

REFLECTIONS ON OUR GERMANIC MENNONITE HERITAGE

(Based on my book, *Faith of our Fathers: From Barbarian to Mennonite and Beyond*)

Richard J. Gehman

October 2011

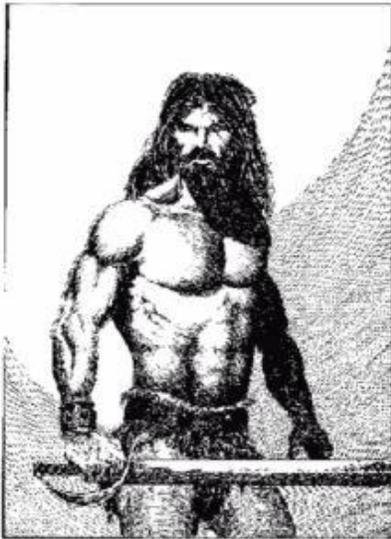
While serving as a missionary in Kenya, East Africa, for thirty-seven years, I had the privilege of studying and teaching African Traditional Religion. My students were very near to their pagan roots. Like them, I also have pagan roots, though mine are 2,000 years old. Who were my ancestors? What did they believe and how did they live? Arising out of curiosity I determined upon retirement to dig through the cobwebs of ancient history and discover my pagan roots. The fruit of this research can be found in my book, *Faith of our Fathers: From Barbarian to Mennonite and Beyond*.¹

Though I will speak throughout this paper of “my” ancestral roots, they are, in fact, the roots of all Pennsylvania Dutch. We trace our forefathers to those who lived in Germany and on the banks of the Rhine River and up into German speaking Switzerland. This paper describes the roots of those who founded the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church.

My pagan roots were like a horrible pit from which God rescued me and my ancestors. David cries out to God for help. After much waiting God did help. “*He (the LORD) brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth – Praise to our God. Many will see it and fear, and will trust in the LORD*” (Isa 40:2 NKJ). My desire is that a discovery of the barbarian pit from which our ancestors were delivered, will give us a song of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord.

GERMANIC BARBARIANS

The information of our Germanic ancestors is derived from Roman sources. When Julius Caesar first encountered them in the western parts of the Roman Empire, the Romans considered them *barbarian*. Whereas, the Romans spoke Greek and Latin, and represented the advances of Greco-Roman civilization, these *Germani* were uncouth and primitive by Roman standards. They spoke a language no one could decipher. These *Germani* spoke nonsense that sounded like *bara bara bara*. Hence our ancestors became known as the *barbarians* who neither spoke the language of the “superior” Greco-Roman civilization nor enjoyed their advances of knowledge.



Origin

It would appear that the Germanic peoples first originated in southern Scandinavia where linguists have been unable to find any evidence of pre-Germanic peoples. From 200 B.C. a gathering momentum of migrations took place, moving southward and westward into the heart of Western Europe. Scholars speak of Scandinavia as a “hive of peoples,” with wave after wave of *Germani* migrating south and west into Europe.

Most of Western Europe is Germanic including: the Danish, Swedes, and Fins in Scandinavia; the Goths, Burgundians, and the Vandals in the East; and in the West, the Franks, Alemanni, Bavarians, Lombards, Angles, Saxons, and Frisians, Dutch, English, all those speaking modern German.

Germanic languages are found worldwide with English as the dominant Germanic language.

From where did the Germanic peoples originate? Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. All the inhabitants of the world can trace their ancestry back to one of Noah’s three sons when the ark landed on Mount Ararat after the flood. The Hamites populated the near East, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and eventually Africa south of the Sahara. The Shemites traveled eastward into Mesopotamia and beyond. The Japhethites traveled north before turning westward. Presumably, the Germanic peoples descended from Japheth.

¹ To simplify matters in this paper, I have chosen not to cite bibliographical references. Sources for the information in this paper are found in my book, *Faith of our Fathers: From Barbarian to Mennonite and Beyond*.

Most of my named ancestors can be traced back to the 1500s and 1600s, though several lineages can be traced back to the First Crusade, and even back further to the Roman Empire. On the basis of their location along the Rhine River during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I have concluded that my ancestors were Alemanni and Franks, though lacking in ethnic purity. As peoples multiply and spread, they form clans, and sub-tribes and federations of tribes. As they migrate and confront other peoples, they intermingle, intermarry and assimilate on the one hand; or on the other hand, they defeat and kill, though seldom do they annihilate. Our Germanic ancestors were no less an amalgamation of peoples than we are today in the melting pot of America. My ancestors were not purely Alemanni or Franks.

Religion

My ancestors 2,000 years ago could be categorized as pagans.

Pantheon of gods: The Germanic barbarians were polytheists. Their many spirits and gods were personifications of nature – earth, water, fire, storm, the sun, and the moon. They worshipped beneath sacred trees and springs of water. Germanic gods were innumerable. *Nerthus* was the earth-mother who rode on a chariot among her people. Over one hundred names for mother-goddesses are Germanic. *Baldr* was the son of the chief of the gods; *Ullr*, the god of archers; *Bragi*, the god of poetry; *Vanier*, the god of fertility, health and wealth; *Mannus*, the god who was considered to be the ancestor of the Germans.

Triad of gods: Though Germanic deities were innumerable, three gods stand out among them according to Tacitus, the Roman historian, who identified them by their Roman names. Tacitus was a Roman historian who wrote in the first century of our Christian era. Our earliest information of the *Germani* is derived from him.

Woden (Oden) (the Roman god, *Mercury*) was a prominent Germanic deity, worshipped as the god of war. He never missed his target when flinging his spear. Images of *Woden* are found on many gold coins and medallions which depict him riding a horse while holding a spear with his upraised arm. “Wednesday” is the day the Germans honored *Woden*.

The *Germani* also worshipped *Woden* because of his healing powers. His image on medallions portrays him as a rider on a horse with a broken leg. These medallions contained magical incantations and were worn as amulets for magical protection.

Rounding out the image of *Woden* as the god of war and the god of healing, he was also noted for being “shifty, full of guile,” skilled in magic and the inventor of poetry.

Thor (the Roman god, *Hercules*) was a red-bearded god of thunder and rain. His image was portrayed on medallions as a man carrying a hammer in iron gloved hands, riding the sky in a chariot, drawn by two he-goats. In the dark sky, raging with the loud clap of thunder and the fierce lightening flashes across the expanse, *Thor* rode with power. Peasants worshipped him as the god of agriculture because he brought them rains and ensured a harvest. “Thursday” is the day Germans honored *Thor*.

Thor was also known as a god of war who served as the Defender of the World and the Guardian of Law and Order.

Tiu (the Roman god, *Mars*) was the earlier god of war before he was supplanted in popularity by *Woden*. In common with the confusion of mixing and blending in mythology, *Tiu* was known as the son of *Woden*, the god of war. And yet *Tiu* was the earlier war god before *Woden* became more popular. At the same time *Tiu* was a giant in stature. *Tiu* is possibly equated with *Tyr*, among the oldest gods of the Teutonic tribes. “Tuesday” is the day when Germans honored *Tiu*.

Mythologies and Cosmologies: Myths are seldom coherent and logical, but fluid and irrational. Creation myths are found among the Nordic peoples. From their cultural landscape they speak of the first two creatures arising out of the mixture of glacial waters flowing from the land of ice, and the warm winds blowing from the land of fire. The first creature, the giant *Ymir*, fathered the race of giants; while the second creature, the cow named *Audhumila*, created the first god, *Buri*. *Buri*'s son fathered the gods *Odin*, *Vili* and *Ve*, who together destroyed *Ymir* and from his body fashioned the heavens and the earth. From two trees the gods created the first man and woman.

Beliefs of the afterlife varied. The world of the dead was an underworld in a hall known as “hel.” This was not a place of punishment, but an abode for all the dead, surrounded by a fence to keep out the living. For the heroic warriors killed in battle, a special heavenly place was reserved for them known as Valhalla. In this hall with 540 banqueting rooms, there were great feasts, continuing battles and the complete restoration to health on the following day.

