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At the 400th Anniversary of Menno’s Death

Menno Simons and the Mennonite World Brotherhood

By CORNELIUS KRAHN

MENNO SIMONS was born in Friesland, and died in what was then Denmark. He was a refugee who, for many years, could not find a place of residence even for half a year. Recent decades led us to understand and appreciate more than ever before what it means to be a displaced person.

The disappearance from the marker where Menno had been buried at Wüstenfelde of the well-known copper plaque portraying Menno holding the Bible in his hands was considered a serious loss. In 1958 representatives of the student body of the University of Kiel came and attached a new bronze plaque to the shaft. Speaking not only for the students of the University of Kiel, but for all of West Germany, the representative stated that this was done to express gratitude for the works of love done by the Mennonites, who bear the name of Menno Simons. When the students all over Germany literally had no shelter, no clothes, no food, no facilities, no hope, Mennonites from other countries came to help them and thus kindled hope and courage in their hearts. To honor the memory and the spirit of Menno, a refugee for the sake of Christ, they attached a new plaque to the marker which had been desecrated after the war. This was indeed symbolic of turning the sword into a plowshare. We could become oratorical in stating that the spirit of Menno is still living.

Menno, The Frisian

Menno Simons was born a Frisian and Netherlander. He had to leave his native country as a refugee at the time when he stepped into the limelight of history. Only for short and secret visits could he come back to his native land. Menno, like all true apostles and evangelists, had such a compelling message burning in his heart that he could not compromise and be silent in order that he might remain in his native country. Since he could not preach openly from his pulpit in Witmarsum, he left his home and went abroad. The newly founded brotherhood centered around the core of the Christian message became for him more important than the home community and blood ties. He was willing to sacrifice all that had been valuable and dear to him for the new community of saints and a world brotherhood. Not that he did not love his people, his country and his native village. On the contrary, but circumstances forced him to exchange the inherited community of blood ties for a community of people whose ties were of an other-worldly nature. As a shepherd of believers scattered from Amsterdam to Danzig and Emden to Strasbourg, he became in his day a forerunner of the spirit of ecumenicity and of a Christianity not confined to geographic and national boundaries.

Menno was a voluminous writer, and yet we have no line from him in his native Frisian language. Even his first Dutch writing soon had to be adjusted linguistically to the new environment in which he lived in order to present his message successfully. When we make a pilgrimage today from Amsterdam via Friesland to Groningen and Emden and stop in Oldersum where he found temporary shelter and recall all the hardships recorded, one is impressed by this unusual record. The last remnant and marker of the castle of Ulrich van Dornum at Oldersum which sheltered Melchior Hoffman, Karlstadt, and Menno was torn down recently, removing one of the last traces of those days. Menno, however, could not spend much time in East Friesland but traveled from place to place and finally found shelter in the province of Holstein which at that time was a part of Denmark. Here he found a home in Wüstenfelde, here he had a printing press, and here he was later buried. (See illustrations.)

Menno, The Leader

Although the Anabaptists of the Low Countries went under many names and nicknames, ultimately the name “Mennisten,” officially first recorded in East Friesland in 1545, became the most common among them. It is true that the Anabaptists had no outstanding personality towering over all others similar to Luther, Zwingli or Calvin. This was likely due to a number of factors. There was none of equal stature. There was also none who found full approval by civil and political authorities. Severe persecution also prevented the appearance of such leadership in the refugee congregations. In addition we must also be aware of the fact that the merging congregational type of church polity among the Anabaptists was not conducive to singling out leaders for commanding positions. In spite of all these factors, we must point out that the name of Menno not only became attached to the brotherhood he served in the Low Countries, but has also become known all over the world.

