

Distinctions Between the Swiss Brethren and the Dutch Mennonites

From the Zurich beginnings in 1525, Anabaptist teaching spread rapidly across Europe, revealing a spiritual climate hungry for Bible truth. The two great centers of Anabaptism were the southern regions around Switzerland and the northern regions of Holland and North Germany.

Melchior Hofmann was baptized by Anabaptists in 1530 in Strasburg, where Swiss Brothers like Michael Sattler labored. Hofmann brought these ideas to Holland, where converts like Obbe and Dirk Phillips, and Menno Simons established the churches that became the Dutch Mennonites. For context, Menno Simons was baptized in 1536, over a decade after the first baptisms in Zurich.

Apart from the Hofmann connection, there is no evidence that the Swiss Brethren directly influenced the founding beliefs of these Dutch brothers. Only later, after Anabaptism was well-established in both places, did the Swiss brothers and the Dutch Mennonites discover each other and realize considerable unity in their beliefs and practices.

The unity between these two groups is more remarkable than the differences. In the first centuries, we have space only for a few notable differences.

1. Dealing with Sin in the Church

Reformers like Luther and Zwingli protested the corruption in the Catholic church. The Anabaptists took their zeal for personal holiness even further and protested the moral compromises of the Reformers as well. They sought to build a New Testament church literally, i.e., a separated body of voluntary believers—inducted into the group by baptism, kept holy through a disciplined order of imitating Jesus in daily life, or what they called nachfolge Christi.

It is hardly surprising that the fledgling Anabaptist churches quickly ran onto the rocks of how to deal with sin in their ranks. They did live in spiritually tumultuous times. Their movement itself was troubled with brilliant teachers like Balthasar Hübmaier, who compromised on nonresistance, or fanatical prophets like Melchior Hofmann with his millenarian visions.

Excommunication

The Swiss Brothers and the Dutch Mennonites took Paul's warning in I Cor. 11 seriously against "eating unworthily." William Estep says, "The Lord's Supper was inseparably connected with discipline from the very beginning of the Anabaptist movement." We see this first in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, the earliest statement of belief from the Swiss Brothers:

"Discipline and expulsion shall be used toward those who have surrendered their lives to the Lord to follow Him in keeping His commandments, who have been baptized and profess to be brethren and sisters, and yet stumble and fall into sin or are unexpectedly overtaken. They shall be admonished twice and the third time reprov'd publicly before the church and expelled according to the command of Christ. And this is to be attended to before the Communion service, that we may unitedly and in one love break and eat of one bread and drink of one cup."

Conrad Grebel wrote, of the Lord's Supper, "It should not be observed except in conformity with Matthew 18," referring to the three-appeal method for admonishing offending brothers. This fundamental tie between church purity and Communion explains why the Amish and Mennonite custom of an examination service preceding Communion persists to this day.

Shunning (Avoidance)

From the very beginnings of Dutch Anabaptism under Dirk and Obbe Philips, the believers in Holland and the Low Countries took a stronger line on excommunication. John Horsch suggests that the pervasive influence of the fanatical disciples of Hofmann and Jan Matthys—which ultimately led to the excesses of the Münster rebellion—compelled the Dutch ministers to take a vigilant stand against deceivers in the community.

Obbe Philips and Menno Simons both spent great energy combating these false teachers in Holland. Obbe was the first Anabaptist leader to teach shunning and believed it was justifiable to extremes such as not giving food or shelter to an excommunicated member. Shunning was based on Paul's teaching: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him" (2Thess. 3:14).

Menno Simons did promote—later in his ministry—a strong stand on shunning. In his words, the excommunicated member should be shunned "whether it be father or mother, sister or brother, husband or wife, son or daughter, without any respect of persons." However, in practice, Menno seems to have been slow to require spousal avoidance—asking a married member to separate from an erring spouse. He wrote that shunning should be practiced "with prayer, tears, and a compassionate spirit, out of great love."

In his later years, visiting deputations of Swiss Brothers challenged Menno for holding un-Scriptural views on shunning. He wrote two books in defense of his views, but the Swiss Brothers were not convinced.

