

Module 401: Menno Simons

Menno Simon's Letter Explaining His Conversion. Introduced and edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“I voluntarily renounced all my worldly honor and reputation, my unchristian conduct, masses, infant baptism, and my unprofitable life, and at once willingly submitted to distress and poverty, and the cross of Christ.”

Module Introduction

Menno Simons (1492-1559), was a man of simple, direct thought and warm character, who exerted great influence on the Dutch Anabaptists. His followers became known as Mennonites. He had become a priest at the age of twenty-four, but accused himself, and the other clergy, of lax and self-indulgent living. Doubts about transubstantiation made him uneasy and caused him to read some of Luther's tracts and study the New Testament which he had been afraid to read up to that time.

The question as to the right age for baptism came up, and claimed more of his attention after a tailor, Sicke Freerks Snijder, was executed in 1531 for having been rebaptized as an adult. Menno was not satisfied with the inconsistent answers he found in Luther, Bucer, and Bullinger and determined to rely on Scripture alone for answers. From this time on, he became an evangelical, as opposed to a sacramental, preacher.

In 1532, popular demand took him to Witmarsum. A brother of Menno joined the followers of John Matthys (Munsterite rebels) and was killed at Bolsward in 1535. This was a life-changing event for Menno. While blaming the leaders who had misled these poor people, Menno also blamed himself for not having shown them the right way. He began preaching Bible truth, and the following year left the church of Rome.

Soon he became an Anabaptist leader, not of the wild and fanatical type, but of a sober, godly band who claimed new birth and sought whole-heartedly to follow Christ. At first these people endured terrible persecution because they were thought to be radicals such as those who seized Munster, but in time the

authorities learned to distinguish them from the others.

Menno died in 1559. He had married after leaving the Roman church and had three children.

My Reader

I write to you the truth in Christ, and lie not. In the year 1524, being then in my twenty eighth year, I undertook the duties of a [Catholic] priest in my father's village, called Pingjum, in Friesland. Two other persons of about my age, also officiated in the same station. The one was my pastor, and was well learned in part; the other succeeded me; both had read the scriptures partially; but I had not touched them during my life, for I feared, if I should read them they would mislead me. Behold! such a stupid preacher was I, for nearly two years.

In the first year thereafter a thought occurred to me, as often as I handled the bread and wine in the mass, that they were not the flesh and blood of the Lord. I thought that it was the suggestion of the devil, that he might lead me off from my faith. I confessed it often sighing and praying, yet I could not be freed from this thought.

Those two young men whom I have mentioned and myself spent our time daily in playing, drinking, and all manner of frivolous diversions, alas! as it is the fashion and way of such useless people; and when we were to treat a little of scripture, I could not speak a word with them without being scoffed at; for I did not know what I asserted. This shows how hidden the word of God was to my understanding.

At length I resolved that I would examine the New Testament attentively. I had not proceeded far in it before I discovered that we were deceived. My conscience, which was troubled on account of the sacramental bread mentioned earlier, was soon greatly relieved, without any human aid or advice; though I was encouraged by Luther in

the belief that human authority cannot bind to eternal death.

Through the illumination and grace of the Lord, I continued daily to examine the scriptures, and was soon considered by some, though undeservedly, as being an evangelical preacher. Every one sought my company, the world loved me and held my love, yet it was said that I preached the word of God, and was a fine man.

Afterwards it happened, before I had ever heard of the existence of brethren, that a godfearing, pious man, named Sicke Snyder, was beheaded at Leeuwarden, for being rebaptized. It sounded strange to me, to hear a second baptism spoken of. I examined the scriptures assiduously and meditated on them earnestly, but could find nothing in them concerning infant baptism. After I had discovered this, I conversed with my pastor on the subject; and after much discussion, he had to admit, that there was no scriptural foundation for infant baptism. Notwithstanding all this, I dared not trust my own understanding, but consulted several ancient authors. They taught me that children were to be washed by baptism from their original sin. I compared this doctrine with the scriptures and found that it made baptism take the place of the blood of Christ.

