

Economics, A Hot Topic: Menno Simons (1552)

Background: Menno Simons (1496-1561) was a Dutch Catholic priest from Friesland, Netherlands, who in 1536 joined the Anabaptist movement in which he served as an itinerant pastor and evangelist. His leadership and writings helped give the Anabaptist movement a sense of coherence and peaceful identity in the years after the collapse of the Anabaptist kingdom in Münster. Although danger of arrest and execution forced Menno to move about, he managed to write prolifically, including controversial pieces such as his *Reply to False Accusations* in which he debates with the Anabaptists' Calvinist Reformed critics. The criticisms that the Anabaptists held property in common were based on reports of the Münster Anabaptists and of Moravian Hutterian Anabaptist communities. In response, Menno argues for radical sharing without a community of goods.

Requirements: Seven (or four) persons—reader parts could be reduced from five to two.

* * * * *

Critic: We lay serious charges against you, Menno. You and your people have your property in common!

Menno: This is false. It's absolutely not true. Our people do not hold property in common. What you call "owning" is not the point. Of course, it is reasonable that Christians should love one another and be solicitous for each other's welfare and share what we have. It is only natural that we should do so. More important, the Bible teaches that we are bonded together. We have one Lord, one God, one baptism, one bread. We are truly one body, and that is why we care for one another.

Critic: That all sounds very pious. But my question is talking about real life—material things, property. Who owns things? Who is responsible for them?

Menno: Please, allow me to explain the logic of our position. Any intelligent person cares for his whole body. He doesn't just clothe one part—say his lower body—and leave the rest naked. No, all parts of the body are important. And so it is with us. We care for the whole body of Christ, his church, those who are gifted with the Spirit of the Lord.

Critic: So you take responsibility for the needs of everyone in your group. Is that what you mean? You call that intelligent. I say it is careless. Someone could take advantage of you; that's for sure.

Menno: You see, we live according to the Bible. And according to Jesus Christ, our love must go even beyond our own circles. We must be prepared to love and serve our neighbors. Not only with money and goods, but we must learn to love and serve them after the example of our Lord.

Critic: Your neighbors? You mean people not in your own group? And what does Jesus Christ have to do with it?

Menno: We are to show mercy and love as much as possible. Yes, we, first of all, take to heart the needs of the saints; no one has to beg. But beyond that, we are to entertain those in distress and to take strangers into our own houses. Jesus teaches us these things: we are not to turn away from our own families; we are to comfort the afflicted, assist the needy, feed the hungry and never turn our faces from the poor. This is the kind of community life that we teach.

Critic: That's all very well, and probably not illegal. But it is known that you advocate taking and possessing the land and property of other people!

Menno: Friend, this is another false charge. You keep talking about property and goods. We are concerned for the welfare of all people, especially the poor and needy among us. In this we obey the Scriptures. Listen to what the Bible says:

Reader 1: Moses says, "If there is a poor person among you, of one of your brothers, within any of thy gates, in thy land which the Lord thy God gives you, thou shall not harden your heart or shut your hand from your poor brother."

Reader 2: Tobit says, "Give your bread to the hungry, and your garments to those that are naked."

Reader 3: Christ himself says, "Be therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Reader 4: Paul says, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercy; etc. For whoever has showed no mercy shall have judgment without mercy; and mercy rejoices against judgment."

Reader 5: John says, Whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up compassion for him, how does the love of God dwell in him?

Menno: Friend, mercy, love, and community—this is what we teach and practice. We have done so for the past 17 years. Let me tell you. We thank God that, in spite of terrible hardships, none of those who have joined us nor any of their orphaned children have been forced to beg.

Critic: You almost make me envy you in this. But I must say it again. These are the charges before you. Not only do you teach community of goods, you'd like to reach into the chests and pockets of others! We must warn people to beware of you.

Menno: You speak of money and of property. Ownership is not the point. In fact, our property has to a great extent been taken away from us and is still daily taken. Many godly fathers and mothers are put to the sword or burned with fire. And although we are not allowed the free enjoyment of our homes in these hard times, we thank God. Why? Because the precious, merciful life of a saint is not a fantasy and a dream. God is love, and all who dwell in love, dwell in God and God in them. This is Christian practice. If it were not so, then we might as well abandon the whole Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and never use the very name "Christian."

Source: Menno Simons, "Reply to False Accusations" (1552), in J.C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 558-560.