At a large conference in Strasburg in 1557, where ministers from fifty churches from the Swiss Brothers in the High countries (Switzerland, South Germany, Alsace) convened, they composed an appeal, "to our dear brother Menno and all the ministers and bishops in the Netherlands who serve the churches of the Lord," admonishing them to refrain applying shunning within a marriage. The Swiss found the Dutch quarrels over shunning unacceptable.

The Dutch Mennonite churches disagreed among themselves on the matter. In 1555, the Waterlander Dutch churches broke away, in part over their belief that the three-appeal approach of Matthew 18 applied even to serious sins. The rest of the Dutch Mennonites would have excommunicated a member immediately for sins like adultery, not waiting till three appeals had been made in vain. Menno Simons himself admitted he changed his mind on this and said he had formerly promoted the threefold appeal "due to his inexperience."

In 1632, the Dutch Mennonites called a conference in the town of Dordrecht to attempt a unification effort to heal the rifts in their churches. The resulting Dordrecht Confession of Faith is used to this day by Anabaptist descendants around the world and cemented the traditional view of shunning for generations. Here, in full, is the English translation of this article:

Article XVII Of Shunning the Separated

Concerning the withdrawing from, or shunning the separated, we believe and confess, that if any one, either through his wicked life or perverted doctrine, has so far fallen that he is separated from God, and, consequently, also separated and punished by the church, the same must, according to the doctrine of Christ and His apostles, be shunned, without distinction, by all the fellow members of the church, especially those to whom it is known, in eating, drinking, and other similar intercourse, and no company be had with him that they may not become contaminated by intercourse with him, nor made partakers of his sins; but that the sinner may be made ashamed, pricked in his heart, and convicted in his conscience, unto his reformation. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14.

Yet, in shunning as well as in reproof, such moderation and Christian discretion must be used, that it may conduce, not to the destruction, but to the reformation of the sinner. For, if he is needy, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or in any other distress, we are in duty bound, necessity requiring it, according to love and the doctrine of Christ and His apostles, to render him aid and assistance; otherwise, shunning would in this case tend more to destruction than to reformation.

Therefore, we must not count them as enemies, but admonish them as brethren, that thereby they may be brought to a knowledge of and to repentance and sorrow for their sins, so that they may become reconciled to God, and consequently be received again into the church, and that love may continue with them, according as is proper. 2 Thessalonians 3:15.

The Dordrecht Confession received broad support by the North German, Dutch, Alsatian, and even some Palatinate churches. The Swiss Brothers, however, did not accept it.

In a ministers' conference in 1660, the Dordrecht confession was formally adopted by the Alsatian churches. A few decades later, in 1693, a young Alsatian minister by the name of Jakob Amman traveled through the churches in Switzerland, admonishing the brothers to more vigilant in church discipline, including the practice of shunning, or what they called the Meidung.

The Swiss Mennonite leaders, under the leadership of elder Hans Reist, disagreed. What followed was a long and acrimonious schism between the Alsatian and Swiss churches that was the beginning of the two major Anabaptist groups: Amish and Mennonites. At the center of this rift were the contrasting views of shunning, which originated with the Dutch Mennonites and are traceable to this day among the descendant churches.

2. Feetwashing

While the Swiss Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck repeatedly listed feetwashing as an ordinance in his writings, the practice was not uniform across the Swiss churches. The Swiss Brothers' hymnbook, the Ausbund, published around 1564, includes a hymn about feet washing, indicating the practice had some significance in their churches. However, by 1693, Jakob Amman was admonishing the Swiss churches in the Emmental region about this, as though it were no longer practiced.

The brothers in Holland, however, promoted feetwashing from the beginning. Dirk Philips, the first major leader in the Dutch churches, treated feetwashing as an ordinance in his Enchiridion (1564). Menno Simons promoted the practice as a brotherly gesture for visitors but not as an ordinance associated with Communion. The various confessions of faith in Holland and North Germany also refer to the practice. In the widely accepted Dordrecht Confession of 1632, the practice is specifically listed as an ordinance.

Article XI. Of the Washing of the Saints' Feet

We also confess a washing of the saints' feet, as the Lord Christ not only instituted, enjoined and commanded it, but Himself, although He was their Lord and Master, washed His apostles' feet, thereby giving an example that they should likewise wash one another's feet, and do as He had done unto them; which they accordingly, from this time on, taught believers to observe, as a sign of true humility, and, especially, to remember by this feet washing, the true washing, whereby we are washed through His precious blood, and made pure after the soul. John 13:4-17; 1 Timothy 5:10.

