

Beliefs and Customs

The Anabaptists were products of the Reformation. They owed much to Martin Luther and the reformers. Anabaptist interpretation of theological statements such as the Apostles' Creed were similar to those of the other Protestant groups. But the Anabaptists were the "radical" reformers. They wished to carry the Reformation ideas to their logical conclusion. It is in their interpretation of the nature of the church that one finds the key to their faith. It is here, too, that one finds the views that best characterize their spiritual descendants — the Mennonites.

The Mennonite concept of the church involves a number of characteristics. The first of these is the conviction that the church must be a free, voluntary association of those who confessed their faith in Christ and who were willing to dedicate their lives to the kind of ideal they saw in the New Testament. They would be admitted to membership only upon their confession of faith and their acceptance of baptism which an infant was incapable of doing.

Secondly, they believed that authority rested not in the tradition of the church nor in pronouncements of Christian princes but in the Bible as inter-

preted through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the light of the New Testament. The Anabaptists on trial in the courts often amazed their accusers by their ability to quote readily long sections from the Bible explaining the basis of their convictions. Mennonite sermons to this day rely heavily upon many Bible quotations and the average Mennonite has a much broader knowledge of Bible stories and teaching than does the average American Protestant. The Mennonite church is in a high degree, then, a Bible-centered denomination, in contrast to a ritualistic and sacrament-centered church.

The Mennonites also stressed the brotherhood church, in which titles are rarely used and all members are of equal rank. The fellowship of the saints is thus stressed more than sacraments and ritual. To them the church is a "fellowship" of believers, who are concerned with the joys and sorrows of each individual "brother" and "sister." This has resulted in the formation of various mutual aid and of other welfare organizations, such as homes for the aged, through which they demonstrate their concern for each other's welfare.

The Mennonite concept of a "gathered" church of the kind described above demands that its members live "nonconformed" to the standards of the secular society of their day. Often, as is true of the Amish, this concept has required that they wear a simple garb in contrast to expensive cloth-

ing, designed to cater to the pride of the wearer. Simplicity of life is stressed both because of the principle of Christian stewardship of one's possessions and because the Christian life should be free of pride and ostentation.

But the church must also be a serving church, interested in the welfare of even its enemies. This has led them into the organization of relief projects and disaster service units. Canning meat for relief is a yearly routine in Mennonite farming communities, as is the work of the monthly sewing circles which prepare large quantities of clothing to be shipped to many countries in need.

And the church is to be a witnessing church. The Anabaptist leaders held that the Great Commission to preach the Gospel to all men was to be taken seriously by all Christians, ordained and laymen. The Anabaptists as a result became the first missionaries of the Protestant era and in a few decades had baptized thousands in central Europe. Severe persecution dulled this movement and for centuries Mennonites were not aggressive in missionary enterprises, but within the past century they have established missions on every continent. Only a few Protestant groups have a higher per cent of their members in foreign missionary and service projects than do the Mennonites.

One of the most basic Mennonite concepts is that the church dare not bless nor participate in war. "Overcome evil with good" and "Love your

enemies'' are only a few of the Bible quotations that the Mennonite believes must be taken literally and seriously by the Christian. For more than four centuries Mennonites have suffered persecution because they dared resist the demands of states that required unquestioning loyalty of their citizens. The Mennonites understand that their first loyalty must be to God and their consciences even when this means for them punishment and sometimes death, but they accept this as the fate of the Christian in an un-Christian world, believing that the New Testament description of the Kingdom is that of the suffering church.

Finally, the concept of the church as held by the Mennonites calls for a triumphant church in the consummation of the Kingdom beyond history.

The above were the ideals upon which Mennonites have attempted to pattern their churches. Needless to say their practices in Iowa, as in other states where they have settled, do not always coincide with their ideals. There have been glaring failures as well as praise-worthy examples of individual and group idealism. Generally respected by their neighbors as a law-abiding and a God-fearing people, who were good neighbors and industrious farmers, periods of war have brought upon them various types of ill will and even persecution. During World War I their young men were drafted into the army but most of them refused to drill and to take training in the use of arms.