The dead continued to interact with the living with power to affect the living. The dead tended to linger in this world at the place of burial, sometimes bringing harm and needing to be killed again. Germans considered grave

sites sacred places where they offered sacrifices to the dead. The *Germani* believed in the existence of the world of the dead as evidenced by archaeological diggings. Burial sites contained weapons, horses, ships and other tools which were needed in the afterlife. Some Germans practiced “ship burials” with the dead placed in a boat, sent out to sea and burned, suggesting belief in the world of the dead lying beneath the sea.

Warfare

Even as the more prominent Germanic gods were warriors, so were the Germanic males. The German’s whole life centered on his military status. When a young man received a shield and spear in the presence of the assembly of the chiefs, or by his father in the presence of his relatives, this proved that he had become a man. Before that, he was a mere member of his family. Afterwards, he became a member of the tribe.

Without doubt, a defining characteristic of Germanic society was their militarism. Status came on the battlefield as the chief and his warriors won battles. Success in battle was essential for the chief to retain the loyalty of his warriors. Germanic society was nothing if it was not militaristic.

Even in marriage warfare was front and center. The bridegroom gave dowry to the woman which reflected the martial society of the Germans. The woman received oxen, a horse, a shield and a javelin. The bride gave gifts to her bridegroom, not surprisingly, more weapons. This indicated that the two were bound together for warfare. When the men fought in battle, their wives implored them to fight on and not retreat. They revealed their breasts to remind the husbands of the terror of impending captivity. Women even joined the men in battle. Marriage was entered, not for personal bliss, but for communal participation in the enterprise of warfare.

As Tacitus said, “The Germans have no taste for peace.” Like brothers, they fought among themselves, Germanic tribe with Germanic tribe; and together, they fought the Romans. It was on the battlefield that the Romans first came in contact with the Germanic tribes. Tacitus observed that, the *Germani* “all have fierce blue eyes, reddish hair and large bodies, fit only for sudden exertion.”

In contrast to the Romans who fought with sword and shield in organized formations, and who had disciplined cavalry who rode horses skillfully, the Germans fought as foot soldiers, skillfully wielding a spear with a short and narrow head, easy to handle either for close or distant fighting. Each German warrior carried several spears and could hurl them at great distances. According to the Romans, the *Germani* lacked discipline in fighting, preferring freedom. They rushed forward into battle with more haste than caution, brandishing their weapons and throwing themselves on the Roman squadrons of horses with fury and the horrible grinding of their teeth.

One battle between the Germans and the Roman defenders of the Roman Empire left the Romans traumatized in utter defeat and humiliation. In 9 A.D. the Germans attacked three elite Roman legions who marched single file westward through the thickets and rough terrain of the Teutoberg Forest. The Germans ambushed them so viciously that they obliterated 20,000 men with their leader, Varus. Those Romans who were not killed outright were burned alive or nailed to trees. From that time onward the Romans never ventured north of the Rhine River, but left that territory to the Germans. These Germans are my blood ancestors.

Social Life

The Germanic tribes once inhabited the frigid lands of what we call Scandinavia today. When they migrated into northern Europe they found it warmer, but by Roman standards it was still cold. The German social life took place in the cold, forested regions of northern parts of Western Europe. In contrast to the warmer climate along the Mediterranean Sea where the Romans and Greeks lived, the *Germani* lived in the cold of northern Europe along the Rhine and in the freezing highlands. Tacitus described the German environment as “hideous and rude, under a rigorous climate, dismal to behold or to manure... Their lands... consist of gloomy forests or nasty marshes.” Certain areas were mountainous and windy.

Clothing: Their clothing was designed to protect them from the cold. During the first century they wore skins of spotted wild animals with the fur turned inwards to better protect them from the cold blasts of winter. Their “mantle” was fastened together with a thorn. As they interacted with the Romans, the Germans adapted Roman apparel and customs. The men wore long hair which they wound in a bun, called a “Swabian knot.” It was smeared with grease. Sometimes the men wore beards. Whereas the Romans used public baths, the Germans seldom washed because they lived in a cold climate.

Housing: During the first century of the Christian era, the Germans did not live in towns or cities. For many years they resisted urbanization, preferring the rural life of their fathers. They dwelled in houses made of timber roughly hewn and smeared with clay. Their houses had dirt floors, generally with one room divided into sections. Their houses were scattered apart from one another. They settled wherever they could find a spring of water and a field to settle on. Surrounding each dwelling place were fields for farming, forests, and meadows.

Economy: Originally, the *Germani* were semi-nomadic pastoralists who depended on their cattle for food. They owned large herds and flocks. They delighted in the size of their herds because their wealth was found in their animals, including cows, oxen, horses, pigs and sheep. Gradually, over the centuries, they became more agricultural. By the Middle Ages, the *Germani* practiced sedentary agriculture. In this later period they also raised geese and chickens. Not until the influence of the Romans did the Germans use coins. Traditionally, they bartered for the exchange of commodities.

Marriage and Family: Like most tribal societies worldwide, the extended family was closely knit and highly valued. Tacitus was impressed by their high moral standards in marriage. Monogamy was the standard and adultery exceedingly rare. Chastity was “well secured.” Harsh punishment ensued for infidelity. Germans married for the procreation of the Germanic race. Failure to procreate large families was considered an abominable sin.

Education: The father served as the undisputed head of the family and all members of the family were subject to his authority. Traditionally, the education of the children was handled within the family. The adults provided a practical education for their children to survive as adults. Boys learned how to hunt and use their weapons of warfare. The military was their primary role in life. Girls were taught how to cook, brew beer, and make their clothes. As the Roman influence increased, the girls learned how to spin, weave wool, and make candles and soap. Every member of the household participated in the economic activities required for living.

Social Discourse: The Germans were most hospitable. Tacitus expressed his opinion, that “no nation upon the earth was ever more liberal and abounding.” The *Germani* admitted every stranger that came to them. To refuse someone hospitality was deemed wicked and inhuman. This generosity extended to the slaughter and feasting of the whole stock until everything was consumed. Then both the stranger and the German entered another home where hospitality was granted to them. This was the opinion and understanding of Tacitus.

However, Tacitus takes a dimmer view of the German’s use of free time. Germans were notorious as drinkers, “drinking night and day without intermission.” In their drunkenness many fights ensued. Verbal arguments often led to physical injury and even death.

Apart from drinking, the *Germani* enjoyed dancing, flinging their naked bodies into their boisterous dance. They excelled in playing dice and gambling away possessions. They gambled until all their possessions were gone and then calmly entered into voluntary bondage if they lost the last throw of the dice. The Germans called this “honor,” keeping their word.

Social Structure

The social structure of the Germans was hierarchical. If the society was monarchical, the king reigned as the head of his people. Originally, before a man became king, his people gave their consent.

Kings: The role of the king was threefold: (1) To serve as judge during popular assemblies; (2) To serve as priest during sacrifices and other religious rites; (3) To lead the warriors in battle during warfare.

Free Men: Below the king were the “free men” who became the warriors. Authority of the Germanic society traditionally resided in the councils of “the free men.” Although many Germanic tribes were ruled by kings who possessed religious and social prestige, true power was in the hands of the assemblies of the “free men” who were the warriors.

Since the basic aim of the state was military, the only solid portion of society was the army. “What held the social hierarchy together was essentially the martial institution, the brotherhood of warriors, which bound together by oath the leaders and their groups of young warriors of known loyalty.”

Semi-Free Men: Below the “free men” were the “semi-free men” who were “probably the conquered peoples.”

Slaves: These men performed manual duties in agriculture and in the home they served as domestics.

Women: Women who were the wives of the “free men,” played a vital role, but they were not “free.”

Biblical Reflections

Instead of God creating man in His image, fallen mankind has fashioned their gods in their own likeness. According to Paul, mankind suppressed their knowledge of the true God and “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man...” (Rom. 1:23).

