

The Amish & Mennonites

Overview: A Mennonite is a member of one of the “Christian” groups derived from the Anabaptist movement, stressing discipleship, community, and an ethic of love and nonresistance. Mennonites are historically distinctive in North America for simplicity of life and the rejection of military service, public office, and oaths. The term "Anabaptist" comes from the Latin word "anabaptista" which means "one who is rebaptized," i.e. a person who was baptized first as an infant and later as an adult. Baptisms are only performed after an individual is sufficiently mature. They have been traditionally opposed to war; some of their members refuse to register for the draft or choose alternate service. They oppose the taking of oaths, believing that a person's word is sufficient. They observe a life of simplicity.

Some Anabaptist faith groups have survived to the present day, including: Amish, Beachy and Brethren groups, Dunkards, Hutterites, Landmark Baptists, and Mennonites. Anabaptists were viciously persecuted during and following the Reformation. Many migrated to Poland and the Ukraine. Today they are mainly concentrated in Germany, France and North America. They now total over 300,000 in the U.S. and Canada.

History: During the Reformation in 16th Century Europe, Luther and Calvin promoted the concepts of individual freedom and the priesthood of all believers. In what has been called "*the radical reformation*", some religious reformers took these beliefs to a logical conclusion; they preached that the believer should separate themselves from all secular activities. One of the largest groups, the Anabaptists promoted: baptism during adulthood after confession of faith, instead of during infancy, the total separation of religion from and state, worship services in the home rather than at church.

The religious movements that they founded were called "*free churches*" as contrasted to the state churches which were normal for the time. Their groups were simple associations of adult Christians. Most groups were wiped out in wars or programs of genocide which were organized by various governments, and both the main-line Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

The *Mennonites* are named after Menno Simons (1496-1561), a Dutch Anabaptist leader and former Catholic priest. They were severely persecuted and fled to Switzerland and other more remote areas of Europe. The *Amish* began as a split-off sect of the Swiss Mennonites during the late 17th century. Their founder was Jacob Amman, who based his beliefs and practices on the writings of Simons and on the 1632 Mennonite *Dordrecht Confession of Faith*. The split with the Mennonites was mainly over the practices of *foot washing* and *avoidance*. The latter practice is based on the discipline of fellow believers as described in Matthew 18:15-17. A non-conforming member would be shunned; the community of believers would terminate all contact with him. Amman took this practice one step further and required the spouse of a person under the ban to neither sleep nor eat with them, until they repented and changed their behavior or beliefs.

The Amish and Mennonites have retained similar beliefs, and differ mainly in some practices. Some Amish migrated to the United States, started in the early 18th century. As a result of William Penn's "*holy experiment*" in religious tolerance, many Amish started settling in Lancaster County, PA during the 1720's. Other groups settled in or moved to New York, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri and Ohio, etc. They have attempted to preserve the elements of late 17th century European rural culture. They reject most of the developments of the modern society. During the 1860's, a series of conferences were held in Wayne County OH to deal with modern pressures. Partly as a result of these conferences, the Amish split into a number of divisions, including the conservative *Old Order Amish* and various more liberal groups.

Beliefs: The Amish are a very conservative faith group. They believe in remaining separate from the rest of the world & reject involvement with the military or warfare. The *Ordnung* is an oral tradition which regulates the Amish way of life. Specific details of the *Ordnung* differ among various church districts.

Excerpts From Their Confession of Faith

1. "Since the nature and mission of the church call for a concise statement of what a brotherhood believes, the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches has undertaken to rewrite the Confession of Faith to make it more readable." **Comment:** The formalizing of what a group of believers must believe and practice is fraught with danger. The writing of creeds by men is placing in the hands of fallible men the decision of what is and is not to be included and the interpretation thereof. To the Christian, the Scriptures are his only creed and he has an independent priestly duty to study it for himself. - Acts 17:11

2. "We believe that man (man=mankind) was created in the image of God, sinless, and in fellowship with God, with a free will to make moral choices. But man sinned, and willfully disobeyed God, breaking fellowship with Him and bringing physical, spiritual and eternal death on the whole human race. Consequently all are sinful by nature, guilty before God and in need of forgiveness through Christ." **Comment:** The Scripture does not teach the whole human race is doomed to eternal death due to Adam's sin, only those who sin. - Ezekiel 18:20; Rom. 5:12

3. "We believe that there is one Mediator between God and men, the Man Jesus Christ. The purpose of His coming was to redeem man from the judgment and power of sin and to reconcile him to God. Through the shedding of His blood, Christ provided the one sufficient sacrifice for sin and established God's New Covenant. We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, convicts man of his sin and need for salvation. Those who repent of their sin and trust in Christ as Saviour and Lord receive forgiveness. By the power of the Holy Spirit they are born into the family of God and receive the assurance of salvation." **Comment:** The Scripture does not teach we are forgiven of sins by Grace through faith ONLY. Saul of Tarsus trusted in Christ as his Saviour and Lord following the appearance of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus and he then repented with fasting for three days, but had his sins washed away only after being baptized. - Acts 22:16

