven years he seems to have labored in Holland, but about 1543 he turned to northwest Germany, especially the Rhineland. In 1546 he chose Holstein as his field of labor, and his final years were spent at Wuestenfelde, a village between Hamburg and Lüneburg. Like Luther he took a wife soon after his conversion, a good woman named Gertrude who bore him a number of children. His son Jan seems to have died young, but he speaks of his

daughters in 1558, and one of them became the mother of the wife of the martyrologist, Pieter Janz Twisck. Gertrude and Menno seem to have lived in wedded life for about twenty years before they were parted by her death. Menno was severely ill in January 1561. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his renunciation of the Roman Church he roused himself on his sickbed and delivered a short exhortation to those present. The next day he passed away, January 31, 1561.

Menno Simons was the author of twenty-five books and booklets.³ Undoubtedly his most influential treatise is the *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*; in Dutch, *Dat fundament des christelij kenleers*. The 1558 edition was entitled *Een fundament en klare aanwijzing* (*A Foundation and Clear Instruction*). The first part of the book is a vigorous call to real discipleship and includes discussions on repentance and faith. A major concern is the biblical doctrine of baptism. He also argues eloquently for religious toleration:

Do not excuse yourselves, dear sirs, and judges, because you are the servants of the emperor. This will not clear you in the day of vengeance. It did not help Pilate that he crucified Christ in the name of the emperor. Serve the emperor in imperial matters, so far as Scripture permits, and serve God in divine matters. Then you may boast of His grace and have yourselves called after the Lord's name.

Do not usurp the judgment and kingdom of Christ, for He alone is the ruler of the conscience, and besides Him there is no other. Let Him be your emperor in this matter and His holy Word your edict, and you will soon have enough of storming and slaying. You must hearken to God above the emperor, and obey God's Word more than that of the emperor.[4]

Menno described the true congregation of Christ as those who are truly converted, who are born from above of God, who are of a regenerate mind by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the divine Word, and have become the children of God, have entered into obedience to Him, and live unblamably in His holy commandments, and according to His holy will all their days, or from the moment of their call.[5]

As to his own foundation he added:

Brethren, I tell you the truth and lie not. I am no Enoch, I am no Elias, I am not one who sees visions, I am no prophet who can teach and prophesy otherwise than what is written in the Word of God and understood in the Spirit. (Whosoever tries to teach something else will soon leave the track and be deceived.) I do not doubt that the merciful Father will keep me in His Word so that I shall write or speak nothing but that which I can prove by Moses, the prophets, the evangelists and other apostolic Scriptures and doctrines, explained in the true sense, Spirit, and intent of Christ.[6]

This last phrase is the key to Menno's understanding of the Scriptures. All parts of God's Word witness to the Lord Jesus. Menno's motto was, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Menno was a Christocentric churchman.

That Menno was a genuine evangelical is abundantly evident in his writings. In

Van 't rechte Christengeloove

(The True Christian Faith), about 1541, he fairly sings as he writes of Christ:

Behold, my reader, such a faith . . . is the true Christian faith which praises, honors, magnifies, and extols God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ through loving fear and fearing love, for it recognizes the good

will of the Father toward us through Christ. It recognizes, I say, that all the promises to the fathers, the expectation of the patriarchs, the whole figurative law, and all the prophecies of the prophets are fulfilled in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. It acknowledges that Christ is our King, Prince, Lord, Messiah, the promised David, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the strong One, the Prince of Peace, and the Father of the age to be; God's almighty, incomprehensible, eternal Word and Wisdom, the firstborn of every creature, the Light of the world, the Sun of Righteousness, the True Vine, the Fountain of Life, the true Door and Shepherd of the sheep, the true Foundation and the precious Cornerstone in Zion, the right Way, the Truth, and Life, the promised Prophet, our Master and Teacher, our Redeemer, Saviour, Friend, and Bridegroom. In short, our only and eternal Mediator, Advocate, High Priest, Propitiator, and Intercessor; our Head and Brother.[7]

In his book,

Bericht van de Excommunicatie

(Account of Excommunication), 1550, Menno declared:

I dare not go higher nor lower, be more stringent or lenient, than the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit teach me; and that out of great fear and anxiety of my conscience lest I once more burden the God-fearing hearts who now have renounced the commandments of men with more such commandments.[8]

On the role of the sacraments (baptism and Lord's Supper) Menno declared:

Faithful reader, do not imagine that we insist upon elements and rites. I tell you the truth in Christ and lie not. If anyone were to come to me, even the emperor or tile king, desiring to be baptized, but walking still in the unclean, ungodly lusts of the flesh, and the unblamable, penitent, and regenerated life were not in evidence, by the grace of God, I would rather die than baptize such an impenitent, carnal person. For where there is no renewing, regenerating faith, leading to obedience, there is no baptism.[9]