The *Germani* created gods in their own likeness. On the one hand, the Germans were violent and warlike, fierce and determined. Their gods were likewise warlike. On the other hand, the Germans recognized their own fragility and vulnerability and therefore relied on the gods for rain, harvest, healing and victory in battle.

The Romans looked down upon our ancestors as boorish barbarians, inferior to them. In many ways they were correct. The Romans had an amazingly advanced civilization of infrastructure, engineering technology, governance

and military might. But the fact is that all men are equal in their need of redemption from the “futile ways inherited from [their] forefathers.”

Despite the primitive state of Germanic culture when compared to the Romans, especially their technology, the Germans exhibited both human depravity and the common grace endowed to all men. Their hospitality was noteworthy; their fidelity in marriage admirable; their honesty and commitment to their word remarkable. But their propensity to violence, revenge, drunkenness, gambling and debauchery were reprehensible and reflected their fallen, sinful nature. They were my blood ancestors.

Though the Germanic peoples and their cultures are uniquely German, in so many instances the values and cultural life ways of my barbarian ancestors remind me of the traditional Africans. The only difference is that Christianity was embraced by my ancestors over a thousand years ago, contrasted to the evangelization of Africa a century ago.

How then were these Germanic barbarians converted? The centuries’ long process was strange by comparison to the way Africa has been evangelized in the past century.

CHRISTIANIZATION OF GERMANIC BARBARIANS

My blood ancestors (the *Alemanni* and *Franks* – the Germanic Barbarians) were converted to Christianity over many centuries through various means. I know none of those earlier ancestors by name nor do I know whether any of them really knew the Lord. Only God knows, but we do know something of the way my blood ancestors were brought into the fold of Christianity.

Christianization through Acculturation

By the first century of the Christian era, the right (or eastern) side of the Rhine had been abandoned by the Romans to the control of the *Germani* whom they could not subdue. The left (or western) side of the Rhine belonged to the sphere of the Romans. The Germanic frontier border was lined by the Romans with frontier forts.

Mutual antagonism persisted between the Romans and the Germans who heckled and attacked their protagonists. In AD 268 the Germans invaded Roman territory, slaughtering Christians and capturing, setting on fire and destroying a sacred shrine in Clermont, France, before the Romans repelled them. In AD 366 they crossed the frozen Rhine again in larger numbers and invaded Gaul (modern day France). The *Alemanni* (a confederation of tribes) settled among the Romans and over time adopted Roman culture. Finally, in AD 406 the *Alemanni* crossed the Rhine for the last time with an enormous invasion, utterly conquering the Roman territory. They overran Gaul and parts of Italy and Spain. From the fifth century they settled in Alsace and expanded into the Swiss Plateau and parts of what are now Bavaria and Austria, reaching the valleys of the Alps by the eighth century. With savagery the *Alemanni* laid waste the great cities of Mainz and Worms, massacring thousands and destroying churches, and Roman civilization. With this invasion the Dark Ages began.

But the process of Christianizing the Germans had begun through acculturation, as they lived among the Romans and picked up elements of Roman culture. Germans modified their way of life, learning from the Romans such things as clothing, housing, agriculture, and even the Christian religion. They embraced everything Roman. Thus Christianity became nominally accepted as part of the Roman civilization over the period of many years.

Christianization through Royal Decree

The *Franks*, another Germanic confederation of tribes, had many contacts with the Romans over the years. Numerous *Franks* served in the military. Others rose to high positions within the Empire. These *Franks* were Romanized and consequently Christianized in the early part of the fifth century. *Franks* became the dominant Germanic group which eventually subdued the *Alemanni* and absorbed them into the Frankish kingdom. Unlike other Germanic groups, like the *Vandals* and *Goths*, the *Franks* settled permanently on the land as cultivators and established an enduring kingdom.

The pagan Frankish king, Clovis (c. 466-511), the most famous of the Merovingian kings, showed himself more humane to the clergy and churches. He actually married a Catholic Christian. The story (or legend) relates that during a desperate battle with the *Alemanni*, Clovis vowed that if God gave him victory, he would become a Christian. Upon making the vow, the *Alemanni* suddenly turned their backs and fled. On December 25 in AD 496, Clovis, King of the Franks, was baptized along with three thousand soldiers at Rheims. His Christian baptism was “one of the turning points of Christian history.” All other Germans who converted to Christianity had become Arian Christians. This alienated them from the Romans who considered Arians heretics.

But Clovis accepted the Catholic faith and embraced the Nicene Creed. This changed everything. The tens of thousands under the rule of Clovis, dutifully followed the dictates of their king. Clovis and his subjects worshipped in the Catholic Church, mingled among the Romans, socialized and intermarried with them. Instead of being an alienated, heretical minority, their conversion to Catholic Christianity created sympathy and cooperation with the Catholic Christians. Most Germans had been Christianized, but not born of the Spirit, we may assume. They became “Christians” by being baptized in a Christian ritual, with the priest using Latin, a language which the Germans did not understand. Although the Franks adopted the outward form of Christianity, they were nominal for the most part.

After his conversion, Clovis continued his tradition of murderous warfare. The Bishops condoned his murders, bloodshed and treachery because they said he was in the service of God. Clovis became irritated that Arian Chrostoams held part of Gaul, so he went forth with the sword to bring the *Burgundians* and *Visigoths* under his sway. He compelled them by the sword to adopt the Catholic faith.

Conditions began to deteriorate over the following century. The Franks had abandoned their old culture with its traditional restraints, but had not acquired the moral ethic of the Christian faith. Cruelty and civil wars plagued the Frankish Kingdom. Murders, rape and adultery occurred in high places. One bishop would often become so befuddled by drink that four men could hardly take him away from dinner. Bishops were unchaste, gluttonous and drunkards. They needed more than superficial Christianity; they needed the transforming gospel of saving faith.

Christianization of the *Alemanni* by Irish Monks

Despite the conversion of Clovis who reigned over them, the *Alemanni* engaged in bloodshed, robbery, treachery, bitter feuds, disorder, lawlessness, and licentiousness. Even in the sixth century they were busy with pagan ritual, witchcraft, and the worship of nature, and the worship of spirits which haunted the trees and lakes. They needed the preaching of the gospel.

Columbanus (c. 543-615), born in Ireland, entered a monastery to escape his sensuous life. He embraced the rigorous discipline of Celtic monasticism. At the age of forty he heard the incessant call of God to preach the gospel in foreign lands. With twelve monks he sailed across the English Channel and began preaching in Burgundy in eastern part of Gaul (today’s France).

Their method of evangelization was through the monastery. Columbanus received permission from the King of Burgundy to establish “a house of prayer” in the solitude of the Vosges Mountains, the area where my ancestors, the Vautrins (Woodrings), lived later in the sixteenth century. Columbanus found a desolate, wild place among high cliffs which could only be reached by a slow walk along difficult, winding trails.

Columbanus and his twelve monks made a deep impression on the residents with their modesty, patience and humility. They lived the simplest of lives, often subsisting on nothing more than forest herbs, berries and tree bark. Loving solitude, Columbanus frequently withdrew with one companion to a cave seven miles deep in the forest.

So great was their effect on the local population that he established numerous monasteries with *Burgundian* monks. Columbanus organized a perpetual service of praise with choir succeeding choir, night and day, to sing praises to God. In these houses of prayer he put into practice what he had learned in his home country of Ireland. These practices he imposed on the *Burgundian* monks. This strict Celtic monastic tradition involved an almost unending routine of prayer, fasting and manual labor. He demanded immediate and unquestioning obedience. Silence was required of all monks apart from necessary communication. The monks lived on scanty provision of food of vegetables, herbs and grain, served once daily.

Columbanus was fearless and bold. He challenged royalty and clashed with the Roman hierarchy, insisting on Celtic discipline. When the Bishops of the Catholic Church became unhappy with him, they expelled Columbanus who fled with Gall, his close companion. They traveled together up the Rhine River to Lake Zurich where they found “savage” Germans who practiced rituals of magic and superstition. I can trace my ancestors, the Hollingers, to the slopes of Lake Zurich where they lived for centuries. Gall became impetuous and spoiled his opportunity of Christian witness by setting fire to one of the heathen shrines and throwing a heathen sacrifice into the lake. The furious Germans seized him and beat him.