Afterward, desiring to know the grounds for infant baptism, I went and consulted Luther. He taught me that children were to be baptized on account of their own faith. I perceived that this also was not in accordance with the word of God.

Next I consulted Bucer. He taught that infants were to be baptized, that their baptism would cause those who had their training, to be more careful in bringing them up in the way of the Lord. I perceived that this doctrine, too, was without foundation.

I then consulted Bullinger. He directed me to the covenant and circumcision. This I found incapable of being

substantiated by scripture.

Having thus observed that authors varied greatly among themselves, each following his own opinion, I became convinced that we were deceived in regard to infant baptism.

Shortly after, I went [as priest] to the village in which I was born, called Witmarsum. Covetousness and a desire to obtain a great name, were the inducements which led me to that place. There I spoke much concerning the word of the Lord, without spirituality or love, as all hypocrites do, and by this means I made disciples of my own stamp, such as vain boasters and light-minded babblers, who, alas! like myself, cared but little about these matters. Although I had now acquired considerable knowledge of the scriptures, yet I wasted that knowledge through the lusts of my youth in an impure, sensual, unprofitable life, without any fruit, and sought nothing but gain, ease, favor of men, splendor, reputation and honor, as all generally do who embark in the same ship.

Thus, my reader, I obtained a knowledge of baptism and the Lord's supper, through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, through much reading of the scriptures, and meditating upon them, and through the gracious favor and gift of God, but not by means of the service of misleading sects, as it is reported of me: I hope that I write the truth and do not seek vain glory; though some [of the sects], doubtless, may have contributed to my assistance in the pursuit of truth, yet will I, for this, render thanks to the Lord forever.

Meanwhile it, happened, when I had resided there about a year, that quite a number broke in upon baptism; but whence the first beginners came, or where they resided, or who they properly were, is to this hour unknown to me, neither have I ever seen them.

Afterwards the sect of Munster made inroads, by whom many pious hearts in our quarter, were led into error. My soul was much troubled, for I perceived, that though they were zealous, they erred in doctrine. I exerted my feeble efforts, as far as I was able, in opposing them by preaching and exhortations. I conferred twice with one of their leaders, once in private, and again in public; but my admonitions availed nothing, because I did that myself which I well knew was not right.

The report spread far abroad that I could readily silence these persons. All looked to me. I saw that I was the leader and defender of the impenitent, who all depended upon me. This pained my heart; I sighed and prayed, "Lord help me, lest I make myself partaker of other men's sins." My soul was troubled and I reflected upon the result of my doings, namely, that if I should gain the whole world, and live a thousand years, and at last have to endure the wrath of God, what would I have gained?

Afterwards; the poor straying flock, who wandered as sheep without a shepherd, after many severe edicts and slaughters, assembled near my place of residence, called Oude Klooster; and, alas! through the ungodly doctrines of Munster, and in opposition to the Spirit, the word and the example of Christ, drew the sword to defend themselves, which the Lord commanded Peter to put up in the sheath.

After this had transpired, the blood of the slain, although it was shed in error, grieved me so sorely that I could not endure it. I could find no rest in my soul. I reflected upon my carnal, sinful life, my hypocritical doctrine and idolatry, in which I continued daily under the appearance of godliness. I saw that these zealous children willingly gave their lives and their estates, though they were in error, for their doctrine and faith. And I was one of those who had discovered some of their abominations, and yet I myself remained satisfied with my unrestrained life and known

defilements. I wished only to live comfortably and without the cross of Christ.

Thus reflecting upon these things my soul was so grieved that I could no longer endure it. I thought to myself, miserable man! what shall I do? If I continue in this way, and live not in conformity to the word of the Lord, according to the knowledge of the truth which I have obtained; if I do not rebuke to the best of my limited ability the hypocrisy, the impenitent, carnal life, the perverted baptism, the Lord's supper and the false worship of God, which the learned teach; if I, through bodily fear, do not show them the true foundation of the truth, neither use all my powers to direct the wandering flock (who would gladly do their duty if they knew it) to the true pastures of Christ, Oh, how shall their shed blood, though shed in error, rise against me at the judgment of the Almighty, and pronounce sentence against my poor, miserable soul.