Menno explained the meaning of grace in his book entitled,

Van 't rechte Christengeloove

(The True Christian Faith):

For all the truly regenerated and spiritually minded conform in all things to the Word and ordinances of the Lord. Not because they think to merit the atonement of their sins and eternal life. By no means. In this matter they depend upon nothing except the true promise of the merciful Father, given in grace to all believers through the blood and merits of Christ, which blood is and ever will be the only and eternal medium of our reconciliation; and not works, baptism, or the Lord's Supper . . . For if our reconciliation depended on works and ceremonies, then grace would be a thing of the past, and the merits and fruits of the blood of Christ would end. Oh no, it is grace, and will be grace to all eternity; all that the merciful Father does for us miserable sinners through His beloved Son and Holy Spirit is grace. But reconciliation takes place because men hear the voice of the Lord, believe His Word, and therefore obediently observe and perform, al though in weakness, the things represented by both signs under water and bread and wine.[10]

In his booklet of about 1537 on regeneration, entitled

Van de nieuwe creature

(The New Birth), Menno wrote a vigorous description of Christian holiness:

The regenerate, therefore, lead a penitent and new life, for they are renewed in Christ and have received a new heart and spirit. Once they were earthly-minded, now heavenly; once they were carnal, now spiritual; once they were unrighteous, now righteous; once they were evil, now good, and they live no longer after the old corrupted nature of the first earthly Adam, but after the new upright nature of the new and heavenly Adam, Christ Jesus . . . Their poor, weak life they daily renew more and more, and that after the image of Him who created them. Their minds are like the mind of Christ, they gladly walk as He walked; they crucify and tame their flesh with all its evil lusts.[11]

Menno also stressed justification by faith. To a Christian woman who was troubled by the depravity of her nature Menno wrote a comforting letter about 1557, quoting many statements from the Bible indicating that all the saints of history suffered in the same way, and adding:

Since it is plain from all these Scriptures that we must all confess ourselves to be sinners, as we are in fact; and since no one under heaven has perfectly fulfilled the righteousness required of God but Christ Jesus alone; therefore none can approach God, obtain grace, and be saved, except by the perfect righteousness, atonement, and intercession of Jesus Christ, however godly, righteous, holy, and unblamable he may be. We must all acknowledge, whoever we are, that we are sinners in thought, word, and deed. Yes, if we did not have before us the righteous Christ Jesus, no prophet nor apostle could be saved.[12]

On the other hand, Menno was most severe with those who tried to claim the promises of the gospel without living a holy life. In a harsh protest against the unvarnished sin of some professing Christians of the German Protestant state church he wrote this blast:

All they ask is that men say, Bah, what dishonorable knaves and scamps these confounded priests and monks are! The devil take them, the rascal pope with his shorn crew have deceived us long enough with their purgatory, confession, and fasting. We now eat whenever we get hungry, fish or flesh as we please, for every creature of God is good, says Paul, and nothing to be rejected. But what follows in Paul's statement they do not understand: namely, them which believe and know the truth and partake with thanksgiving. They say further, How miserably the priests have had us poor people by the nose, robbing us of the blood of the Lord, and directing us to their peddling and superstitious transactions. God be praised, we caught on that all our works avail nothing, but that the blood and death of Christ alone must cancel and pay for our sins. They strike up a Psalm, *Der Strick ist entzwey und wir sind frei*, etc. (Snapped is the cord, now we are free, praise the Lord) while beer and wine verily run from their drunken mouths and noses. Anyone who can but recite this on his thumb, no matter how carnally he lives, is a good evangelical man and a precious brother! If someone steps up in true and sincere love to admonish or reprove them for this, and point them to Christ Jesus rightly, to His doctrine, sacraments, and unblamable example, and to show that it is not right for a Christian so to boast and drink, revile and curse; then he must hear from that hour that he is one who believes in salvation by good works, is a heaven stormer, a sectarian agitator, a rabble rouser, a make-believe Christian, a disdainer of the sacraments, or an Anabaptist! [13]

As a leading elder, Menno served as a sort of general superintendent in the Anabaptist Brotherhood, traveling about in North Germany, and sometimes visiting the Netherlands, aiding the local elders and

strengthening the congregations in Christ. Although the Anabaptists stressed holiness of life, theirs was, of course, not a perfect church. Moral transgressions occurred which had to be dealt with. Other problems also arose. One of the elders, a man named Roelof Martens, but better known as Adam Pastor, became unsound in the Trinitarian faith; Pastor denied that Christ was eternal. The other leaders at first tried to lead Pastor back to evangelical faith in the Holy Trinity, but failing in this Menno Simons and Dirk Philips excommunicated Pastor in 1547. To counteract any erroneous influences which Pastor may have sowed in the Brotherhood, Menno wrote in 1550 his *Belijding van den drie eenigen en waren God* (Confession of the Triune God).