Columbanus and Gall quickly fled together and found their way to Lake Constance. A priest showed them a solitary place, surrounded by high mountains and buried deep in the wilds where they set up a chapel and huts for dwelling. Though Christianity had penetrated the area years before, the residents had returned to their pagan beliefs and practices. Columbanus and Gall had arranged to meet in the pagan temple to celebrate their first Mass and bless the temple as a Christian Church. A large crowd of pagans gathered out of curiosity. Since Gall knew German, he began preaching. As he increased in crescendo and passion, he seized the three heathen images and trashed them. As the crowd became agitated, Columbanus began chanting the Liturgy in Latin and processing and singing the Psalms

for the consecration ceremony. Everyone was struck silent in awe at this new experience so that their passions cooled down.

When Gall went fishing one night on the Lake, a sudden storm broke out with the rolling of thunder. He heard the terrifying voice of a demon of the mountains crying to the demon of the lake, "Come up to help me to throw out these strangers who have driven me from my temple and destroyed my images and turned away my people from following me."

Filled with fear, Gall crossed himself and fled back to the Abby where the abbot gathered everyone to the church for prayer. As the torches flickered and the people chanted the psalms, they heard the howling of the devils in the wind and rain. In terror they fell on the floor and implored God for protection.

Further problems arose with the pagan Germans surrounding them in the forest, angry for driving out the old religion. Because of the opposition which arose in the community, Columbanus decided to leave by crossing the Alps and traveling to Italy. However, Gall desired to remain behind.

Gall (c. 550-646) remained in Swabia, named after the *Suevi*, a German tribe which was part of the *Alemanni* alliance. This area included German-speaking Switzerland and Alsace from where the *Gaiimans* (Gehmans) and other paternal branches of my ancestral tree originate. A priest showed him a solitary place surrounded by mountains and valleys and full of wild beasts, bears and wolves. Several monks gathered around Gall and helped establish a monastery where they lived as hermits with an austere life. From this monastery they went out to preach and convert, walking along the Rhine Valley and up the mountains. They engaged in a healing ministry as well.

One of the first things Gall did when arriving in north-eastern Switzerland was to destroy the local pagan sanctuary. This was a power encounter, a trial by ordeal, in which the pagan gods were challenged by the Living God who made the heavens and the earth. Germans were convinced that the destruction of a holy place would lead to immediate reprisals by their gods. When Gall and the monks remained unharmed, this became an impressive demonstration of the power of the Christian God and led to their conversion.

Though Gall was invited to an abbey in Burgundy, he preferred the solitude of living in the wilds. He passed away at the age of ninety years after serving forty-five years as a monk in eastern France and German-speaking Switzerland. Today one of the Cantons of Switzerland is known as the "Canton of St. Gall." In the city of St. Gallen is the Abbey of St. Gall. Both Columbanus and Gall are known today as the Apostles of the *Alemanni*. They have both been canonized.

Christianization of the Franks by an English Monk

Wynfrith (Wynfrid), later known as Boniface, was born in Crediton in Devon, England, around AD 672. As a boy he expressed a desire to enter a monastery. As a youth he learned his theology at several Benedictine monasteries in England. At the age of thirty he was ordained as a priest. Throughout England Boniface was recognized as a scholar, monk and priest with high moral standards. But his heart was in missionary work among the Germans on the Continent.

Eventually, Pope Gregory II commissioned him to go to the German frontiers as a missionary. Pope Gregory bestowed on him the name "Boniface," meaning "fortunate" or "auspicious" in Latin. After several years of ministry, the Pope consecrated Boniface as "the bishop for the German frontier without a fixed see."

When Boniface traveled to Germany, he found a Christianity that was inextricably mingled with pagan practices. Germany was in great darkness of syncretism. Christians practiced pagan rites for their dead ancestors. They carried charms and amulets and used augury, and practiced magic spells. Pockets of pure paganism remained while nominal Christianity abounded. The clergy were poorly trained and did not practice celibacy.

Boniface is remembered for his power encounter in AD 723. The Germans worshipped *Thor*, the god of thunder. Their place of worship was under a giant oak tree. With a large number of pagans watching, Boniface began felling the giant oak tree devoted to *Thor* in order to demonstrate the superior power of the Christian God. The Germans believed that anyone who would destroy the tree would be slain by *Thor*. The pagans stood by, cursing and hurling abuse. But Boniface confronted the evil powers of paganism with a frontal attack by cutting the tree down. Before Boniface had completed the task, a powerful gust of wind finished the felling.

When *Thor* did not respond by hurling a lightning bolt at him, the assembled local people agreed to be baptized. Boniface built a little chapel to St. Peter out of the wood from *Thor*'s oak tree. Today a great cathedral stands on that spot in Fritzlar, Germany. Boniface continued his ministry into his late 70s, strengthening the churches in Hesse, Thuringia and Bavaria.

Christianity Strengthened under Charlemagne

The process of Christianizing the *Franks* and *Alemanni* took many centuries. An important person responsible for the deepening of the process of Christianization was Charles the Great, known as Charlemagne, the greatest king of the Carolingian dynasty. When the Pope crowned Charlemagne Emperor of “the Holy Roman Empire” on Christmas day in AD 800, the Roman Empire was resurrected and placed into the hand of a German leader who preserved whatever remained of the Roman culture, mostly within the walls of the monasteries. What an irony that the Germanic barbarians, who had destroyed Rome, should now preserve the remains of Roman culture.

The Carolingian dynasty of Germanic rulers did much to protect “Christian Rome.” Charles Martel became famous when he decisively defeated the Muslims who had overrun Spain in the battle of Tours in AD 732. By doing so, he saved Western Europe for Christianity. He also supported the work of Boniface in his missionary work beyond the Rhine. Pepin the Great, the son of Charles Martel, protected the Pope in Rome from the ravages of the Arian *Lombards*. When the *Lombards* threatened the city of Rome, the Pope appealed to Pepin the Great for protection. In return for his help, Pepin the Great was crowned King of the Franks by the Pope.

Charlemagne, the son of Pepin the Great, proved friendly and supportive of the Catholic Church, but he believed the Church could not dispute a decision made by the Emperor. The premise for this was his belief that the Church and State are like soul and body, each with its own respective spheres of responsibility. Charlemagne maintained, however, that the bishops were subordinate to the Emperor.

He established and endowed the parish system. The Parish clergy not only preached from the pulpit, but taught every child the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Later Charlemagne directed the clergy to instruct the Christians on the articles of faith, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Seven Virtues and the Seven Sacraments. Thus Charlemagne successfully established the Holy Roman Empire as a Christian empire. But it was made Christian by the involuntary baptism of every infant born in The Holy Roman Empire. The citizens did not become Christian voluntarily through conversion. Everyone was a “Christian” by virtue of being born in the Holy Roman Empire.

MEDIEVAL LIFE OF MY GERMAN ANCESTORS

In memorizing Scripture I came across Psalm 36:7-9 (NIV): “*How priceless is your unfailing love! Both HIGH and LOW among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*”

I find this very instructive and encouraging. “Both high and low” in society find the same refuge and sustenance from their God. The ground at the cross is level. Both the affluent and the impoverished, the aristocrats and the proletariats find their sustaining grace with God who is “the fountain of life.”

My ancestral tree contains those who are reckoned by society to be both “high” and “low.” On my mother’s side are the Woodrings (the *Vautrin* family from Lorraine, France). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they hobnobbed with the aristocrats. Several Vautrins were ennobled by the Dukes of Lorraine. Several generations of the Vautrins served as a *Saarwerdischer* of Kirrberg in Alsace. This office made them in effect the Mayor, Judge, Town Manager, Financial Chief, Records officer and Coroner. This position required him to know two or three languages. Successive generations of the Vautrins were owners of water powered grist mills. These men were definitely of the upper class.