3. *Wealth and Education: Bernese Farmers vs. Dutch Burghers*

The Dutch government discontinued persecution of the Anabaptists much sooner than the Swiss cantons. Hans Landis, the last Swiss martyr, was executed in 1614, forty years after the last Anabaptist execution in Friesland.

This gave the Dutch Mennonites the freedom to become economically established well ahead of the Swiss Brothers. The Dutch Mennonites were also largely urban. With toleration, they became successful merchants and industrialists and sent their sons to universities. The Swiss Brothers, on the other hand, were mostly farmers. In a 1668 report, the Bernese authorities noted that the Swiss brothers were "not as educated, or so subtle, sharp-minded, and sophisticated as those in the Netherlands."

This is a cultural, rather than doctrinal, difference. The Dutch churches grew wealthy enough that by the late 1600s and early 1700s they contributed vast sums of relief money for their persecuted brothers in Switzerland. Further, they were influential enough to pressure the Dutch government into reprimanding the Bernese Council for cruel treatment of the Swiss brothers. Through this intervention, the Dutch helped the Swiss to emigrate to Holland, and from there find passage to America.

Upon arriving in Holland in the late 1600s, the Swiss refugees found their Dutch brothers too wealthy and worldly to join. A 1713 booklet printed in Haarlem indicates the strains between the two groups: Complaint of the Swiss about the Tainted Practices of the Holland Mennonites.

4. *Menno Simons' View of the Incarnation*

Menno Simons seems to have picked up from Melchior Hofmann's influence a peculiar view on the nature of Jesus' physical body. He believed that since Jesus was the sinless sacrifice, he could not have inherited physical flesh from Mary the way a normal baby develops from a mother's body. Instead, Menno believed God worked a miraculous creation of "celestial flesh," giving Jesus a sinless physical body not originating from Mary, or as we might say today, not from Mary's DNA.

Menno's view became widespread among the Dutch Mennonites. He claimed he did not actively promote his view but was nonetheless drawn into defending it against Reformers like John a Lasco and his brethren from South Germany. At the 1555 Anabaptist conference at Strassburg, the assembly counseled, "The confusion of tongues has come upon the brethren in this matter because they would know more than it was intended they should know." The Swiss Brethren rejected Menno's belief about the Incarnation.

By 1632, the Dutch Mennonites writing the Dordrecht Confession seemed inclined to mute the controversy. Of Christ's body, they wrote, "But as to how and in what manner this precious body was prepared, and how the Word became flesh, and He Himself man, in regard to this we content

ourselves with the statement pertaining to this matter which the worthy evangelists have left us in their accounts...”

Conclusion

The ethnic descendants of the Dutch Mennonites today are the Low German-speaking Mennonites—often called “Russian Mennonites”—in places like Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, and Paraguay. The descendants of the Swiss Brothers are the Amish and Mennonite groups who migrated to the eastern United States in the 1700s-1800s. While the cultural differences can be sharp between these two streams of Anabaptism, their doctrinal unity is striking, for having been separated geographically for most of the past four centuries.

~James Martin

Endnotes

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- [1] Horsch, John, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950) p.191
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 183
- [1] Estep, p. 187
- [1] Horsch, p. 72
- [1] Estep, p. 188
- [1] Horsch, p. 329
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 332
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 333
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 333
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 334
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 130
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 236
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 137
- [1] Bender, Harold S. and William Klassen. "Feetwashing." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Web. 1 Mar 2025
- [1] Smith, C. Henry, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*. (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981) p. 85
- [1] *Ibid.*, p. 134
- [1] Bender, Harold S. and William Klassen. "Feetwashing." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Web. 1 Mar 2025
- [1] *Ibid.*
- [1] Horsch, p. 67, 235
- [1] Müller, Ernst, *Geschichte der Bernischen Täufer*, translated by John A. Gingerich, edited by Joseph Stoll (Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 2010) p. 201
- [1] Horsch, p. 252-253
- [1] Müller, p. 183-213
- [1] Smith, p. 92
- [1] Horsch, p. 254
- [1] Smith, p. 61
- [1] Krahn, Cornelius. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 1957) Vol. 3, pp. 18-20
- [1] *Ibid.*
- [1] Estep, p. 124