

THE

C O N V E R S I O N

OF

MENNO SIMON,

AND HIS

R E N U N C I A T I O N

OF THE

CHURCH OF ROME,

WHEREIN IS BRIEFLY AND PLAINLY NARRATED HOW, AND FOR WHAT CAUSE,
HE RENOUNCED POPERY; ALSO HIS SUBSEQUENT CALLING TO THE
PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF,

AND ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE DUTCH LANGUAGE

A. D. 1554.

TO THE READER.

BELOVED READER, We are falsely accused, by our opponents, of following the teachings of Munster, concerning the king, the sword, rebellion, retaliation, polygamy and other abominations. But my kind readers, know ye that I, never in my life, accepted any of the foregoing doctrines; but on the contrary, I have opposed them for more than seventeen years, and to the best of my abilities, have warned all mankind against this abominable error. I have also, through the word of God, led some on the right way. Never in my life have I seen Munster, nor have I been in the communion of that sect. I also hope, through God's grace, neither to eat nor drink with such (if such there are), as the scripture teaches me; unless they confess their error with all their heart, bring forth fruits meet for repentance, and follow the Gospel in the right manner.

MENNO SIMON.

Menno Simon's Renunciation

OF THE

CHURCH OF ROME.

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 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—sighed and prayed, yet I could not be freed from this thought.

Those two aforementioned young men 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. Thus concealed was the word of God to my understanding.

At length I resolved that I would examine the New Testament attentively. I had not

proceeded far therein, ere I discovered that we were deceived. My conscience, which was troubled on account of the sacramental bread, aforementioned, 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 had my affections, 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 God-fearing, pious man, named Sicke Snyder, was beheaded at Leeuwarden, for being re-baptized. 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.

Afterwards, 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 relation to infant baptism.

Shortly after, I went 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, 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—I, miserable man, what shall I do? If I continue in this way, and live not agreeably 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, &c.*, until after the expiration of about nine months, when the gracious Lord grant-

ed 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 unblamable, 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, 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 in anywise we believe 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. These are not the fruits and evidences of false doctrines, in which God is not a co-worker. Neither could they endure so long under such grievous misery and oppressive crosses, were it not the power and word of the Almighty which sustains them. Yea, more, the Lord endued them with such grace and wisdom, as Christ has promised to all his children in their trials, so that all the worldly-wise and renowned teachers, together with the blood-guilty, daring tyrants, who, O God, boast that they are Christians, were vanquished and abashed by these invincible champions and pious witnesses of Christ. Those ferocious persons knew of no other weapons or refuge to which to resort than those of banishing, seizing, punishing, burning, murdering, and destroying, even as has always been the custom of the old serpent, from the beginning, and as may yet, alas! be daily witnessed in many places of our Netherlands.

Behold this is our calling, our doctrine and fruits of our labor: on account of which we are so grievously slandered, and so malevolently persecuted; whether or not all the prophets, apostles, and faithful servants of God, have endured similar sufferings on ac-

count of their faithfulness, we willingly leave all the pious to judge.

But as much as regards my poor, weak and imperfect life, I freely confess that I am a poor, wretched sinner, conceived in sin, of sinful seed, and sinfully brought forth. I can say with David, that my sins are ever before me. My thoughts, words and actions convince me. I see with holy Paul, "That in me (that is in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing," Rom. 7: 18. Nevertheless, I must be allowed to boast this much in my weakness, if this wicked, desolate world would hear our doctrine (not ours, but the doctrine of Christ), with patience, and, in the true fear of God follow it submissively, this would undoubtedly, be a more christian-like and better world than, alas, it now is.

I thank God, who has made me willing with holy Paul, to hate the evil and follow the good; and willingly would I with my own blood, reclaim this wicked world from ungodly and evil works, and gain it to Christ. Through the grace of God, it is my desire to fear the Lord with all my heart; to love, seek and serve him, to do right before him, and be an unblamable pious Christian.

I hope through the mercy and assistance of the Lord, that no one upon earth may have reason to accuse me of leading an avaricious and luxurious life. Money and affluence, I have not; neither do I desire them, although alas, some from a perverted heart, say that I eat more roasted than they do seethed; and drink more wine than they do beer. My Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, was also called a winebibber, and a glutton. I trust that through the grace of the Lord, I am innocent in this matter, and stand acquitted before God.

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; yea, 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 vaunt loudly, we must look out, when the dogs bark, lest the captors be at hand. Whilst they are saluted as doctors, lords and teachers by every one, we have to hear that we are ana-baptists, hedge preachers, deceivers and heretics, and must be saluted in the name of the devil. In short, whilst 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 change, 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 feareth God let him read and judge.

MENNO SIMON.