My maternal great grandmother was a Kemmerer. Her family traces their ancestry back to the Roman Empire. Professor Edwin W. Kemmerer states that “Kemmerer” comes from a Greek word, *καμαρα*, meaning “vault” or “vaulted chamber.” The German word, *kammer* means a “room” or a “chamber.” *Kammer Herr* denotes “keeper of the chamber” or “the treasurer.” So the occupation of the “keeper of the chamber” (or treasurer) became the name of the family. From early American records written in German the original spelling of the name was “Kaemmerer,” later anglicized to Kemmerer. Lesser servants of the crown included a *Kammer Herr* who served as a Chamberlain, an officer who managed the household of a member of royalty. The Coat of Arms for the Kemmerer family points to a possible Roman origin of a Kemmerer who came with Julius Caesar to the Rhine Valley.

The first known Kemmerer by name was Knight (Count) Johann von Kemmerer who fought in the First Crusade which was called by Pope Urban II in 1095. “The Muslims had conquered Jerusalem,” the Pope said. He called for Christians to reconquer Jerusalem through a Crusade, meaning, “a war of the cross.” The underlying motive was the earning of their salvation through the reconquering of Jerusalem from the infidel Muslims. Tragically, many knights during the first Crusade died of hunger and thirst.

Other branches of the *Vautrin* family were also of the aristocratic status. Sabina Handwerk, my great-great-grandmother, descended from Count Handwerck, a nobleman. He was banished from his forecastle in Greifenstein

during the Peasants' War of AD 1525 and fled to Switzerland where he was compelled to surrender his title of nobility.

In contrast to the high of society on my mother's side, were the lowly peasants of my father's side. The *Göuman* (Gehman) family who resided in Grossehöchstetten in the Canton of Berne, Switzerland, for two-hundred years, were common tillers of the land. For the most part those who married into the *Göuman* family were likewise peasants.

With this knowledge I have found it fascinating to learn of the lifestyle of my ancestors during the medieval period, both the high and low of society. Medieval society was deeply structured with fixed class distinctions.

Feudalism

Feudalism evolved as a system of government during the medieval times in order to replace the monarchical rule of the Roman Emperor after the collapse of the Roman Empire. It was a form of government in which the large landowners exercised the absolute rights, formerly wielded by the monarch, over the vassals under him. These rights included the right to raise an army to defend his fiefdom from external threats; the right to establish laws and hold court to judge cases of law breaking; the right to organize the economy of the landed estate, and to collect taxes.

Feudalism involved a unique system of land tenure. The landowner granted to his vassals, by contractual agreement, a piece of land known as a *fief* or a *benefice*. These free men held their *fiefs* with an agreement to provide the lord certain benefits. In return the lord granted the vassal specified benefits.

Feudalism included a whole lifestyle of the aristocracy. The lords and barons, the knights and the ladies all lived their lives in relative leisure and luxury through the labor of the serfs.

Medieval society consisted of three basic classes, known as "estates." The first estate was the clergy, the second estate was the nobility, and the third estate was the serfs. During the medieval period, the Roman Catholic Church received from wealthy Christians large estates of land which were administered by the prelates (high ranking clergy). Thus the prelates acted in much the same fashion as the nobles, overseeing their *fiefs* and benefiting from the labor of the serfs.

The masses of Germans labored as *serfs* on the *fiefs* of their landed lords. Their slave labor of cultivating the land generated the wealth for the nobility and prelates to enjoy leisure. A *serf* was a peasant who was attached to his lord's property by heredity. Legally, a *serf* was the lord's property, little better than his cattle. The *serf* could be sold like a slave. The lord could prevent a *serf* from doing what he wanted. He was forbidden to leave the manor or to move to a town. He could not marry without the lord's permission. Forced marriages of serfs were common.

Lifestyle of the Classes

Lifestyle of the nobility: When traveling throughout Europe today, visitors are impressed with the medieval castles that are scattered over hill and dale. Everything is relative in life. The lords and ladies in those castles did live luxuriously by medieval standards. But by today's standards, the lifestyle of the average middle class American is far superior to that of the lords and ladies nestled in those castles.

Without central heating, the castles were cold and drafty. The earlier wooden castles risked fire. The later stone castles were dank and damp with people choking in smoke from fire intended to protect them from the cold. Until the thirteenth century, no castle had more than two rooms.

The castle was not only the feudal lord's dwelling, but also his official office where the business of his *fief* took place. In the main hall the feudal lord welcomed visitors, held court with his vassals and audited the accounts of the tax collectors. In that same hall the family ate their meals on a board resting on trestles which at night served as beds for their servants and guests. Within the private chamber the lord and his family slept. The bed was high above the floor with curtains hung to prevent draft. When the lord of the castle wanted a private conversation with his guest, they sat on the bed to talk.

The lord was privileged to eat all the food he wanted, but the variety was limited. Meat was commonly obtained from the game killed during a hunt. For recreation and pleasure the nobles and knights hunted wild animals, from the tiny rabbits to the ferocious wild boar. Every nobleman was a tireless hunter. During daylight hours hunting preoccupied him. If he visited a neighboring feudal lord, he expected to go hunting. If he were home, he always went hunting unless pressed with some urgent business. Medieval kings loved hunting. Hunting was more than a sport; it was an art with learned skills of killing and cutting up the animal.

Kings, nobles and aristocracy also ate domesticated meat, including pork – fresh, smoked or salted; bacon and sausages were prepared as well. Beef and mutton, chicken and geese were common. The usual vegetables included cabbages, turnips, carrots, onions, beans, and peas. Cooking was plain because spices and condiments were not plentiful in Western Europe during the early medieval age. After the Crusades, as trade with the East picked up, spices were imported. Pepper, cumin, cloves, cinnamon and other spices lavishly seasoned the food. Plenty of bread

was served. Apples and pears were plentiful. Plums and cherries were eaten on occasion. Almost all milk was turned into cheese or butter. Coffee and tea were unknown, so the usual beverage was ale or wine which finished off the meal. Fruit juices and honey were the only means of sweetening drinks.

Cooking facilities consisted of pots resting over charcoal fire or set in the fireplace. Furniture was limited. Planks of wood resting on trestles served as tables. Planks of wood and stools served as seats, with only a few chairs. Chests along the walls served as storage for clothing and bedding. Floors were bare until rugs and tapestries were introduced from the Crusades. The courtyard of every castle had a well.

Woolen clothing was worn both summer and winter because the interior of the castles was drafty, damp and cold, even in the summer. Undergarments were introduced with the Crusades when silk and cotton were imported. Night garments were unknown.

Lifestyle of peasants: The landed lords owned vast estates known as manors which were self sufficient. Wood needed to be cut for heating and cooking; a carpenter was needed to build and repair furniture and buildings; a blacksmith to forge metal objects such as horseshoes; a wheelwright to build and repair wheels. Cowherds, swineherds, shepherds, ale tasters and plowmen were all needed. The lord had his own officials to supervise the manor, including a supervisor, a steward and a bailiff (legal officer).

Most of the peasants, however, spent their days working on the farms for the benefit of their landed lords and masters. They raised wheat, barley, rye, oats and other grains, as well as livestock, including chickens, cows, sheep and pigs. These German peasant farmers were the most important figures in the economic life of society. The feudal lifestyle of the nobility depended on the sweat of their serfs. Because of the highly stratified society in feudalism, the agricultural laborers lived a segregated life away from the landed gentry.

At first the practice of farming was “slash and burn.” They cleared one area of the forest and prepared it for cultivation. When the ground was depleted, they moved on to another part of the forest to slash and burn. Later the land for cultivation was divided into two parts, planting half of the land one year and leaving the other fallow. The fields were not fenced. The plowing, sowing and harvesting were done by the peasants cooperatively. Plows were primitive, consisting of a forked tree trunk with an angle that was sharpened, sometimes strengthened with a sharp iron shoe at the end. They were simply “scratch plows” that merely broke the surface of the soil without turning over the sod. Since the soil was deep, rich and hard to plow, and since the oxen were thin and light, they used up to ten oxen in a team to plow. Each peasant was given some thirty acres of land to cultivate, divided into strips designed for plowing.

