The German Anabaptist Faith Groups
by R.A. Oldaker

1. **When did the Anabaptist Movement (Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite) begin?** In the early 1500’s

2. **Why are the Anabaptists seen as different from ordinary Protestants?** For three reasons: (1) The Anabaptists felt that the theologians of the Magisterial Reformation brought only a halfhearted renewal; (2) they believed in the separation of church and state, an idea that the leading Reformers in the 1500’s feared as it might lead to the dissolution of society as they knew it. In this sense, the Anabaptists were far ahead of their time; (3) the Anabaptists, although regarding the Old Testament as God’s Word, felt that the New Testament should guide them in terms of religious practice and doctrine. The Old Testament was only a guide in terms of morality and revelation.

3. **Why is 1516 an important date for Anabaptists?** In that year, the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam published his edition of the Greek New Testament with his own Latin translation and a plea that the Scriptures be translated into every language. He wanted every person to be able to read the Bible and receive benefit. This stimulated scholars to translate the Bible, and many began to pore over it intensely in Bible study groups. The Anabaptists studied the Scriptures and found that what the Scriptures said were at variance with many Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

4. **Who was Ulrich (or Huldrych) Zwingli?** He was the great Reformer of Zurich, Switzerland, one of the Magisterial reformers and the head pastor of the Great Cathedral (Grossmunster). He began preaching from Erasmus’ Greek New Testament (from the book of Matthew) and other books. He hoped that by preaching from the Scriptures, the Roman Catholic church could be reformed and renewed, but Rome did not want reform or renewal. The city council of Zurich agreed with Zwingli (and his sixty-seven theses) to reform the city churches, but the council wanted slow reform and wanted ultimate control over that reform. Although Zwingli agreed, many of his followers did not. They felt that the government should have no say in church reform and argued for the separation of church and state. These dissenters formed their own group on January 21, 1525 and became known as the Swiss Brethren or Anabaptists (because they rebaptized those who had been baptized as infants, which they regarded as no baptism at all since children cannot profess personal faith in Christ).

5. **Who was Oecolampadius?** He was the Magisterial Reformer of Basel, Switzerland. He and all the other major reformers (including Zwingli) met with Martin Luther at the Marburg Colloquy to discuss mutual doctrines. Oecolampadius had contact with the Anabaptists and even had theological conversations with them in his home in August 1525.

6. **Who were Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Georg Blaurock?** They were the students of Ulrich Zwingli and the first Anabaptists. Conrad Grebel’s house was in Zurich and, today, it is marked by a plaque on Neumarkt 5. The first Anabaptist meeting took place at a house in Zollikon (very close to Zurich), which is today located at Gstadtstrasse 23-25. There is a plaque on the wall of the building saying that. These three men instituted the first free church on German-speaking soil.

7. **Why did the Protestant and Catholic church-state unions fear the Anabaptists?** Although the Anabaptists were a people of peace and did not fight or participate in war, they
were feared for their belief in the total separation of church and state. If the church and state were separate, then mandatory taxes could not be collected by the government on behalf of a state church. The state could not get genuine believers to serve in the army because these believers did not believe in hurting others. They believed in loving their enemies. They believed only the state should pursue war, but the church should stay out of religious wars and other kinds of war. The way of the church is peace. By arguing that only true believers should make up a church (rather than being an automatic member by birth), the state church and government felt it would lose control and power over people’s lives. Although the separation of church and state is a commonly accepted idea in the United States today, this was a radical idea in Europe back in the early 1500’s.

8. **What does Taufgesinnte mean?** It is a German term meaning baptism-inclined or baptism-minded. It is a name given to the Anabaptists. The word Anabaptist is translated from the German word Wiedertäufer, meaning re-baptizers. Of course, the Anabaptists did not regard infant baptism as a real baptism because it is no where mentioned in the New Testament. Therefore, when they baptized people upon the profession of their faith in Christ, it was a first baptism, not a re-baptism. The Anabaptists argued that child circumcision in the Old Testament cannot be compared to New Testament baptism in the New Testament since all Jewish children were circumcised physically but that does not mean their hearts were circumcised spiritually. Many OT people were rejected by God even though they were physically circumcised (eg. those who opposed Moses in the desert). In the New Testament, only those who have a living faith can be baptised to show that they have spiritually circumcized hearts. It cannot apply to children. The Anabaptists believe that children are born into original sin (and, because of that, will eventually die physically when the grow old and will definitely commit sin when they reach a certain age because they are are not protected by divine grace), they are innocent of actual sin until they are much older (and the penalty for actual in is hell, something one can be rescued from through real repentence). When the apostle Paul baptized households on the profession of their faith, if there were any children in those households, then they were old enough to also make a decision to accept Christ. This is the Anabaptists’ belief concerning baptism which they have held to for over 475 years.

9. **Why don’t Anabaptists swear oaths?** Because Jesus said not to swear oaths in God’s name (Matthew 5:37). He said that if a person is honest, his simple yes or no answer should be accepted by others. A truthful person doesn’t have to swear an oath to get others to believe him. That is why, today, Anabaptists affirm to tell the truth, but they do not need to swear an oath. They will always tell the truth.

10. **Why don’t Anabaptists fast?** They do, but they believe in fasting in private and in secret. They do not believe any church should regulate fasting by laws. Fasting is an individual matter. That is why Anabaptists may fast at any time and not just during Lent as some Christians do.

11. **Who was the first Anabaptist martyr to be burned at the stake in a Swiss Catholic canton?** Bolt Eberli on May 29, 1525. Who was the first Anabaptist martyr to be put to death in Basel? Hans Ludi of Bubendorf in January of 1530. The Anabaptists themselves did not believe in torturing or killing other Christians for their beliefs. They felt that there should be freedom of religion, even for the Turks. Only God can judge a person’s heart.