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Nevertheless Menno was neither the founder of the movement, which was named after him, nor its only outstanding leader. His influence in Switzerland, where the movement started, was insignificant. It is only in the range between Strasbourg and Emden where his forerunner, Melchoir Hoffman, was active that his influence was outstanding. Co-workers, such as Dirk Philips, also traveled much and became well known as leaders. Leenaert Bouwens possibly baptized more persons and certainly traveled just as extensively as Menno. Intellectually, others such as Adam Pastor and Obbe Philips may have surpassed him. Nevertheless, there is something about Menno which gives him the qualities looked for in an outstanding leader which the others did not have to the same degree. Obbe Philips, one of the earliest leaders, withdrew from the movement. His brother, Dirk, did not have the grace of love and tolerance to the degree which Menno possessed this gift. Leenaert Bouwens not only lacked these same qualities, but he came on the scene too late to make the same impact Menno did.

Menno’s Significance

Already from the Catholic pulpit Menno secretly and openly preached and promoted the Anabaptist cause. But his significance as a leader during his lifetime lies in the fearless and courageous stand he took once he had decided to join the persecuted minority of persons who were ready to give their lives for the cause of the Lord. He furnished this leadership in the most crucial hour of Anabaptism. The radical wing had been crushed and deprived of its leadership. The peaceful remnant living underground was like a herd of sheep without a shepherd. His bold action gave it courage and made its survival possible.

The question as to whether the movement would have survived without Menno will not necessarily find a unanimous answer by all scholars. There is a possibility that under other leadership the movement could have survived not so very differently from the development it took under the guidance of Menno and his associates. However, under the predominant influence of Dirk Philips and Leenaert Bouwens, the course would have been different and not necessarily better. Menno’s gentle hand and courageous stand helped those in hiding to come forward and encouraged many of those misled by the radical leaders to return to the peaceful wing of Anabaptism and prevented the disintegrating influence of too rigid discipline.

The theological views of Anabaptism pertaining to Christ, the Bible, the church, the world, eschatology and martyrdom were to some extent shaped before Menno’s conversion and were unique enough to mold the believers from Amsterdam to Danzig and from Emden along the Lower Rhine River into a brotherhood of like-minded Christians. However, through his writings and his tireless traveling, Menno helped considerably in this process. The significance attached to his person and his writings by the authorities engaged in the suppression of Anabaptism make this point very clear.

In passing we like to point out that the name for the Anabaptist movement in the Low Countries, which originally was predominantly "Mennisten," was dropped in later centuries. In Switzerland the name was never used to a large extent, which is understandable. Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands and Taufgezinne in Switzerland became the most commonly used names in these two countries. Thus, in the countries in which Anabaptism originated, particularly in the country which gave us Menno, his name is at present not attached to the movement, while in the rest of the world the descendants of the Anabaptists are known as “Mennonites.” In Danzig, Prussia and Poland where Menno Simons and Dirk Philips established the first congregations they were soon known as “Mennonites.” From here they spread to Russia and north and South America under this name. Swiss Anabaptists in France, Germany and Austria also became known as Mennonites and their descendants in North America are known only under this name. By now there is a total of nineteen countries into which Mennonites have spread and in most of them they are referred to under this name. The latest country added to the list of those into which Mennonites have moved in their constant search is British Honduras.

Menno’s Writings

It has been pointed out that Menno’s significance lies in the fact that he was a courageous leader, a traveling messenger and a writer. The writings of Menno were among the most significant reasons which contributed to the survival and spread of the Anabaptists during the sixteenth century. Not only did these writings play a significant role among the Anabaptists of Dutch background but also among those of the Swiss heritage. This may be a partial answer to the question how it happened that those from Switzerland moving to other countries also became known under the name “Mennonites.” They relied heavily on the writings of Menno and other Dutch authors. The Foundation Book of Menno appeared in the critical moment and became a most significant guide for Christian living. Menno’s complete writings have appeared in the Dutch, German, and English languages and some parts have been translated into other languages. To date the writings of no other Anabaptist leader have been distributed and read as widely as those of Menno. However, we can well ask the question, who reads Menno’s writings today unless it is for purposes of research? Hardly anybody in Europe reads Menno otherwise and even the latest American edition of his writings is probably more a matter of decorum on the bookshelf than a book that is read. The same can possibly also be said about the biographies of Menno, although no other Men-
nonite leader has had as many biographies written about him as he.