The peasants seldom ate in excess of their needs. Due to poor technology and the poor yield of their crops, due to their gaunt animals and the unceasing demand of their lords, the peasants barely survived. Cows gave little milk. Winters were harsh and only the healthiest of animals would survive. They were unable to provide sufficient hay for their animals during the winter months. Therefore, the old pigs, sheep and oxen were slaughtered in the fall. The meat was salted or smoked for preservation. When hay gave out in the spring, the animals were fed on straw or tree cuttings from branches. As a result the cattle were so weak from starvation that they could barely walk to the pasture.

During the fourteenth century conditions grew harsh. Within a period of ten years the temperature dropped by four degrees. For five years drenching rains poured down on Europe, causing once fertile farmland to become water logged. This destroyed crops and led to starvation of 1,500,000 people. Crime increased as desperate people stole from any storehouse of food. With bodies weak from malnutrition, people were more vulnerable to disease. When the Bubonic Plague struck in AD 1347, Europe was devastated. By the end of the plague, 25,000,000 people had died, one-third of the population. Those who survived continued to suffer from famine. People began to suspect witchcraft for their troubles and accused neighbors. Even the Pope blamed the destructive cold on witches. Historians estimate that between 1400 and 1700 some fifty-thousand were accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake.

Warfare

In the absence of a strong central authority from Rome, the landed gentry raised their own armies to enforce law and maintain justice. The major purpose of feudalism was to grant authority to the great lords of fiefdoms to right the wrongs and ensure justice with warfare. From the young men in his own fiefdom, the lord raised armies to defend themselves from attack and take revenge on others. The warrior of the middle ages was the knight.

Traditional customs of the Germanic peoples survived into the medieval period. The *Germani* were traditionally warriors first and foremost. They admired the virtues of the warrior which included: courage in battle, sound judgment, faithfulness to one’s word, and loyalty. The medieval customs of knighthood can be traced back to the ancient German traditions of a young warrior bearing his arms.

Germans were concerned about defending their rights and taking revenge for any perceived injustice. Feuds and revenge for alleged injustices were common. Feudalism granted the right to the lord of the manor to wage war in defense of his rights. Medieval wars were seldom unprovoked, but usually engendered by a legal claim or legal grievance. Warfare during the medieval period was endemic. War was a curse that gripped the peoples of Germanic Europe.

The rigorous training to become a knight reflected their Germanic traditions. The whole purpose of the feudal class of men was to fight. So a man's life was devoted to warfare preparations. Lest his mother be indulgent towards her offspring, all boys were sent off at the age of seven or eight to live in another feudal household. They were then trained to care for the weapons and war horses and to practice handling them. Knights in training lived hard, rough lives, preparing them for a career as warriors.

When the young men attained the age of maturity, around the age of twenty-one, they were "dubbed" as knights in a solemn ceremony. Kneeling before an experienced knight, they received a blow by the hand or the flat side of the sword. Once a man received his arms and "dubbing," he was a fully fledged knight. This marked his coming of age.

Christian Influence

Though we find many elements of medieval Christianity falling short of biblical standards, it is the only era in history when Christian faith held sway over a large society, when the popular culture was "Christian." Although the peoples of Europe during medieval times were not "Christian" in their moral conduct, Europe was the home of "Christendom."

Feudal aristocracy was intensely devout. They held to the teachings of the Christian Church absolutely. Though they sinned with vigor and enthusiasm, they also repented and did penance with diligence and zeal. Every fiefdom had a monastery and every feudal residence had a personal chapel. The peoples built cathedrals and went on crusades.

The Catholic Church was active in promoting Christian standards in medieval society. They developed a code of chivalry which every knight was obligated to keep. Before anyone became a knight he was required to confess his sins, receive his Savior in the Lord's Supper. The night before his dubbing he went to church and prayed all night. According to the code of chivalry, knights should fight with bravery and always keep their word. They never should attack their enemy if he was without his armor or unprepared for battle. Generosity was greatly admired among the Germans and became a virtue of all knights.

Under the Christian Church the knights were servant-warriors who served God and the Church by defending the people from their enemies. They engaged in Crusades to restore the Holy Land from the Muslims. The ideal knight was a perfect, gentle warrior. He feared God and maintained the Christian religion. He refrained from giving offence and lived for honor and glory, not for monetary reward. He shunned unfairness, meanness and deceit. He always spoke the truth. He respected and honored all women.

However, the ideal of the knight did not always prevail in reality. During the 1400s knights were accused of robbing churches and setting them on fire and imprisoning priests. They were accused of adultery and other shameful offenses. Nevertheless, the ideal knight of the medieval age was shaped by Christian ideals of the Church.

MY GEHMAN ANCESTRY IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY SWITZERLAND

I have traced my blood ancestry from their pagan roots to their Christianized state under the Holy Roman Empire. With broad strokes I have painted their religious beliefs and cultural heritage.

The Gehmans (*Goüman*) in Switzerland

As we move into the 16th century I am able to trace my ancestry to *Martin Göuman*, born approximately in 1555. He lived in the vigorous climate of the alpine mountains of Switzerland and married *Anni Berger*. He became the father of *Nicholas Göuman* who was born in Grosshöchstetten in the Canton of Berne. *Martin Göuman* is my own forefather thirteen generations removed; he is also the forefather of Father William Gehman, founder of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church (now the Bible Fellowship Church), eight generations before him.

Though we know none of the details of their lives, we may assume that they were members of the State Church which at that time was the Reformed Church, founded by Ulrich Zwingli. We may also assume that prior to the Zwinglian Reformation they were members of the Roman Catholic Church. During those years *everyone* was a baptized member of the established church without exception.

The geographical location of the *Göumans* in the Canton of Berne, Switzerland, leads me to conclude that they descended from the *Alemanni* subgroup of the Germanic tribes. We know for certain that the *Göuman* family lived for two-hundred years in Grosshöchstetten, fifteen miles southeast of the city of Berne. They only left their native

land in the eighteenth century because of religious persecution. We may therefore assume the *Göumans* lived in the Canton of Berne for several centuries.

They shared in the history and character of the Swiss peoples living in the alpine valleys and mountains of western Switzerland. They were strong, tough, self-reliant, resilient people who cherished their independence. Their natural habitat bred into them these characteristics. Separated by natural barriers that pitted one area against another, the Swiss never did unite into a homogenous nation. Out of self-interest for self defense they did band together in a confederation of city and rural states, divided between French, German, and Italian speaking Swiss. The *Göumans* lived in the German speaking area of Berne.

The Alpine ranges in the south, the Jura Mountains in the west, and major lakes, together provide two-thirds of the country's natural borders. Between the Alps and the Jura lies the hilly Middleland which constitutes one-fourth of Switzerland. The *Göumans* lived in this agricultural heartland of Switzerland, a rolling hill country with intensive agriculture bordered by rugged woodland. From the heights of Oberthal, one of the villages where the *Göumans* were granted hometown citizenship rights, they had a spectacular view of the 13,000 foot-high peaks of the Berner Oberland.

Religious Turmoil

Though we cannot be sure of details, we believe that the *Göumans* had been members of the Roman Catholic Church, the established Church of the Holy Roman Empire. Every citizen was baptized as an infant in the Church. In their church they recited the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and adhered to the Nicene Creed. They believed that grace was mediated to them through the seven sacraments, especially the Mass. They believed that when the priest consecrated the bread and wine, the elements were transformed literally into the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ in a repeated sacrifice. Their salvation depended on both the grace of God imparted through the sacraments, and also through their good deeds. They prayed to Mary and the saints, and submitted to the infallible authority of the Pope. They contributed money for indulgences for remission of punishment in purgatory. Veneration of the relics of saints contributed to their own salvation.