But the greatest danger to the Anabaptist fellowship was not heresy from within; it was persecution by the state, incited in many cases by the state-supported church clergy. Understandably this made the Anabaptists quite bitter against both the Catholic and Protestant leaders of the day. In a polemic against Jelle Smit, better known as Gellius Faber, of Emden in East Friesland, Tegen Gillis Faber (Reply to Gellius Faber), 1554, Menno wrote:

He who purchased me with the blood of His love, and called me, who am unworthy, to His service, knows me, and He knows that I seek not wealth, nor possessions, nor luxury, nor ease, but only the praise of the Lord, my salvation, and the salvation of many souls. Because of this, I with my poor, weak wife and children have for eighteen years endured excessive anxiety, oppression, affliction, misery, and persecution. At the peril of my life I have been compelled everywhere to drag out an existence in fear. Yes, when the preachers repose on easy beds and soft pillows, we generally have to hide ourselves in out-of-the-way corners. When they at weddings and baptismal banquets revel with pipe, trumpet, and lute; we have to be on our guard when a dog barks for fear the arresting officer has arrived. When they are greeted as doctors, lords, and teachers by everyone, we have to hear that we are Anabaptists, bootleg preachers, deceivers, and heretics, and be saluted in the devil's name. In short, while they are gloriously rewarded for their services with large incomes and good times, our recompense and portion must be fire, sword, and death.[14]

In his book, *Vermaninge Van dat Lijden, Kruys, Vervolginge der Heyligen* (Admonition on the Suffering, Cross, and Persecution of the Saints) of about 1554, Menno protested the awful persecution which the Anabaptists then had to bear both in Catholic and Protestant lands:

For how many pious children of God have we not seen during the space of a few years deprived of their homes and possessions for the testimony of God and their conscience; their poverty and sustenance written off to the emperor's insatiable coffers. How many have they betrayed, driven out of city and country, put to the stocks and torture? How many poor orphans and children have they turned out without a farthing? Some they have hanged, some have they punished with inhuman tyranny and afterward garroted them with cords, tied to a post. Some they have roasted and burned alive. Some, holding their own entrails in their hands, have powerfully confessed the Word of God still. Some they beheaded and gave as food to the fowls of the air. Some have they consigned to the fish. They have torn down the houses of some. Some have they thrust into muddy bogs. They have cut off the feet of some, one of whom I have seen and spoken to. Others wander aimlessly hither and yon in want, misery, and discomfort, in the mountains, in deserts, holes, and clefts of the earth, as Paul says. They must take to their heels and flee away with their wives and little children, from one country to another, from one city to another-hated by all men, abused, slandered, mocked, defamed, trampled upon, styled "heretics." Their names are read from pulpits and town halls; they are kept from their livelihood, driven out into the cold winter, bereft of bread, [and] pointed at with fingers. . .[15]

In his Brief Defense to All Theologians of 1552, called in the Dutch, Korte glaaglijke ontschuldiging (Brief, Lamentable Apology), Menno made a list of ten topics on which he wished to participate in a theological disputation with the state church men: (1) The qualifications of evangelical preachers; (2) the unchangeable character of the doctrine of Christ and his Apostles; (3) Christ's perfect teaching, and his perfect sacrifice; (4) the source, nature, and fruit of regeneration; (5) Christian faith and love; (6) obedience to God's commandments; (7) Christian baptism; (8) the Lord's Supper; (9) ecclesiastical excommunication; and (10) the Christian life.[16]

No disputation of the type requested was ever granted Menno. A number of times he respectfully requested a disputation, with a guarantee of safe conduct, but his requests were always spurned. The clergy of Wesel in the land of Cleve replied that they preferred for the Henker (executioner) to treat with Menno! Some how, in God's mercy, the hangman never did catch up with him, and he died a natural death at the age of sixty-five. [Back to Contents](#)

Leenaert Bouwens

The four most outstanding bishops or elders of the Anabaptists in the North were Menno, whose oversight covered the congregations from East Friesland to Holstein; Dirk Philips, who looked after the churches in Danzig and the Baltic area; Leenaert Bouwens, who served the congregations of Holland; and Gillis of Aachen (also known as Jelis of Aix-la-Chapelle), who served the Rhineland churches. Of these four men Menno was undoubtedly the most attractive personality and the most effective writer and leader. But we must not overlook the great gifts of Leenaert.