AN ACCOUNT

OF THE

SEVERE PERSECUTIONS OF MENNO SIMON, AND A DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE WHERE HE LAST PREACHED THE GOSPEL, DIED AND WAS BURIED.

“All that will live godly in Christ Jesus,” says Paul, “shall suffer persecution,” 2 Tim. 3:12. These words, although often confirmed, through the inconsiderate wickedness of this world, we find particularly confirmed in the example of our author Menno Simon. For, after he had been persecuted in many ways and sought for by his opponents, they, in order that their design might be accomplished with certainty, issued a decree in which it was stated that whosoever should shelter, or in any manner conceal Menno Simon or any of his followers, should suffer death; which decree was enforced in the year A. D. 1539 in the case of Tjaert Reyndertz,* a peasant living near Harlingen (prov. Friesland, Neth.), who, because he secretly harbored Menno Simon in his house, in his great danger and distress, was a few days after, taken to Leenwarden (in the same province), and as an ungodly criminal put on the wheel, though even his enemies acknowledged that he was a pious man.

Besides this, another decree was issued in the year A. D. 1543, throughout West Friesland, by which a general pardon, the favor of the Emperor, freedom of the country, and besides, one hundred Carl guilders** was promised to any criminal, even murderer, who would deliver Menno into the hands of the executioner; and, in order that their purpose might be more readily accom-

plished, his name, person, clothing and stature were described, and this description posted upon the church-doors; so that he could not even find a hut of straw where he could quietly rest with his wife and little children, for any length of time. Menno himself relates that in 1546, at a certain place, where they yet boasted of being evangelical christians, four dwellings were, at once, confiscated, because the owner had rented one of them for a short time to his sick wife and little children, though the neighbors were not aware of it. This severe persecution compelled Menno to remove to a place situated between Hamburg and Lubeck, six and a half or seven miles from Hamburg, three miles from Lubeck, and nearly a mile from Oldeslo, which formerly was a large forest of oaks, but which is now an open field, generally called Woeste Veldt, belonging to the nobleman and estate of Van Vriesenburg; which nobleman was at that time a very cruel person, on which account he was generally shunned and feared. But having spent much of his youth in the Netherlands, and having often witnessed the death of martyrs, he was very compassionate towards them, being conversant with their doctrines. He clandestinely gave them liberty to dwell there, and assiduously and faithfully assisted them; although he was requested by the king's order not to permit them to live there; therefore he announced to them, through one of his servants, that they should leave

* See Martyr's Mirror, English edition, published by D. Miller, Lampeter Square, Pa., 1837, Page 382.

** Forty Dollars.

before sun-down, at the risk of punishment, yet, he sent a faithful servant after the first, to tell them the cause of this announcement, and to inform them that the men should either absent or conceal themselves for a week or two. In the mean while he succeeded in quieting this excitement, through one of the courtiers. After this the exiles came hither from every side, until there was quite a little community there, who lived in comparative quiet. Each family had to pay one dollar a year for this protection, and were taxed no further. This may well be considered a special dispensation of God's providence, that the exiles were fostered and protected by a very cruel person, who was feared by all around him. For which reason Menno considered it expedient, as it was said, to remove to that place.

Menno Simon died about thirty years after he left the church of Rome. During this time he taught and proclaimed the gospel, purified of Roman idolatry and superstition. His last exhortation was given on his death-bed, while the hand of death seemed already to rest upon him, showing his unquenchable zeal. He, however, partially recovered and was better for several days, but on the day of the anniversary of his remun-

ciation of popery, he suddenly became worse, though well taken care of, and the next day, being Friday the 13th of January, 1561, he calmly fell asleep in Jesus, in the sixty sixth year of his age, and was buried in his own garden, which according to Hoornbeck, was also customary with the primitive Christians under the persecutions of the pagans.

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NOTE 1.—Although the "Martyrs' Mirror," page 59, and T. J. van Braght in his "Bloody Theatre" and others, write that Menno Simon died on the 13th of January 1559, yet we are led to think that he died in 1561, for the following reasons:

The old biography of Menno Simon mentions 1561 as the year of his death, which statement we deem correct; also on the 23rd of January 1559, he wrote a tract (see his Reply to Zylis and Lemmekes in this book), and sent it to the German teachers, Zylis and Lemmekes. Now, if he died on the 13th of January 1559, he must have written this ten days after his death.

NOTE 2.—The reader should know that although some old biographies mention 1505 as the year of his birth, yet we will take 1496; for, the "Martyrs' Mirror," "The Bloody Theatre," "The Decline of Tyrants" and "Annals," all mention that he died in his sixty sixth year. If Menno, then, died in 1561, he necessarily was born in 1496, or else he died in the fifty sixth year of his age.