While they were aware of the rites and rituals, the traditions and practices of the church, they did not know the Scriptures. No one taught them the Bible because the priests did not know the Scriptures. The worship in church was conducted in Latin, a language which the Germans did not understand. The priests were trained to conduct the liturgy of the Mass in Latin. They learned to read the Latin liturgy and familiar portions of the Gospels, but they could not read the rest of Scripture with any understanding. Most clergy could neither read nor write. Therefore, their priests had no knowledge of the Old Testament and only a limited acquaintance with the New Testament. For Germans, Latin was a foreign language, but their only Bible was the Latin Vulgate.

No doubt the *Göumans* were aware of the corruption within the established church. While the peasants toiled in labor on their farms, the prelates enjoyed the luxury of their fiefs. This material wealth engendered vices of worldliness and immorality. Prelates paid enormous sums to attain certain church offices. Even in monasteries, drunkenness and debauchery were not uncommon. Monks chose the most jovial among them to be their abbot or prior, someone who was fond of women and drink so that they might be permitted to indulge in similar dissipation. No one in the Holy Roman Empire became a Christian by choice. They were automatically baptized as infants into the Christian Church. Baptism made them citizens of the Empire and members of the Church. Since they were not born again by the Spirit of God, and since they received no biblical teaching, their lives were not transformed.

Religious ferment began to spread with discontent over corruption followed by renewal efforts. Four hundred miles away from Berne, Switzerland, Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s in Germany. Sixty miles away in the city of Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli became the founder of the Reformed tradition in the Protestant churches. Zwingli (1484-1531) studied in the University of Basel, the foremost center for humanism in Europe because of the presence of Erasmus. The emphasis of Erasmus was reform of the morality of the church, not a reform of doctrine. In 1516 Zwingli was ordained and on January 1, 1519, Zwingli became "the people's priest" in the Grossmünster, the largest church in Zurich.

The First Anabaptists

Ulrich Zwingli began preaching through the Gospel of Matthew, ignoring the assigned Scripture readings of the conventional lectionary. Two years later Zwingli began to disciple a group of ten men. Every day except Sundays and Fridays they met in the Great Minster at 7:00 A.M. to study the biblical languages in order to read the Scriptures in the original languages, even as Zwingli learned from Erasmus. These early disciples became the first Anabaptists, known in Switzerland as "the Swiss Brethren."

Following the emphases of Erasmus, Zwingli stressed the importance of moral and ethical regeneration with a de-emphasis on the sacraments. Reformation was primarily about the life and morals of the church, rather than

doctrine. The relevance of Jesus Christ to the Christian was primarily as a moral example with the Christian's goal of imitating Jesus. The primary purpose of religion was to inculcate a set of inner attitudes, such as humility and willing obedience to God.

By 1522 Zwingli began to preach against the Roman Catholic traditions of indulgences, penance, pilgrimages, the cult of the saints and of Mary, clerical celibacy and monastic asceticism. He called for a worship that was derived from Scripture and not tradition. Zwingli emphasized preaching more than Luther did. The Reformed liturgy of Zwingli became simplified. Images and organs were removed. Singing during worship was taken only from the Psalms and sung *a capella*. Zwingli thus preached a radical reformation that challenged virtually every aspect of traditional Roman Catholic tradition, basing all his beliefs on the Scripture.

"Scripture alone" became the most basic tenet of Zwingli. He agreed with Luther that it was the local church alone, gathered around the Scriptures, that had the right to interpret Scripture. The meaning of Scripture was sufficiently clear for people to understand.

This led to more radical challenges to universal tradition in Christendom. Tithing was compulsory in the Holy Roman Empire. The State took the tithe from everyone and distributed this to the Church. Since Scripture provided no support for this tradition, Zwingli preached that Christians were not under moral obligation to pay tithe. During Lent, when by tradition all Christians abstained from the eating of meat, Zwingli with his disciples studied the Scriptures on this subject. When they concluded that Christians were not bound by this tradition, several of these disciples broke the Lenten Fast and ate sausages. Zwingli himself did not eat the sausages, but approved of the others eating them.

Zwingli broke with the most fundamental beliefs of the Church in the realm of the sacraments. Whereas, the Roman Catholics taught transubstantiation (that the bread and wine became the literal body and blood of Christ), and the Lutherans taught consubstantiation (that the body and blood of Christ are comingled with the elements of the bread and wine to become the "real presence" of Christ), and John Calvin later taught the "spiritual presence" of Christ in the sacraments (that the believer by faith partakes of Christ spiritually when taking communion), Zwingli concluded that the Lord's Table is merely a memorial, a time of remembering the death of Christ for our sins.

Even in baptism Zwingli toyed with a radical break from Christian tradition of thirteen hundred years. Roman Catholics baptized infants in order to wash away original sin. The Protestant Reformers could not accept this, for they believed that salvation and the forgiveness of sins is through faith. An infant cannot believe. Yet neither Luther nor Calvin repudiated infant baptism. They struggled to figure out some theological explanation to justify the continued baptism of infants.

Initially, Zwingli held to a view of baptism very similar to the Anabaptists. Even Reformed theologians admit that Zwingli held to believers' baptism initially. On June 15, 1523, Zwingli wrote to a friend that the bread and wine in the Eucharist are what the water is in baptism. "It would be in vain," Zwingli argued, "to plunge a man a thousand times in water, if he does not believe." Zwingli declared that children should not be baptized until they were instructed in the faith. He confessed that those who baptize infants cannot quote any clear word of Scripture ordering them to baptize infants.

These early disciples of Zwingli shared in his vision. As they later said, "Zwingli led us into this." Later, they complained, he backed away from his own vision of the church out of fear of the magistrates. Zwingli, like Luther and Calvin, believed in the Constantinian model of the Church – a Church established by government authorities. Even before Constantine, governments assumed that political unity could not prevail within the royal realm without one unified religion in which all citizens held membership. These Magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin) sought to reform the Christian Church with the approval and support of the magistrates.

Zwingli backed away from a baptistic view of baptism because the magistrates, on whom he depended for support of the reformation, opposed believers' baptism. In order to have a strong, unified rule, everyone born into their realm became citizens. Certification of their citizenship was infant baptism into the one unified church.

Although the Town Council had approved the direction of Zwingli's Reformation at the first Disputation in January 1523, nothing changed afterwards. Zwingli's disciples became restless. This was followed by the Second Disputation in October of 1523 when the Town Council convened to consider three major questions that arose from Zwingli's attempt at reformation: tithes, images and the Mass. Nineteen-hundred citizens attended, including theologians, magistrates and priests. After the debate the Council rejected the use of images in the churches and the Mass as a sacrifice. But nothing was agreed upon to replace the Mass.

Grebel, one of Zwingli's disciples, arose to press for a decision on a replacement of the Mass. Zwingli agreed that "everything not instituted by Christ" was an abuse. He did not differ essentially from these men, but he left the decision to the Council as to the timing of carrying out of the proposed reforms. Simon Stumpf argued, "Master

Ulrich! You do not have the power to reserve judgment to my lords...The Spirit of God decides.” Ulrich replied, “My lords will decide the appropriate manner in which the Mass is to be practiced in the future.” Grebel desired coercion; Zwingli preferred preaching and patience. Grebel wanted reform now; Zwingli was prepared to wait for he recognized that the people were not yet ready for the reform.

This quickly led to a permanent rift between Zwingli and his disciples. Because Zwingli chose to retract some of his earlier position because of pressure from the magistrates, his early disciples forsook him and they became known as the Swiss Brethren, the forerunners of the Anabaptists/Mennonites. Zwingli turned hostile towards them. Through the Town Council his disciples were imprisoned, banished or drowned.

Hans Goïman Converts to Anabaptism

We know that in this rich agricultural area the *Goïmans* labored diligently on the farms for six generations. They may have resided in Switzerland for hundreds of years previously. They were humble peasants, workers of the land. It is from this area that most of the Mennonite families originated who immigrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Many of them, like the *Goïmans*, transitioned to the Jura Mountains or to Alsace and the Palatinate, before reaching the Woods of William Penn.