Leenaert Bouwens was born at Sommeldijk in 1515. Nothing is known of his family. During his youth he was a member of a club which was devoted to political oratory. After becoming an adult-by the time he was about thirty years of age-he was chosen as an Anabaptist preacher. In 1551 Menno ordained him to the office of elder. Leenaert's wife felt that she could hardly give her consent to his ordination, and she finally appealed to Menno himself to excuse her husband because of the great hazards of serving as an Anabaptist elder. Menno wrote her a tender reply, suggesting that she simply commit her husband into the sovereign care of God. Because of the great need of Leenaert's services in the Brotherhood, he did not find himself able to release him. The woman must have been persuaded, for Leenaert served long and well. He is best remembered as the elder who kept a name list of those whom he baptized in Holland. In five distinct periods from 1551 to 1582 he baptized no less than 10,252 persons. These lists are valuable in determining the times of founding and the early growth of some of the Dutch Mennonite congregations. Leenaert went through a period of difficulty- perhaps partly through unhappy relations with Dirk Philips in the middle 1560's-but after Dirk's death (1568) he resumed his office and baptized the last 3,509 persons of his career as bishop. He died a natural death at Hoorn in 1582, escaping the martyrdom which had loomed so large in the fears of his wife thirty years before.

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Gillis

Gillis of Aachen was born around the year 1500 in the district of JÃ¼lich, which is now a part of the Dutch province of Limburg. At the trial of two Anabaptist women in 1540 a witness described Gillis as a pale man, of average height, with large eyes and a pointed brown beard. It is said that at times he wore his hair rather long, at other times short. No other Dutch leader is mentioned in testimonies of the martyrs as often as Gillis; he was the one who had baptized large numbers of them. He seems to have been involved in a

moral lapse about the year 1552, but in 1554 he was reinstated to his office. The fall of Gillis was often used to reproach the early Dutch Anabaptists. In 1557 Gillis was captured, and on July 10 of that year he was to be burned as a heretic, as was generally the mode of execution for heretics in Catholic lands. Because of terror he recanted in an effort to avoid the fire. This did not save his life, but he was beheaded rather than burned to death. His right hand was also cut off, and his body was broken on the wheel. Gillis was the grandfather of Galenus Abrahamsz de Haan (1622-1706), a famous physician and Mennonite preacher and leader of Amsterdam.

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Martyrdom Escaped

It is rather remarkable that of the four greatest leaders in the early history of the Dutch Anabaptists only Gillis died as a martyr. How closely these leaders may have come to apprehension and martyrdom we do not know. Menno reported in his Reply to Gellius Faber, 1554:

About the year 1539, a householder who was a very pious man, named Tjaert Reynerdson, was seized in my stead, because out of compassion and love he had received me in his house secretly. He was a few days later put on the wheel after a free confession of faith, as a valiant knight of Christ, after the example of his Lord, although even his enemies testified that he was a pious man without reproach.

Also, in 1546, at a place where they boast of the Word, a four-room house was confiscated, because the owner had rented one of the rooms for a short time, unknown to anybody, to my poor sick wife and her little ones.[17]

The early Dutch Mennonite martyrologist, P. J. Twisck, relates in his book, *Ondergangh der Tyrannen, en Jaerlijcksche Geschiedenisse* (Decline of the Tyrants, and Historical Incidents Year by Year), that he heard Menno's daughter (who was Twisck's mother-in-law) relate how on one occasion a certain traitor who personally knew Menno had agreed to identify him so as to bring about his capture. The traitor accompanied by officers was on a boat on a Dutch canal when a boat containing Menno passed theirs, going in the opposite direction. The traitor said nothing. Menno saw his danger, however, and leaped ashore after the boats passed, and escaped. After his escape the traitor spoke up and reported what had happened; he also explained that he had been unable to speak when he saw Menno. The authorities were so incensed that they put the would-be traitor to death.[18]

Professor N. van der Zijpp, the greatest living authority on Dutch Anabaptism, estimates the total number of Dutch Anabaptist martyrs at 2,500. The last one executed in the North was Reyte Aysesz, who was put to death by drowning at Leeuwarden in Friesland on April 23, 1574. In the South the last martyr was Annaken van den Hove, who was buried alive on July 19, 1597, at Brussels in Flanders. Both martyrs were found by Catholic theologians to deserve death as heretics, and were handed over to the civil authorities of Friesland and Flanders respectively for execution.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-christian-wenger/anabaptists-in-the-netherlands/>

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