My heart trembled in my body. I prayed to God with sighs and tears, that he would give to me, a troubled sinner, the gift of his grace, and create a clean heart within me; that through the merits of the crimson blood of Christ, He would graciously forgive my unclean walk and unprofitable life, and bestow upon me, wisdom, Spirit, candor and fortitude, that I might preach his exalted and adorable name and holy word unperverted, and make manifest his truth to his praise.

I began in the name of the Lord to preach publicly, from the pulpit, the word of true repentance; to direct the people into the narrow path, and through the power of the scripture to reprove all sin and ungodliness, all idolatry and false worship, and to present the true worship, also baptism and the Lord's Supper, according to the doctrine of Christ, to the extent that I had at that time received grace from God.

I also faithfully warned every one in relation to the abominations of Munster, concerning kings, polygamy,

dominion, the sword, etc., until after the expiration of about nine months, when the gracious Lord granted me his fatherly Spirit, aid and power; then I voluntarily renounced all my worldly honor and reputation, my unchristian conduct, masses, infant baptism, and my unprofitable life, and at once willingly submitted to distress and poverty, and the cross of Christ. In my weakness I feared God; I sought out the pious, and though they were few in number, I found some who were zealous and maintained the truth. I conversed with the erring, and through the aid and power of God, with his word, reclaimed some from the snares of damnation, and gained them to Christ, while the hardened and rebellious, I commended to the Lord. Behold, thus, my reader, the God of mercy, through the benign influence of his abounding grace, exerted upon me, in my heart, a miserable sinner, produced in me a new mind, humbled me in his fear, taught me to know myself in part, turned me from the way of death, and graciously called me into the narrow path of life, to the communion of his saints. To him be praise forever more, Amen.

About one year thereafter, while I was secretly exercising myself in the word of God by reading and writing, it happened that six, seven or eight persons came to me, who were of one heart and one soul with myself, in their faith and life, and as far as man can judge, were blameless, and according to the testimony of the scriptures, separated from the world and subdued to the cross. They sincerely abhorred not only the sect of Munster, but the anathemas and abominations of all other worldly sects. For the sake of those pious souls who were of the same mind and spirit both with them and with me, they with much solicitude kindly requested me, to reflect on the great sufferings and necessity of the poor, oppressed souls (for the hunger was very great and the faithful stewards were very few), and apply to advantage the talents which I had unmeritedly received from the Lord.

When I heard this my heart was greatly troubled. Trouble and fear were on every side; for on the one hand I was sensible of my limited talents, my great ignorance, my weak nature, the timidity of my flesh, the unbounded wickedness, perversity and tyranny of the world, the powerful sects, the subtlety of different minds, and the heavy cross that would oppress me, should I comply with their solicitations, and on the other hand, the miserable, starving condition and necessity of these God fearing, pious children, for I saw plainly that they erred as innocent sheep which have no shepherd.

At last, after much prayer, I placed myself and these circumstances before the Lord and his church, in order that we might pray earnestly to the Lord for a season; should it accord with his acceptable and holy will that I could or might labor to his praise, that he would give me such a mind and heart as would enable me to say with Paul, "Woe is me, if I preach not the Gospel," and if not, that he might provide a way to prohibit the same, for Christ says, "That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:19, 20).

Thus, my reader, behold, I was not called to serve among the followers of Munster, nor of any other seditious sect (as it is falsely reported concerning me), but I have been called, unworthily, to this office by a people who were ready to receive Christ and his word, who led a penitent life in the fear of God, served their neighbors in love, bore the cross, sought the welfare and salvation of all men, loved righteousness and truth, and abhorred wickedness and unrighteousness— which shows pointedly that they were not such perverted persons as they are slanderously reported to have been. But they were true Christians, though unknown to the world, if we believe at all that Christ's word is true, and his unblamable, holy life and example infallible.

Thus have I, a miserable sinner, been enlightened of the Lord, converted to a new mind, fled from Babel, entered into Jerusalem, and finally, though unworthily, called to this high and arduous service.