Menno Today

What Menno really means to the Mennonite world brotherhood today is possibly more of a symbolic nature and a matter of interpretation or conjecture. At times he may get too much credit and at times not enough, depending on what we think he stood for or promoted. We may praise, judge and evaluate him by the standards of our later heritage and our attitude toward the same. Non-Mennonites living in the vicinity of Mennonites will see Menno in the mirror of those named after him. If they have a good impression of them, Menno will be given much praise. This was the case when the representatives of the German students honored his memory. When contemporary Mennonites make a poor impression, Menno’s evaluation and appreciation will go down. This yardstick is not confined to non-Mennonites living in non-Mennonite communities but is also used among Mennonites themselves since so little is known about centuries past and the basic beliefs of our forefathers.

For some Menno is a great champion of religious liberty and the freedom of the individual conscience. We must say that he very definitely was this. For others he was a Bible-centered Christian. He definitely placed Christ in the center of the Bible and interpreted it on the basis of the well-known passage from I Corinthians 1:13. For others he may appear as a Biblical legalist and literalist, and there is some truth in that, particularly looking at some of the followers named after him. Again, for others he was a man who strongly emphasized the close tie between faith and the fruits of faith. This is definitely a concern of Menno. For others again he had a unique concept of the church and the Christian brotherhood, and who can deny this fact?

So we could continue enumerating Menno’s unique contributions. Menno, and to a large extent, the early Anabaptists, had these concerns and emphases. Some were more developed than others. This depended somewhat on the challenges which developed within and outside of the group. Today in retrospect we must aim to balance these emphases taking into consideration the heritage of our forefathers and above all the Bible and the challenge of our day.

We have referred to the fact that the nineteenth century has been added to those to which Mennonites have migrated mostly for religious reasons. This is evidence that the spirit of Menno and the martyrs has not completely died out. Some are still willing to leave relatives, home and property and move into unknown countries for the sake of religious freedom. It is true, only very few Mennonites of our day express their loyalty to Christ and their heritage in this way. Most of the contemporary Mennonites consider this a misinterpretation of the basic Christian responsibilities.

We today emphasize strongly that a Christian must witness for Christ and practice discipleship in the environment in which he lives. He must make his heritage meaningful to himself and his environment by meeting the challenge of the day in all areas of life. It is considered more challenging, more meaningful and more Christian to do this than to escape from life in a “monastic” way as this has been done by Mennonites in centuries past. In both of these traditions we can claim a heritage of Menno. He did leave his country, but he never lived to see the day when belief and practices for which he labored became petrified and when his followers were to persist in a blind zeal to preserve dead forms. He was ready and willing to discuss basic issues with representatives of the group he served, as well as with the Reformed, the Lutherans, the Catholics, and the representatives of governments. He kept channels of conversation and communication open.

We need, in our day, a revival of the unique concept of the brotherhood or church, and the concept of discipleship which was born in the days of Menno. We are in need of fitting these into our day and age and making them meaningful. More than ever before we need disciples of Christ working in small cells and groups sensitive to the needs of the hour in the realm of the religious life, that is, that fallen man must be reconciled to God, and in the sphere of the social life, that is that man must be a brother to man, and the further implications contained in these two basic concepts.

Menno in This Issue

This issue is largely devoted to Menno Simons, in view of the fact that January 31 is the day on which he died 400 years ago. The first article in this issue summarizes Menno’s significance as a leader of the believers who were ultimately named after him (p. 3). Leo Laurence, pastor of the Witmarsum Mennonite Church, presents the village of Witmarsum in which Menno Simons was born in 1496 and converted in 1536 (p. 6). Otto Regier describes the place where Menno lived and died (p. 7), while Karsten Köhler tells what the relief work of the American Mennonites meant to the starving students after World War II (p.8).

A pictorial story relates the life and work of Menno Simons, showing illustrations from Witmarsum, East Friesland and Holstein where Menno resided (pp. 21-29). William E. Keeney and Henry Poettker discuss some theological aspects of the writings of Menno Simons (pp. 29-39).

A special Menno Simons commemoration will take place in the Bethel College Mennonite Church on January 29-31. A similar commemoration will take place during the same days in Amsterdam and Witmarsum, The Netherlands.