

Hutterite/Anabaptist Background

Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ came from heaven to earth, to be the Saviour of the world. He showed us how to be obedient to the will of God, even to the death on the cross. Christ established His church and gave it the great commission to go into all parts of the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Mark 16:15 – 16. He enriched the church by sending the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost 30 A.D. so that His disciples were given power to preach His gospel.

We are the heirs of the faith of this church. The Anabaptists hold to these truths of simple faith and purity of life which is taught in the New Testament.

It is necessary to go back and look at the development of the early church. It spread rapidly as persecution set in against the Christians, to Europe beyond Rome, to Persia, to Egypt and all along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Most church members were from the lower class of people. Thus the state of the church had no temporal advantage such as wealth or material things. This did not hinder the early Christians, they wrote many devotional material, creeds and essays on the defense of the faith. The pagan rulers made their governments enforce extreme persecution, on these Christians from 250-310 A.D., until in 311 A.D. Christianity was legalized by the Roman Emperor Constantine. The church then became a state religion which meant each citizen automatically became a member. Thus the church was no longer composed of persons who had repented of their sins and had been born again by the Spirit of God.

Many changes began to take place, one being the development of the hierarchy. Also there was much interest in historical and devotional literature. Men worked on Bible translations such as: O.T. Hebrew, LXX Greek, New Testament Greek and in 400 A.D. the Vulgate.

This now brings us to the Medieval Period on the time line. The pope (that word means father) had become so powerful that he had absolute reign and everyone had to bow to him. He then decided to build in Rome a huge new cathedral and for this he needed lots of money to pay for the materials and workers. He sent a monk named Tetzal to Central Europe to sell papers called "Indulgences." These papers stated that in return for a certain sum of money, a certain number of sins were forgiven, and the buyer of the paper was excused from a certain number of years in Purgatory.

All of this might have worked in 1517 if the printing press had not been invented. One of the first items Johann Gutenberg printed on his press was indulgence blanks. But another thing was being printed: The Holy Bible. This became a revival for learning as Christian reading material was widespread. People began to read, study and learn of Jesus' life and teachings, and these teachings of Jesus were far different from the teachings of the Catholic church.

One man named Martin Luther objected to the sale of indulgences and hoped to correct the Catholic Church of some of its wrongs. The greedy men in the church refused to allow any change in church teaching, so on the eve of October 31, 1517 as Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the church door at Wittenburg, Germany, the Protestant church was born. Luther and his followers formed a separate church which we know today as the Lutheran church. They were persecuted by the Catholic Church but soon they became too strong to be destroyed. In the German states where Luther's teachings were followed, all citizens had to be members of the Lutheran church.

Calvin and Zwingli from Switzerland also broke away from the Catholic Church. Now known as the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, respectively, they insisted that people must belong to the ruling church and must bring their babies to be baptized into the new church.

Some of the men who worked with Zwingli were dissatisfied and felt the need for a free voluntary church. They met in homes for many years and it was during one of these Bible Study meetings that George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him and he in turn baptized others present in the room. They were called Anabaptists (re baptizers) because they could not recognize infant baptism.

January 17, 1525 Zwingli and his followers called a public debate with the Anabaptist leaders. The date of this public debate is known as the birthday of the Anabaptist church. The Anabaptist leaders held fast to the Gospel which taught:

1. The word of God as a standard for being a Christian, (not those who were baptized as infants and attended mass).
2. The Church was separate from the State. (They did not like government appointed ministers and government paying expenses of the church.)
3. They believed in baptism upon confession of faith.
4. They believed in the way of love instead of war, strife and violence.

Zwingli, Calvin, Luther and other "State" church leaders did not agree with this teaching and joined forces with the Catholics in an attempt to kill the movement. Today many of the convictions for which these men died are accepted by all Christians, but it was the Anabaptists who were ahead of their time by several centuries in thought and theology.

Some of the early leaders of the Anabaptist movement were: Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock, Felix Manz, Balthasar Hubmaier, Menno Simon, and Jacob Hutter. These men were highly educated, intelligent men many of whom were ex-monks or Hebrew scholars.

Persecution set in immediately directed against the leaders. This drove many preachers from Switzerland to South Germany and Austria.

Smith's Story of the Mennonites tells that in July 1526 Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier organized at Nikolsburg in Moravia a church of over 6,000 members. Their basic principles were the following:

1. Adult baptism upon confession of faith
2. The Lord's Supper as a memorial feast
3. Non-resistance
4. Opposition to the oath and swearing
5. Separation from the world
6. The ban to be used in church discipline

These members came from all over Switzerland, South Germany, The Tyrol, Schleswig, and Upper Austria to escape persecution. But at this time the turks were threatening war on Moravia and the government asked them to bear arms. This caused a split in the church, in which the conservative group (which was the smaller) believed that under no circumstances can a follower of Christ bear arms and in Chapter Two of Acts the only Christian way to live is the one which the early church in Jerusalem followed by having all things in common. Jacob Wiedeman, who was the leader of this group, left Nikolsburg in 1528 with his followers and traveled to Austerlitz to seek refuge on the Kaunitz estates. On their way they stopped at Bogenitz where they spread a cloak on the ground and all members placed their material possessions on it. This was the beginning of the religious community way of life which is still practiced among the Hutterites of South Dakota and Canada.

Wiedeman and his followers were warmly welcomed by the four Kaunitz brothers and on their estates they built the first household or Bruderhof.