

MENNONITE NAZIS:

A LESSON FROM HISTORY

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From the editor

Pulling into the local pretzel shop here in Lancaster County, the scene was pretty predictable. Buggies, horse ties, and old bicycles outside. Inside the old building, a plainly dressed, Old-Order Mennonite lady took my pretzel order. I paid and was about to head out to my car with my nice, warm bag of salted pretzels when I noticed two stacks of papers sitting on the counter. Looking closer I discovered, to my surprise, that these papers were actually voter registration forms and a “tract” explaining why voting for the conservative President was the only “Christian” choice.

Picking up the paper I asked the young lady, “So I didn’t know that conservative Anabaptists voted. When did this start?”

To this the Mennonite lady responded, “Well, it’s getting so bad that they are starting to.”

I answered back, “Historically it has never helped the church to get involved in politics.”

Election time

Yes, it’s election time again, and the headlines are full of statistics and touching stories, all proclaiming their different sides of the political arguments. Depending on which news source you read, it would be easy to believe that the other side is Satan himself. Conservative Evangelicals are putting up quite a stink over this election and unquestioningly preaching the idea that voting in this election is a moral obligation. The socialist agenda of the current administration is seen as a major threat to the conservative way of life, and therefore voting against the “Liberal-

Socialist” agenda is seen as almost important as walking an aisle. The left is no better, and more than ever they have learned to use spiritual overtones and self-righteous-sounding arguments to justify their agendas.

But who would the Apostles vote for? In the early church, saying “Jesus is Lord” was actually a political statement. This phrase was in direct contradiction to the cry of Romans, “Caesar is Lord.” The closest equivalent to this sentiment in our day would be saying, “Jesus for president!” In the early church this was not mere sentimentality. After the death and resurrection of the Jesus, this motto became the early Christian battle cry.

What does that mean practically?

So what did saying “Jesus is Lord” mean practically? To the early Christians it meant a separation from the politics of Rome and a purposeful establishing of a new nation called “The Kingdom of God.” Throughout history, radical followers of Jesus have charted the same course.

What is the answer to the question “Who would the apostles vote for?” I believe that they would vote for Jesus. But to a statement like that some may be thinking, “That all sounds nice and spiritual, but isn’t it okay to simply recognize that Jesus is the “real King in your heart,” but to still go ahead and vote for others—just in case?” Others ask, “Isn’t it better to vote for the lesser evil?”

History has proven that for serious Christians with conviction, voting for the “lesser evil” is a bad idea. Whether we want to admit it or not, the facts of history

cry out that when the church has thrown in their lot with the different “lesser evils” of their day, it has led to both the church and the state losing out.

Good causes

Throughout history when the politicians have vied for the attention of the church, their issues have appeared so justifiable—so important.



Emperor Augustus (63 BCE - 14 CE)
The son of God who brought the good news of peace to the world.

The political activists have made it seem apathetic, un-American, and yes, even un-Christian *not* to get involved.

However, when the records of history are reviewed, it is amazing how the church’s entanglement with these seemingly “good causes” has littered the trail with casualties, often leading entire communities off course.

Mennonite Nazis

A painful example of good intentions turned really bad is the case of the Mennonite political involvement in Germany during WWII. In some respects I would rather forget this chapter of our Anabaptist history. However, I feel that if we are going to lift up the good things we have done, then we also need to be honest with our mistakes—and this was a big one! I believe that understanding these mistakes could help to keep us from making similar mistakes in the near future.

The Mennonite church in Holland, northern Germany, and Prussia¹ was one of the first to receive the gospel during the early years of the Anabaptist revivals of the 1500s. However, by the 1700s the materialistic slide of the Mennonites in Holland had its effects on Prussia as well. By the late 1700s, the Mennonites of northern Germany had enjoyed more connection with their conservative Protestant and Evangelical neighbors. Some of this had good result.² However, economic and societal pressures bit by bit diluted the German Mennonites—almost completely—into mainline society. By the time of the Franco-Prussian

¹ Prussia covered basically (in varying degrees during history) what is now northern Poland and parts of northeastern Germany.