Martin *Goïman*'s grandson, Hans *Goïman*, born about 1616, became the first *Goïman* to become an Anabaptist. This he did despite the continuous persecution of the Anabaptists. What *Hans Goïman*'s motives were, we do not know. This was nearly one-hundred years after the Reformed Faith was imposed upon the people of Berne. We know that the Zwinglian Reformation came to the Canton of Berne by mandate, not through evangelism or personal persuasion. Following the mandate that everyone should follow the Reformed faith, the Town Council passed numerous regulations such as: “If a man curses he shall throw himself down and kiss the ground, and if anyone refuses to do this, he shall pay a fine of a pound or go to jail. Drinking to one’s health was to be punished by a fine of a pound; drunkenness by a day’s imprisonment. All gambling was proscribed whether by cards, dice, or otherwise. No dancing on communion days.”

Because of the nominal Christianity that prevailed throughout the land, many/most church members were not living a Christ honoring life. The stark contrast between the sterling character of the Anabaptists and the Reformed made a compelling case for conversion.

The Swiss Brethren refused to baptize their infants, arousing the ire and rage of both the Reformed Church and the Magistrates. They did not attend the state churches because they claimed that many sinners attended church. Neither did they participate in the communion services of the state church. They refused all oaths, did not participate in war to defend the motherland, nor did they accept governmental offices. Despite these offenses, Pastor Thorman of the Reformed Church commented that the Anabaptists were models of piety and conduct which his own Reformed people should follow. Anabaptists were known for not wearing lace collars which they regarded as a sign of pride. They spoke slowly and sang softly. They shunned taverns, baptisms and marriage celebrations. Their lifestyle in contrast to the Reformed was appealing.

But we also know that many conversions have mixed motives. Throughout the medieval period the peasants frequently rose up in rebellion and were repeatedly put down with harsh measures by their lords. In the 1640s there was civil unrest in the Canton of Berne because of the increased governmental absolutism and taxation. Many peasants in the rural areas of Berne resented the announcements from the Reformed Church pulpits about a new tax to support the standing military force. Many country people resented Berne’s alliance with France that caused taxation and felt it was a means by which the aristocratic Berne city councilors got what they wanted. When one man was imprisoned in the city of Thun for opposing the tax, hundreds of peasants from the Emmental Valley, where Hans Gouman lived, stormed the tall-towered castle where he was incarcerated.

For whatever reasons, Hans *Goïman* left the Reformed Church and became numbered among the “Swiss Brethren,” part of the Anabaptist movement. His son, Christian *Goïman* the elder (born 1643) also became a staunch Anabaptist. While living in the Emmental Valley, Christian *Goïman* the Elder became known as “the hard-necked *Wiedertauffer* [rebaptizer].” For his obstinate attitude, on September 29, 1710, Christian was thrown into prison on an island in the Aare River that loops around the city of Berne. At the same time his own son, Christian *Goïman* the Younger was thrown into the same prison.

Gehman Heritage in the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church

Christian *Goïman* the Elder (born 1643) is the common ancestor of both Flo and myself. Christian *Goïman* the Elder had seven children of whom two are important to us. **Christian *Goïman* the Younger**, born March 1, 1678, is the ancestor of Father William Gehman, founder of the Evangelical Mennonite Church cum Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, cum Bible Fellowship Church. Of the many children of Elder William Gehman who became part of the M.B.C., they included W.G. Gehman (born 1874), Presiding Elder of the M.B.C. and Director of

the Gospel Herald Society; and Allen M Gehman (born 1866), longtime Treasurer of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church and the grandfather of my wife, Florence A. (Hilbert/Gehman) Gehman. Father William Gehman is the great grandfather of my wife, Florence A. Gehman

The second son of Christian *Goïman* the Elder who is important to us was **Benedict Goïman** (born January 7, 1687). He is the ancestor of my father, Rev. Rudy H. Gehman. From Benedict *Goïman* came many ministers of succeeding generations including dozens from the Joseph Gehman, my dad's father.

CONCLUSION

The roots of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church coincide with the ancestry of the Gehmans. Their cultural roots are Germanic, their national roots are German Swiss within the Holy Roman Empire, and their religious roots are Anabaptist. Most settlers in Lancaster County and early members of the M.B.C. cherish the same roots.

Our Creator God loves diversity. In God's infinity, He is the embodiment of infinite perfection; in our created finitude, we reflect those gifts and graces that he has imparted to us. As a body is made of many members, so the Body of Christ is made of many diversely gifted and graced members, not only individual members, but diverse races, cultures and nations. We neither disparage nor despise those gifts and graces which we have received, nor do we disparage or despise the gifts and graces granted to others. Hopefully, we learn from one another and build on the strengths of others.

Our German heritage is rich. We neither apologize for it nor flaunt its riches over others. We are One Body and need one another. Through inherited traits, honed through the rigors of life in agrarian midlands surrounded by the Swiss Alps, our ancestors traditionally have been characterized by strength of character. Germans are tough, self-reliant, hard working and resilient people. They can be stolid and stern. They are disciplined and organized, determined and stubborn. Their warrior heritage has led to many wars through perceived wrongs and injustices. Their strong convictions have led to many splits within churches.

Counteracting many of the flaws of their national character, the Mennonite faith has bred into the Lancaster folks the graces of Jesus Christ. They are the quiet people of the land, living in peace, and turning the other cheek. They seek to practice the Beatitudes of Jesus in literal and practical ways to become "poor in spirit," "meek," "merciful," and "peacemakers." They bless those who persecute them and do not take revenge. This Mennonite Christian heritage has counteracted the flaws within the Germanic culture. We bless God for this rich heritage of ours.

While the Bible Fellowship Church no longer subscribes to much of the Mennonite theology, we are deeply indebted to our Swiss German Mennonite heritage. They held tenaciously to the authority of Scripture. Their rejection of ecclesiastical traditions of their day was due to their adherence to their understanding of what God had taught in the Bible. The first Swiss Brethren, under the tutelage of Ulrich Zwingli, searched the Scriptures, reading from the Hebrew and Greek text. The teachings of Scripture had priority over traditions.

Their opponents called them, Anabaptists (rebaptizers), though they just called themselves "brothers." Hence they became known as the Swiss Brethren. Rather than speaking of them as Anabaptists, they are better described as *Taufers* (baptizers), for they did not emphasize rebaptism but believers' baptism. The Swiss Brethren (or Anabaptists) were the outstanding opponents of infant baptism and all that it represented. They insisted on the importance of faith and repentance prior to baptism. This was unacceptable to the magistrates who desired a united realm with one church in which everyone was a member. Because of their rejection of inherited tradition, the Swiss Brethren and later Mennonites suffered ignominy, imprisonment, banishment and death.

Their persistence in obeying their convictions eventually broke the fetters of the State Church and brought about the separation of Church and State. Wherever the model of the State Church prevailed, coupled with universal taxation for the tithe, the decline of a vibrant Christian faith ensued. Infant baptism commonly leads to nominalism – Christian in name and profession, but without the experience of the new birth. Adult baptism on the genuine confession of faith in Christ leads to a church living with faith.

Mennonites were concerned with an inner change of life, not just a profession of faith. Whereas the Epistle of James was misunderstood by Martin Luther, who called it an "epistle of straw," the Swiss Brethren and their Mennonite heirs recognized that faith without works is dead; that a profession of Christ that is not accompanied by a changed life is an empty profession. In the first generation of the Swiss Brethren their lifestyle was a sterling example of the Christian life.

Unfortunately, they did not distinguish between justification and sanctification. The emphasis on living a holy life (sanctification) coupled with their neglect of justification by grace through faith alone tended to overwhelm the doctrine of justification. Hence legalism crept in. The Mennonite communities began to define what offenses were off limits and would lead to the Ban. In the process of defining more clearly what was acceptable for Christians to do, our forefathers fell into the same pitfall of adherence to traditions which the Medieval Church had done.

Instead of circling our wagons and defending our theological tradition, we need to open ourselves up to the whole council of the Word of God and let the Scriptures continually correct our understanding of God's Word. All theological/church traditions have blind spots which need correction through immersion in the written Word.