These conscientious objectors embarrassed the government to the degree that it was willing to try a different plan during World War II. Beginning in 1941, Mennonite and other young men were assigned to civilian public service camps where they performed "work of national importance." Of the nearly 12,000 who thus served in the period 1941-47, 4,665 or 38 per cent were Mennonites.

Two Mennonite camps were established in Iowa. Camp Number 18, near Denison in the western part of the state, engaged in soil conservation from August, 1941, to September, 1946. Another Mennonite unit was opened at the State Hospital at Mount Pleasant in 1943 and was closed in September, 1946. Thirty-three men did a variety of tasks in the hospital at a time when there was a critical labor shortage in this institution. Under the present Selective Service Law, Amish and Mennonite men are drafted into a variety of jobs in hospitals, public service institutions, and other positions in America and abroad where they perform work "contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest."

Because they believe that the chief characteristic of a state is its power to enforce its decisions by coercive acts, including even the use of the death penalty and the waging of war, Mennonites have been reluctant to enter politics where they would be required to uphold coercive methods which would be in violation of their love and non-resist-

ance ethic. They regard themselves not as being politically irresponsible but as part of the Christian minority which acts as the conscience of society, constantly reminding rulers of the high standard of ethics to which all rulers ultimately will be held responsible by the Source of all power. Nevertheless, several Iowa Mennonites have served in Congress. Christian William Ramseyer of Bloomfield, Iowa, a member of the Pulaski Mennonite Church, served as the Sixth Iowa District congressman from 1915 to 1933. Edward Clayton Eicher, Washington, Iowa, was the First Iowa District Congressman from 1933 to 1938, and at the time of his death was the Chief Justice of the District Court for the District of Columbia. He was a son of Bishop Benjamin Eicher who founded the Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church.

The Old Order Amish, Conservative Amish Mennonites, and "Old" Mennonites retain certain church practices no longer observed by the General Conference Mennonites in Iowa. One of these is the wearing by the women of the "prayer veil" in church worship. This practice is based upon I Corinthians 11:5. The small cap or "prayer veil" worn by Mennonite women is made of either fine silk net or lawn material but the Amish use organdy. This cap is similar in appearance to that seen in pictures of Pilgrim mothers or like the one worn by "Mother" in James MacNeill Whistler's painting.

The above three groups also observe the rite of feet-washing at the time of communion services. Following the distribution of the emblems the men go to one side of the church and the women to the other where they wash each other's feet in obedience to John 13:14, which states, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." Following the ceremony the two parties who have washed each other's feet then greet each other with the kiss of brotherhood in obedience to Romans 16:16, which commands, "Salute one another with an holy kiss." Communion services are generally held twice each year.

The Old Order Amish use as a means of church discipline the practice of shunning. Those guilty of unconfessed sins are not only denied the privilege of participating in the communion service but the members withhold social fraternization from them so that they may understand that the bonds of brotherhood have been severed and so that the transgressor may be made aware of his misdemeanor. When such a person is in need of help, they however come to his aid and they are encouraged to show only a spirit of love towards the transgressor. To the surprise of many, this method does have a powerful spiritual and psychological effect upon the one shunned and usually he is soon restored to church fellowship.

This device is, however, open to abuses and

when arbitrarily applied has brought about strife and church division. Other Mennonite groups practice church discipline by withholding the privilege of communion from the erring ones, or by expulsion when the guilty one refuses to mend his ways. Some Mennonite churches have abandoned altogether the use of church discipline, no longer adhering to the principle that the church must consist only of those who accept the concept of a church being composed only of those in fellowship with the brethren.

The Old Order, as was stated earlier, meet in each other's homes for worship. In Iowa each district has services every two weeks, with Sunday school on the intervening Sundays. The services, held in German, consist of singing, prayer, Bible reading, and a sermon, like any Protestant service, except that there are really two sermons consisting of extended remarks by the minister who conducts the "opening," and a lengthy sermon by the preacher of the morning, who uses no notes but speaks impromptu not on a particular verse but generally on an entire chapter. This is followed by testimonies by other ministers present as well as by laymen who are called upon to give their approval of the message of the day. Following dismissal, benches are cleared away, tables are set for the noon lunch, and the members continue their fellowship for several hours. The Amish do not have revival meetings nor evening services, and

follow the patterns of worship set many years ago.