² For example, the Mennonites of Danzig shared a formal relationship with the Moravians of Herrnhut, who were only a few hundred kilometers away. When these Mennonites made their way to Russia, a large revival followed.

wars of the 1890s and WWI in the 1920s, many Mennonites were getting involved with politics, nationalism, and even starting to fight in wars.

After WWI

After WWI conditions were tough for all Germans—Mennonites included. The penalties placed on the German people by America and their allies crippled the economic stability of Germany. Farmers were hit particularly hard. Many farmers incurred large debts and were even forced to export their crops to support the surrounding countries hurt by the war.

The stock market crash of 1929 made a terrible situation even worse. Not only did it further crush the German economy, it also caused an uneasiness by revealing an unexpected weakness of western industry and capitalism. The ripple effect of this crash in the already-struggling post WWI Germany was devastating.

Joseph Stalin and Marxism

Added to this economic pressure in the West, the Russian Revolution led by Joseph Stalin was wreaking havoc all over the East. Notably affected by this revolution were the German Mennonite Brethren in Russia. Stalin’s reign of terror was notorious. German Mennonites frequently heard stories of how the “Communists” were making matters in Russia unbearable. By this time, some of their Russian Mennonite brethren had enormous farms. These farms became sitting ducks to Stalin’s forced economic plans of state ownership. Naturally, anti-communist feelings were strong.



Could the two crosses be fused?

Everyone was looking for answers. But they were looking in the wrong place. Their Bibles apparently were no longer looked at as a blueprint. Some looked to Western ideas of democracy and capitalism; others looked to the East and wanted to try the new “Marxism.” Regardless, everyone longed for a new, bold nationalism that would restore their honor and protect what little wealth, freedom, and property they had left.

Major compromise

At this point a zealous, strong-handed political conservative by the name Adolf Hitler came to the scene. Hitler

promised a unification of the German people, protection against the Communists, and a list of new “economic stimulus packages.” All these ideas promised Christian morality and prosperity for all good Germans. Some had cautions about Hitler’s intensity. But when it became election time, it was the “issues” that people voted for ... and Adolf Hitler had the political cure of the day. It should always be remembered that Hitler was voted in by a fair democratic election process. Many liberals preferred the Communists. But the conservative Evangelicals, along with the German Mennonites, gave their vote for the new guy with the little mustache ... complete with their new motto, “Heil Hitler.”³

The new plan

As part of a new “stimulus package,” in 1933 Hitler canceled all farming debts and reformed trade relations to benefit the German farmers. These changes actually made the German farmers part of the privileged class. Communist supporters were hauled off to concentration camps and many of the territories taken from Germany after WWI were quickly given back by rapid military actions. Germans were thrilled with these changes. When Austria fell to the marching armies, Germans were electrified. The Protestants were so happy that they even took down the cross that rested over the very castle where Martin Luther had translated the Bible, and put up a Swastika in its place.⁴

What was the spiritual cost?

What was the effect of Nazi nationalism on the Mennonites? Historically, the Mennonites had a heritage of separation from worldly politics. Could they get involved in politics and still stand against this new mindset? In a word—no.

Sadly, the Mennonites of Germany joined in with the jubilant nationalistic feelings that were spreading. As a matter of record, the German Mennonites were so happy

3 This salute is often translated as “Hail, Hitler.” However, the German word “Heil” can also have connotations of “salvation” or “healing.” Thus the salute could have been used in the sense of seeing Hitler as a savior or healer of the German nation.

4 Metaxas, Eric. Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy. Thomas Nelson, 2010. 308.

with their new Führer⁵ that they wanted to express their official gratitude to him. In a telegram written September 10, 1933, the sentiments of a church council that had just taken place were expressed:

To Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Berlin:

The Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonites, assembled today in Tiegenhagen, Free State of Danzig, feels deep gratitude *for the powerful revival that God has given our nation* through your energy, and promises joyful cooperation in the upbuilding of our Fatherland through the power of the Gospel, faithful to the motto of our forefathers: No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid which is Jesus Christ.”⁶ (Underscore and italics mine.)