When the persons before mentioned, did not desist from their supplications, and my own conscience in some degree made me uneasy (although in weakness), because I saw the great hunger and need, already referred to, I surrendered myself, soul and body, to the Lord and committed myself to his grace, and commenced in due time, according to the contents of his holy word, to teach, and to baptize, to labor in the vineyard of the Lord with my limited talents, to build up his holy city and temple, and to repair the dilapidated walls. The great and mighty God has made known and revealed the word of true repentance, the word of his grace and power, together with the salutary use of his holy sacraments, through our humble service, doctrine and unlearned writings, together with the careful service, labor and help of our faithful brethren, in many towns and countries, to such an extent, and made the condition of his churches so glorious and bestowed upon them such a subduing power that many exalted and proud hearts not only became humble; the unclean, pure; the drunken, sober; the avaricious, benevolent; the ferocious, mild, and the ungodly, pious; but they also faithfully yielded their possessions and blood, bodies and lives, for the "blessed testimony" they had, as may yet daily be seen.

...

He who, purchased me with the blood of his love, and called me, who am unworthy, to his service, knows me, and knows that I seek not wealth, nor possessions, nor luxury, nor ease, but only the praise of the Lord, my salvation, and the salvation of many souls. For this I, my poor, feeble wife and children have for eighteen years endured extreme anxiety, oppression, affliction, misery and persecution, and at the

peril of my life, have been compelled everywhere to live in fear and seclusion; indeed, when ministers repose on easy beds and downy pillows, we generally have to hide ourselves in secluded corners; when they at weddings and feasts, pipe and beat the tambour, and boast loudly, we must look out, when the dogs bark, lest the captors be at hand. While they are saluted as doctors, lords and teachers by every one, we have to hear that we are anabaptists, hedge preachers, deceivers and heretics, and must be saluted in the name of the devil. In short, while they are gloriously rewarded for their services with large incomes and easy times, our recompense and portion must be fire, sword and death.

Behold, my faithful readers, in such fear, poverty, misery and danger of death, have I, wretched man, performed to this hour, without charge, the service of the Lord, and I hope through his grace to continue therein to his glory, as long as I remain in this earthly tabernacle. What I and my faithful co-workers have sought or could have sought in performing these our arduous and dangerous duties, is apparent to all the well disposed, who may readily judge from the works and their fruits.

I will here humbly entreat the reader for Jesus' sake, to accept in love, this my confession in relation to my illumination, conversion and calling, and to meditate thereon. I have made it out of urgent necessity, for the information of the pious reader, because I was slandered by the clergy, and am accused, without foundation of truth, of being called and ordained to this service by a seditious and heretical sect. He that fears God let him read and judge.

MENNO SIMON.

Discussion Starters

Can a conscience be improperly trained? Discuss this in light of Menno's fear to read the Bible and his sighs to God for doubting that the bread and wine really

became Christ's body and blood.

True or false: Reading the Bible made Menno more conscientious.

The execution of Sicke Snyder for being re-baptized as an adult had a strong impact on Menno, and made the question of infant vs. adult baptism important to him. How did he go about resolving the matter?

What does Menno mean when he says, "I compared this doctrine with the Scriptures and found that it made baptism take the place of the blood of Christ"?

Why do you think Menno was at such pains to assure his readers that he didn't learn his doctrine from the sects, but rather by reading the Bible, and meditating on it with Holy Spirit illumination?

Menno accuses himself in those early years of wishing only to live comfortably without the cross of Christ. What meditations and prayers did this lead him to?

About nine months after Menno began preaching the truth as he understood it, what dramatic change took place in his life and spirit?

When six or eight people pleaded with Menno to lead them, what considerations kept him from wishing to do so? What considerations compelled him to become their leader after a season of prayer?

What troubles did the faith of the early Mennonites bring upon them?

Contrast the life that Menno and his family lived with the lives of established ministers. Were all ministers of the established churches hypocrites and wrong-doers? Did Menno expect of them an understanding that God had not given them?