4. "We believe that the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian and transforms him into the image of Christ. He empowers the believer to follow Christ and to be an effective witness for Him. The Christian lives in fellowship with God and other believers, and joins the local church at baptism." **Comment:** The Scripture does not teach baptism is the means to joining the local congregation. It is the means by which one is saved and added by God to the body of Christ. - Acts 2:38,41,47

5. "Local congregations may receive into fellowship those who have been baptized by another mode (other than immersion, WS) on their confession of faith." **Comment:** The Bible nowhere teaches this. Not only must a person be immersed, he must be immersed properly - Acts 19:1-7

6. "We believe that the church is one body, the bride of Christ, established through God's redemptive work in history. Believers from all nations, races and social classes, regenerated by faith in Christ and cleansed by His blood, are baptized by His Spirit into one body and separated to God and are members of this body, whose head is Christ. Despite diversity in congregations and denominations, the Spirit works a basic unity which results in cooperation and fellowship with believers of other Christian groups." **Comment:** The Scripture does not teach the body of Christ is comprised of denominations, but individuals. - I Cor. 12:27

7. "The local church is an association of believers, baptized and organized for worship, fellowship, nurture, service and witness. Each congregation regulates its own affairs. Congregations, committed to the Word of God and to this confession, affiliate as a denomination or a conference, whose polity is outlined in the constitution of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches." **Comment:** Though the congregations of the Mennonites are autonomous to a great degree, they have organic linkage in districts and conferences having authoritative power. The Scriptures describe complete autonomy of the local church with no legislative power delegated to any other church or organization.

Some Practices: Practices of the Old Order Amish are listed below. Some smaller Amish groups have adopted more progressive practices. Members usually speak a German dialect called *Pennsylvania Dutch* (Deutsch). *High German* is used during worship. They learn English at school. Schools are one-room buildings run by the Amish. Formal education beyond Grade 8 is discouraged, although many youth are given further instruction in their homes after graduation. Members do not own or use automobiles. They do not use electricity, or have radios or TV sets. Marriages outside the faith are not allowed. Couples who plan to marry are "published" in late October. They are married in one of their homes during November or early December. They

celebrate the traditional "Christian" holy days. They also observe a Fast Day on October 11. Men follow the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures with regards to beards. They do not grow mustaches, because of the long association of mustaches with the military. Men usually dress in a plain, dark colored suit. Women usually wear a plain colored dress with long sleeves, bonnet and apron. Women wear a white prayer covering if married; black if single. At death, a woman is usually buried in her bridal dress, which is often blue or purple. Religious services are held in the homes of members biweekly on Sunday. They meet in a different home each week. Funerals are conducted in the home without a eulogy, flower decorations, or other display. The casket is plain, without adornment. A simple tombstone is erected later. They do not collect social security, unemployment insurance or welfare. They maintain mutual aid funds for members who need help with medical costs, dental bills, etc. They do not take photographs based on the commandment of Exodus 20:4.

Problems: The Amish's insistence on terminating formal schooling after the 8th grade conflicted with many state's laws which require children to remain in school until their mid-teens. Some Amish migrated from Pennsylvania to other states, like Missouri, which had more relaxed laws. A ruling by the US Supreme Court in 1972 recognized their right to limit education of their children.

Highway accidents between motor vehicles and Amish black horse and buggies are a concern to many.

There was an outbreak of polio in 1979 among Amish in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Wisconsin Missouri and Canada. The North American population of Amish was essentially unvaccinated against polio at the time. The spread of the disease was halted by an emergency vaccination campaign. This was the last significant outbreak of the disease in the U.S.

Some Amish groups have a limited gene pool. For example, the Amish in Lancaster County, PA, are descendants of about 200 Swiss citizens who emigrated in the mid 1700s. Because they do not marry outsiders and because few outsiders have joined the order, the "*community has been essentially a closed genetic population for more than 12 generations. Thus, intermarriage has brought to the fore certain genetic mutations that were present in the initial genetic pool (as they are in any population), making the Amish host to several inherited disorders.*" These include dwarfism, mental retardation and a large group of metabolic disorders. One in 200 have glutaric aciduria type I; they are born healthy, but can experience permanent neurological damage when a mild illness strikes.

Conclusion: The Bible does not teach the kind of separation from the world that the Amish practice. In fact, just the opposite. Christians are to be a salting influence for good upon others of the earth and are urged to be the light of the world; like a lamp, not hidden under a basket, but placed on a lamp stand so as to give light to all in the house. (Matt. 5:13-16).

The Bible does not teach that refusing to partake in certain physical things of the world automatically makes one more spiritual. It is similar to the belief that celibacy is holier. It is not. To taste not, handle not, and touch not are presented by Jesus as regulations imposed by men that are of no value (Colossians 2:20-23). As a matter of personal scruple and expediency a Christian may wish to abstain from some legitimate secular item, but it must be understood as a private judgment, not essential for salvation and in no way binding on the conscience of others.

The Mennonite and Amish approach to religion is commendable in many ways, but the errors seriously jeopardize their hope of eternal life.

Reference Sources: Ontario Canada Religious Tolerance website; The Interactive Bible website, Handbook of Denominations book by Frank Mead.