I’m sure Hitler didn’t take time to answer every telegram that he received, but this one he replied to personally:

For your loyalty and your readiness to cooperate in the upbuilding of the German nation, expressed in your letter to me, I express my sincere thanks. — Adolf Hitler

Yikes!

Now to the defense of these German Mennonites, we have to remember that the atrocities that Hitler committed were not completely known at this time. On the other hand, there is a very important lesson to learn from just that point. When the church gives its support and affirmation to the ways of this world, when the church condones “lesser evil,” it finds itself praising an antichrist.

Quick seduction

Caught up in the feeling of the day, in 1933 the United (Vereinigung) Mennonites stopped asking for special

5 Führer means “leader.”

6 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Nationale Erhebung und Religiöser Niedergang,” Mennonitsche Geschichtsblätter 31 (1974): 64. Quoted in: Mennonite Life, *Mennonitische Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Prussian Mennonites, the Third Reich, and Coming to Terms with a Difficult Past*, James Peter Regier, March 2004. <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2004Mar/regier.php> (Without Regier’s article, my article would not have been possible.)



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-04481B / CC-BY-SA
The famous straight-arm Nazi salute is now illegal in Germany and a few other European nations.

treatment as conscientious objectors from war. In 1934 “nonresistance” was removed from the Mennonite confession of faith.

In 1939 when the German armies took over Prussia bringing the Mennonites of Danzig to be united with the rest of Germany, the Mennonites saw it as an act of God. Emil Händiges, of the United (Vereinigung) Mennonites wrote:

Our German peoples have endured unspeakable difficulties under the Polish yoke during its twenty year foreign rule. The most difficult at the end. Then God, the Lord, helped them through the hand of our Führer and freed them. We thank our Führer for this act of liberation.⁷

Mennonite and conservative Evangelical journals praised these military conquests by the German soldiers. These journals frequently quoted from the Prophets and the book of Revelation, showing Germany’s place as “God’s people” in prophecy.⁸

Gott mit Uns

Today it is easier to think of these German soldiers as committed pagans and monsters. “After all,” we tell ourselves, “how else could they have conducted all of those terrible deeds?” The sober truth is that most of those

German soldiers claimed to be Christians. Astonishingly, the belt buckle worn by all of these so-called “Christian” Nazi soldiers boldly proclaimed, “Gott mit Uns.”⁹

By 1940 the subtle influence of this political leaven had almost completely taken over the German Mennonites. Issuing a proclamation representing the political posture of the Mennonite Union during this time, the United Mennonite church wrote: “The Conference will

not do anything that would even have the faintest appearance of opposing the policies of our leader (Führer).”

Reading this stuff, I had to ask, “Could this still be called Anabaptist?” I don’t personally think so. But more importantly, can they be called followers of Jesus? These changes were a pretty far cry from the decree of separation from the world and shunning of earthly government that was espoused by the early Anabaptists in the words of the Schleithem Confession of 1527. It is obvious that their original convictions had grown stale.

Fresh faith

During this time of compromise, there were small groups of first-generation Anabaptists on the scene. A first-generation Hutterite group led by

Eberhard Arnold¹⁰ was just becoming organized during this time period. Enthusiastically embracing the foundational ideas of Anabaptism, they were dismayed over the posture of their Mennonite spiritual cousins.

When the Nazi authorities found out about these new Anabaptists, they became alarmed. The Hutterites’ radical theological and, particularly, their strong economic stance was more than the Nazis would stand for. But because of their radical stance, the loosening Men-

nonites were getting heat for also being called “Anabaptist.” When the authorities asked the politically-friendly Mennonites if they were associated with the new Hutterite group, the Mennonites didn’t exactly stand up for them. In a united effort of both the northern and southern Mennonites, an official disclaimer stated: “The Hutterites belonged neither to the Vereinigung (Union) of German Mennonite Churches, nor to any other organization within our Free German Mennonite Church.”¹¹

It wasn’t long until this new Hutterite community was raided. Fortunately, most of them made it out of the country, and the new group ended up as refugees in England. When England, the US, and Canada would not let the new group settle in their countries, the American Mennonites came to their rescue through the help of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The MCC helped the Hutterites

¹⁰ This group later became known as “The Bruderhof.”