12. **Who was Grimmelshausen?** For students of the German language, Grimmelshausen is known as a rather famous German poet who lived in the late 1600’s. In 1668, he wrote admiringly of the Anabaptist Hutterite colonies in Slovakia. He felt their communal life was superior to that of the Catholic monasteries.
13. **Who were the Umbträgers?** (Notice the extra -b in this word). They were people who passed out Anabaptist tracts in the 1500’s. This was one way the message was spread. Only fifty years earlier was the printing press with moveable type invented by Gutenberg. This invention helped spur on the Reformation of the church.

14. **What is Gelassenheit?** It is a German word meaning yielding or surrender to God. It is a willing submissiveness to the commands of Christ to live as he lived. It is a very important Anabaptist belief.

15. **Who were some other early Anabaptist leaders who were famous?** Those would include Michael Sattler (former prior of the Benedictine Order of St. Peter in the Black Forest), Dr. Balthasar Hubaijer (cathedral priest in Regensburg), Hans Hut, Hans Denk, and Johannes Brötli (pastor in Quarten by the Walensee). These three, among thousands of others, died martyrs’ deaths.

16. **Why did some Anabaptists get a bad name?** Well, there were two groups of early Anabaptists: those who eschewed all violence and those who thought war might bring in the kingdom of God. The first group of peaceful, non-violent Anabaptists are called Biblical Anabaptists because they do not resist evil perpetuated against them and they do not believe in revenge. The second groups of Anabaptists were no different from all the Catholics or Protestants of their day. They believed it was all right to fight in the name of religion, especially when there is a union of religion and government. Modern Anabaptists reject this violent view. Today’s Anabaptists all stem from the nonviolent Anabaptists of the 1500’s. These old violent groups were led by Jan Matthijs (a baker of Haarlem) and Jan Bockelson (a tailor), Melchior Hofmann (a former Lutheran clergyman and furrier who gained converts in northern Germany and in the Netherlands) and Thomas Münzer, who tried to usher in the kingdom of God at Mühlhausen in Thuringia in 1524 and at Münster in Westphalia. He was eventually beheaded after one battle in 1525, proving that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. The violent group supported the German Peasants Revolt of 1534. The peasants, under Sebastian Lotzer, wrote Twelve Articles demanding the end to serfdom and a new social order. They believed in violence. The peaceful Anabaptists supported the peasants’ religious goals but did not think violence would solve anything, and they were right. The peasants were utterly crushed by the German princes. One of the religious goals of the peasants was “to appoint our own pastors who would preach the gospel pure and clear without human content.” When reading your history books, you should distinguish between these militant millennialists and the nonviolent pacifists, both of whom were called Anabaptists by their enemies. The Catholics and Protestants often did not make distinctions and used the excesses of the militants as an excuse to attack the pacifist Anabaptists.

17. **Who was Menno Simons?** He was an Anabaptist leader from Holland. The modern Anabaptist Mennonites are named after him. He was a Catholic priest from Friesland of the Netherlands. He was born in Witmarsum around 1496. He became a priest in Utrecht in 1524. As a priest, he was not very moral. He was disposed to card games and alcohol and was not a model Christian. He began reading the Scriptures and experienced a spiritual birth. As a new man, he began to lead a moral life. He was impressed with the high morality of the Anabaptists. In 1529, he was suspected of being a follower of Martin Luther. He read the writings of Anabaptists and liked the fact that their beliefs were strictly Biblical and not based on human tradition. In January of 1536, he joined the Anabaptists and was baptized, probably in Groningen. The government put a price upon his head: one hundred gilders, equal to a priest’s annual salary. Menno organized strictly pacifist Anabaptists in Oldenburgian East Friesland and in Holland. He preached that the ethic of love had to permeate all human relationships. He also preached that
Christians should not kill others. That is the state’s business, not the business of the church.

18. **What are the Articles of Schleitheim?** It is a list of beliefs held to by the Anabaptists. It was written in 1527, probably by Michael Sattler. Among its beliefs was the one that said the church and state should be separated and that the government should not be involved in any religious matters. Another belief was to live peacefully with all mankind and not to fight as Christians.

19. **Why are the Mennonites named after Menno Simons?** Well, they were named that by their enemies. They were labeled Menists and Mennisten (Mennonites). The term first appears in 1545 in a mandate of Countess Anna of East Friesland. The Dutch Mennonites, however, call themselves the Doopsgezinde (the Dutch version of the German Taufgesinnte, the Baptism-Minded).

20. **When did the Anabaptists stop being persecuted in Europe?** The Catholics and Protestants fought for thirty years in Germany (1618-1848). Tens of thousands of people were killed. The wars ended with the Peace of Westphalia. The treaty legally recognized Lutheranism, but not Anabaptism. In the 1700’s, the Anabaptists were tolerated and eventually recognized as equal citizens. However, many Anabaptists fled to other countries: to Russia, to Paraguay, to Canada, to Bohemia, to America. Some of the Anabaptists (eg. the Amish) no longer exist in Europe at all. They all live in the United States. Mennonites live in North America, Central America, and even South America. They live in over eighty countries of the world. The Hutterites live in Canada and in the United States. The Anabaptist Brethren groups live in America and in many other countries as well.

For further information on the history of the German Anabaptist Faith Groups, please send your questions to Prof. R. A. Oldaker at either rolinguist@aol.com or randy.oldaker@mail.wvu.edu