Conservative Mennonite groups still have men's and women's pews on opposite sides of the church, have unaccompanied singing, and follow informal patterns of worship rather than liturgical procedures. There is much socializing before and after church services, as well as in connection with women's sewing circles, and neighborhood mutual aid frolics. The concept of belonging together and of sharing with each other as brethren is strengthened in these and in other ways.

Weddings, especially among the Amish, are major social events. Tuesdays and Thursdays in autumn are the usual wedding days for the Amish, who make of these occasions joyous holidays, where good fellowship and an abundance of food prevail. In contrast to the practice of the Amish, for many decades a Mennonite wedding was a simple affair in the home of the bride or the minister, with only a very few, if any, invited guests being present. Within the past thirty years, however, church weddings with scores of guests and impressive receptions have come to be the rule in Mennonite circles. Mennonite church buildings have tended to be simple and utilitarian, devoid of symbolism and ornate decoration. Cemeteries are often on plots adjoining the church. Here too are marks of simplicity, with tombstones being simple and modest in size. Church grounds and cemeteries are always well kept, in keeping with Men-

nonite conception of orderliness and cleanliness.

Attention has already been called to Mennonite mutual aid and relief services. A more recent aspect of Mennonite outreach can be found in the establishing of city and rural missions by local churches. Several years ago the goal of one mission outpost for every Mennonite congregation was adopted with the result that at least four new churches or mission outposts have been established by Iowa Mennonites within the decade of the 1950's. This outreach into non-Mennonite communities is bringing into the church new names not associated with a Swiss or Pennsylvania Dutch background. While only a few Iowa Mennonites have entered foreign missionary service, several score of their young people have served overseas in voluntary service projects under the Mennonite Central Committee or have helped take cattle and horses to Europe and Asia on United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration ships. The average Iowa Mennonite is not provincial in his outlook.

Although Iowa Mennonites are primarily farmers, many Mennonites in recent years have been entering business in such towns as Wayland, Wellman, and Kalona. With several centuries of farming experience behind them, Mennonites had gradually come to feel that the life of simplicity and freedom which they cherished could best be lived in a rural community. There too, they felt,

the principle of brotherhood could best be nurtured. With ideals of frugality, cleanliness, and industry, they have succeeded in obtaining good farms and in giving to their neighborhoods the air of prosperity.

The Old Order Amish, who do not own tractors, automobiles, electric lights, telephones, modern heating and plumbing systems, and radios, seem to have an economic advantage over their Mennonite neighbors who buy these conveniences and as a result are expanding their frontiers into non-Amish communities, displacing farmer's sons who go into business in the nearby towns.

Another sign of the times is the gradual disappearance of the "Grandpa houses," once so common in the community. Earlier, when the son was old enough to operate the family farm, the father built a small house in the same yard where his son lived or built an attached apartment for his use but still continued to help on the farm on a semi-retired basis. Now "grandpa" moves to town but often drives out to the farm to lend a helping hand. It remains to be seen if the Mennonites can maintain their ideals of simplicity and community in an urban or even a small town environment.

Forces other than a rural environment have helped maintain their spirit of community. Constantly subjected to the teaching that the People of God are a minority in any world culture, and that they must be distinct and peculiar because

they have been called out of a secular society to be the salt of the earth, and remembering the years of persecution endured by their forefathers, the Mennonites do not easily make their peace with the world.

Their primary social relationships are within the group and much emphasis is placed upon social contacts with their fellow believers. Nor are these contacts made only within the local community. Amish and Mennonite young people do considerable traveling to Amish and Mennonite communities in other states or to distant settlements within their states. The writer's own grandfather, living in Johnson County, Iowa, met his bride-to-be Veronica Goldsmith of Henry County, Iowa, in Butler County, Ohio. They were married in 1863.