¹¹ Schroeder, “Prussian Mennonites,” 18.



Nazi belt buckle, emblazoned with the words “God with us.”

⁷ Emil Händiges, “Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden: Eine Notwendige Berichtigung,” *Mennonitische Blätter* 81, No. 6 (June 1934): 6.

⁸ Steven Mark Schroeder, “Prussian Mennonites in the Third Reich and Beyond: The Uneasy Synthesis of National and Religious Myths” (Master’s Thesis: University of British Columbia, 2001), 26.

⁹ God with us.

immigrate to Paraguay, conveniently close to a group of Colony Mennonites that the MCC was already helping.

More Mennonite Nazis!?

However, just when the Hutterites thought they were far, far away from the dreadful politics of their homeland, they discovered that thousands of miles away, virtually in the “middle of nowhere,” these South American Mennonites were also indoctrinated with Nazi politics!

The Mennonites there in Paraguay were living in terrible conditions and they spoke frequently to the Mennonites of Germany. Many felt that if Germany defeated Russia, then the Colony Mennonites would have a chance to leave South America and come live in Germany.¹²

Like their brethren in Germany, the Mennonites of Paraguay had also had council meetings to discuss the advantages of Nazi politics. After their church council, they also blessed the Nazi government and saw the Nazis as the political party that was upholding conservative Christian values. After the conference, the Colony Mennonites of Paraguay wrote:

With greatest excitement we German Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco¹³ follow the events in our beloved Motherland and experience in spirit the national revolution of the German people.

We are happy that in Germany, after a long time, a government that freely and openly professes God as Creator stands at the head of the nation ...With special sympathy we hear that the current government takes seriously the realization of Christian principles in social, economic, and cultural life and especially

emphasizes the protection of the family.¹⁴ (Under-score mine.)

One youth leader writing home to Paraguay, while studying in Germany, wrote: “If one lives through such weeks in Germany, one is drawn involuntarily under the spell of the Führer and can do nothing else than confess oneself a National Socialist.”¹⁵

The new Hutterites were disappointed. The living conditions of Paraguay were horrible indeed, but they felt that the freedom of worship was worth the cost. Emmy Arnold once wrote in a letter, “Better hookworm, than hooked cross (swastika).”

Responding to the lack of education and deplorable living conditions of the Colony

Mennonites, the Hutterites quickly went to work trying to educate and offer social aid to the different Mennonite groups. Holding preaching services and hymn sings, some repentance progress was made. However, it was still a hard, upward fight. On one occasion, when the Hutterites came into a church building that the Mennonites had generously opened for them to worship in, the Hutterites were met with a framed picture of Adolf Hitler. The picture was front-and-center ... right over the communion table!¹⁶



The meeting hall at Fernheim Colony, Paraguay, was opened to the Bruderhof refugees as a place to gather. Note the portrait of Adolf Hitler at the front, and the old German saying on the banner—**Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!**

(Roughly translated, “Community before self-interest.”)

The war ends

We know how part of the war story ended. Germany

lost the war, Hitler committed suicide, and soon all the atrocities of the Nazi party were being broadcast to the world. The Mennonites as well as conservative Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical groups repented of their support of this antichrist. Mennonite leaders even repented publically.¹⁷ The Mennonites of South America followed

12 Emmy Barth. *No Lasting Home: A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness*. Plough Publishing House, 2009, 39-48. Available online at: <http://cdn.plough.com/~media/Files/Plough/ebooks/pdfs/n/nolastinghomeEN.pdf>

13 The Chaco is the semi-arid area of western Paraguay, a veritable wilderness now turned into productive crop and grazing lands by the industrious Mennonites.

14 John D. Thiesen. *Mennonite & Nazi?: Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1999), 73.

15 Barth, “No Lasting Home,” 40.

16 See picture this page. From Mennonite Church USA Archives in North Newton, Kansas.

17 “Emil Händiges offered his public repentance at the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948. Referring to

suit, and eventually the political answers of the little German Führer were vehemently discarded.

Yet, somehow, something was lost by this pandemic compromise. I believe that something was particularly lost from the Mennonites. Compromise of this magnitude from mainline Protestants and Catholics was one thing ... the world was somewhat used to seeing that. But when even the “radical Christians” were seen bending their knee to this evil, then something deep was lost.

The German church that emerged out of WWII Germany was anemic. Secularism has claimed the day, and today radical Christianity is virtually unheard of there.

How did this happen to the Mennonites?

When I lived in Germany 20 years ago, I was a new convert to many of these Anabaptist ideas like nonresistance and separation from worldly politics. Walking into a Mennonite church there, I noticed on the walls the war memorials of Mennonites who had fought in the war. My guide was a man in his seventies who remembered the war period well. I asked him, “How did this happen? How did the Mennonites get swept up into all of this Nazi nationalism?”

He somberly told me, “It came over us like a revival.”

That was an impressive answer, and I am sure that at the end it did indeed come on them like that. But was it completely unexpected? I now think that the compromise was more insidious than the Mennonites were aware of. As the years go by and I watch the way modern conservative Mennonites respond to politics, I can somewhat understand how this could happen again. I now think that instead of being a sudden change, it rather happened because of a long time of slow compromise. James Peter Regier says it well in the conclusion of his excellent essay on this historic time period of Mennonite history:

It seems then, that the biggest flaw of the Mennonites was not any immediate error. Instead, it was the natural consequence of years of gradual theological adaptations and compromises to better fit within the German community. When National Socialism came, the Mennonites no longer had the capacity to resist.¹⁸

Have we learned our lesson?

Have we learned our lesson? Have we learned that trusting in “good” political strategies is a *really* bad idea? The

such Anabaptist and Mennonite founders as Conrad Grebel, Thomas Müntzer, and Menno Simons, Händiges recalled that the movement had, among other things, been founded on a teaching of nonresistance.” (Quoted from: Regier, *Mennonitische Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.)

18 Regier, *Mennonitische Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Mennonite lady at the pretzel bakery said that things are getting so bad that Mennonites simply have to start getting involved in politics.

I disagree.

It is exactly *because* the world is getting so bad that it is time to leave the failed solutions of the world and to start showing a model to the world of what the world would look like if we all would simply follow the teachings of Jesus.

So is voting a sin?

As we have seen, the issue is a subtle one. On the one hand, it seems so innocent. We might ask, “So what’s wrong with just telling someone who our choice would be for President?” That may seem innocent enough, but perhaps it is just this type of subtlety that warranted Jesus casting this rebuke: “Beware of the leaven of Herod.” Akin to the insidious pathos of pharisaical thinking, Jesus warned that the infection of “worldly political thinking” can grow in us, leading to our eventual spiritual destruction.

Jesus’ use of the metaphor “leaven” in this context is sobering. This word picture brings to mind the way we use leaven (today called yeast) in cooking. The small amount of yeast necessary to make a loaf of bread rise starts out seemingly innocuous and insignificant. However, once added to the dough, it is not long before that small bit of yeast affects the entire loaf, often swelling it to two or three times its original size. It happened to the Mennonites in Germany during WWII, and it can easily happen today if we look to worldly politics for our answers.

How is it with us today—in what way do we apply Jesus’ warning to “beware of the leaven of Herod?” Have we learned our lesson from history? We must learn from history that the world never has, and never will, come up with a lasting ultimate solution to their problems. Their shortsighted cures will always lack the clarity to see the root causes of their disease. As Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

If through this political season you have felt yourself infatuated with the agenda of worldly solutions, then please accept this lesson from the Mennonite Nazis and repent before you find yourself venerating the devil himself! ~

Their shortsighted cures will always lack the clarity to see the root causes of their disease.