For more than sixty years the Gingerich brothers of Johnson County visited regularly their Goldsmith, Gerig, and Wenger first cousins in Henry County. In the horse and buggy days this trip required one day each direction. Often trips to distant states were reported in detail in Mennonite national church papers as well as in the local papers, thus keeping the community informed of conditions in other Amish and Mennonite communities.

One such traveler and reporter was S. D. Guengerich of Wellman, Iowa, who on his trips east and west sent home remarkable travel accounts. Some of these appeared in the *Wellman Advance*,

while others appeared in the Sugar Creek, Ohio, *Budget*, a weekly paper presenting a nation-wide coverage of Amish news. Mennonite travel news was carried by the *Herald of Truth*, established in Chicago in 1864, and three years later moved to Elkhart, Indiana.

Their Pennsylvania German culture gave their communities special characteristics which enabled them to maintain their distinct physical identities. One of the most easily observed characteristics were their substantial, well-kept barns, generally Swiss-bank barns, the kind built on the slope of a hill where there was good drainage and where a wide ramp on the upper side led into a spacious second floor room. Here loads of hay could be unloaded or stored, protected from the rain or hot sun and in other seasons the farm machinery could be stored in this space. This large, well-ventilated room lent itself to other purposes. In this spacious room during the summer months the church could meet or the young people could hold their Sunday evening "singings."

Another Pennsylvania Dutch characteristic is the dinner bell which appears on poles, or on the top of summer houses, and are rung to call the men in from the fields shortly before the noon hour. These evidently are passing from the scene as antique dealers in recent years made a business of collecting them.

Even more characteristic than these physical as-

pects of their culture was their language which is still used as the house or mother language by the Amish and to a lesser degree by the Mennonites whose ancestors came from the Palatinate. Pennsylvania German is really the regional dialect of the citizens of the German Palatinate. While visiting in the Palatinate a few years ago, the writer was surprised to discover how very similar was the local dialect to the language he had learned to speak as a boy. There have been some modifications because of the introduction of English words, but basically the two dialects remain the same.

Although Amish sermons are supposedly preached in High German, often they are Pennsylvania Dutch with a considerable admixture of English phrases. The Amish child in Iowa is trilingual, learning Pennsylvania German, or Dutch, as it is popularly called, from his parents and playmates, learning High German in Sunday school and church, and learning English in the public schools. Many never learn to speak English correctly because of their tendency to translate German phrases and word-order into English quite literally and often the outsider can recognize the one with the Pennsylvania Dutch background because he has been betrayed by his speech. Comparatively few Mennonite children in Iowa are now being taught the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect but among the Amish this is universal.

Although not all Mennonites (in contrast to the

Amish) have worn distinctive garbs, simplicity of dress was stressed by all groups a century ago. Their costume was similar to that worn by European peasants in the early modern period. The Amish simply "froze" the costumes of the seventeenth century and have perpetuated them to this day. This includes the full skirts, the apron, and the cape worn by the women, the latter a large triangular cloth worn over the waist and coming to a point at the waist in front and in the middle of the back. The lapelless coat fastened with hooks and eyes worn by the men, the broad-brimmed hat, and the broad-fall trousers characterize the Amish men's costume.

All of these sociological devices to help them maintain their separation from the outer society became matters of church discipline and were enforced rigidly to the degree that often the form was stressed at the expense of the spirit. At the present time the Mennonites who have surrendered most of these outward forms of simplicity and separation are trying valiantly to retain a life of separation from the standards of a secular society. Whether they will be able to retain true humility of spirit and simplicity of life in a materialistic culture remains to be seen.

How long will Iowa have its Amish? This question is often asked. The answer perhaps can be found in the field of education. As long as the Amish can give their children an education in a

rural setting under conditions which they can control, there will continue to be strong Amish settlements in Iowa and elsewhere. But if they must send their children away to consolidated schools where values are stressed which they do not cherish, an increasingly large per cent will accept these secular standards and drift away from their childhood culture. The Mennonites who have accepted new cultural forces, such as the English instead of the German language, will likely continue to make adjustments to their environment which may or may not endanger their spiritual values.

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