This is lecture 15. It deals with Dutch Anabaptism. Northern European, that is, Dutch and north German Anabaptism, is in some significant ways different from that in the south. It is the product of a number of different influences and different personalities and was prepared by movements like The Brethren of the Common Life and the sacramentarian movement. Leading personalities were Melchior Hoffman, Bernhard Rothmann, Jan Matthijs, and John of Leiden, along with the dominant figure of Menno Simons. Others like Dirk and Obbe Philips were also important early leaders.

Also known as the devotio moderna or the Modern Devotion, The Brethren of the Common Life were founded by the Dutchman Gerard Groote in the second half of the fourteenth century. Influenced by the Latin church fathers, especially by Jerome and Augustine, whose neo-Platonism also influenced medieval mysticism under whose tutelage the Modern Devotion came, the Brethren established a lay religious society, and they did so because at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Roman Catholic Church had decided that there were to be no more new monastic orders formed in the church. In other words, it believed that there existed enough monastic orders and they didn’t need any more. What this did, however, was to limit reform movements within the church, because monastic movements essentially arose as reform movements within the Catholic Church, and once new monastic orders were discontinued, the impulse toward reform within the Catholic Church died away. And those who wanted to reform the church after 1215 invariably went into heresy.

So here you have The Brethren of the Common Life being established in the second half of the fourteenth century, a lay religious society for the purpose of reforming society and educating young boys. This is important in the sense that the church is not the sponsor of reform movements any more, but reform movements arise outside of the church and increase
during this period. It was from the midst of this Modern Devotion, from The Brethren of the Common Life, that men such as Thomas à Kempis arose, whose *Imitation of Christ* became the classic of late medieval pietism.

The emphasis of The Brethren of the Common Life was on moral reform and on the interior nature of true religion, and this led them to disparage external ritual. Gerard Groote said on one occasion, and I quote, “The priest chief’s aim should be to convert sinners, for the conversion of sinners is a greater work than the creation of the world. I believe that prayer is more beneficial than mechanical rules and transactions. Admonition is better than absolution, for after all, it is God alone who can convert sinners. Suppose someone takes his neighbor’s property and is unrepentant, then all his confessions are of no avail and everyone who absolves him is simply a servant of the devil.”

What this passage makes clear is that from the point of view of The Brethren of the Common Life, true religion cannot be controlled by a priestly church. It is an intensely personal inner spiritual matter between man and his Maker. This diminution of Catholic ritual and its argument of objective grace in the sacraments were also characteristic of the Dutch sacramentarians. As Groote had argued, and as Erasmus was to argue later on, external ritual without inner faith or conversion leads necessarily to superstition, to placing one’s trust in the visible ritual to the neglect of true religion; true religion being spiritual and moral.

It was from this soil that Cornelius Hoen’s sacramental views grew. In 1523, he wrote Zwingli from The Hague that the words of institution, that is, Christ’s words, “This is My body,” were really a figure of speech, a trope, and that the word *is* must be understood to mean “signifies.” Zwingli was convinced, but Luther, who received a similar letter, was not. And at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, the two met to discuss the matter; that is, Zwingli and Luther met to discuss the sacrament of the Eucharist, though without agreement.

There at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, Zwingli argued for a symbolic presence in the Eucharist; Luther argued for the real presence. Erasmus’s views tended in the same direction as Hoen’s, as he himself admitted on occasion. This was the soil upon which the ideas of a Melchior Hoffman and a Bernhard Rothmann fell in the early 1530s, and it would be interesting to know how much correlation there was between these centers of
activity of The Brethren of the Common Life on the one hand and the sacramentarians on the other, and the later centers of Dutch Anabaptism, but no such study exists.

Melchior Hoffman, whose early activity in northern Germany was decisive for early Dutch Anabaptism, burst on the scene in 1523 as a Lutheran lay missionary in Livonia. Because he did not have a formal theological education, the political authorities were always somewhat suspicious of him. When he was rejected by the ruling elites, he turned to the masses, becoming even more suspect, and then was forced in June 1525 to return to Wittenberg for a certificate of orthodoxy from Luther himself. In other words, the authorities in northern Germany and the heads of cities where he was operating were not quite sure that Melchior Hoffman was orthodox, and they wanted Luther to give him a certificate of authenticity. And he received this in Wittenberg. With this in hand, he returned to Livonia only to be expelled from Dorpat, then from Reval, and forced to seek sanctuary in Stockholm. Here it was that he published his commentary on Daniel, a favorite book for sixteenth-century apocalyptic speculation. By this time, his sermons too began to concentrate heavily on apocalyptic themes.

For a time, to 1527, he was in Lubeck, but he had to flee that city to Schleswig-Holstein. In Schleswig-Holstein, for a time he gained the favor of Frederick I, king of Denmark, and was appointed deacon at the Nicholas Church in the city of Kiel. Here he acquired his own printing press, which he used with increasing frequency to attack Luther’s surrogates. In late 1527, he returned to Wittenberg, but this time there was no Lutheran certificate of good conduct waiting for him.

Then at the Flensburg disputation of 1529, his ideas were condemned, especially his increasingly bitter attacks on Luther’s ideas of the real presence. Many who came in conflict with Luther’s doctrine of the real presence after the 1529 Marburg Colloquy did what Hoffman now did. They went to Strasbourg or to Zurich, where Luther’s Eucharistic adversaries lived. When his radical ideas were noticed, however, even the Strasbourg Reformers turned their backs on him, and Hoffman now completely turned away from them. In Strasbourg, he now came under the influence of the city’s spiritualist Anabaptists led by Hans Denck and under the visionary prophecies of Ursula Jost, known as Strasbourg’s prophetess. Under their influence, he came to extol the inner word, he came to extol free will, and a grace that illuminates all men. He also came to differentiate between a first and a second
justification. The first justification consisting of the cancelation of original sin through the redemptive death of Christ; the second justification was effected by the Holy Spirit, by means of which one could achieve perfection. The achieving of perfection is a peculiarly mystic concept during this period. In effect, he advocated a kind of two-tiered Christianity.

In discussions with Caspar Schwenckfeld, he developed a doctrine concerning the heavenly flesh of Christ, according to which Christ passed through Mary like sunlight through glass. It was a doctrine intended to exalt the divinity of Christ at the expense of His humanity. Perhaps even more important than these changes, however, were the new developments in his apocalyptic thought. He now began to argue that Christ’s return was imminent, but that return had nonetheless to be prepared by an act of great cleansing in the world. And he came to regard himself as the new Elijah, and he predicted the return of Christ for the city of Strasbourg in 1533.

In May 1530, he returned to Emden in East Friesland, where he baptized three hundred persons, establishing in Emden and the neighboring city of Norden the earliest continuous Anabaptist congregations in northern Europe. The spread of the movement was phenomenal, undoubtedly having been well prepared by the ideas of the Devotio Moderna and the sacramentarians. But persecution was also almost immediate, and Hoffman was forced to leave the city, returning to Strasbourg. In his place, he left Jan Volkertszoon, also known as Jan Tripmaker, in charge as preacher.

In Strasbourg, he had first lived unnoticed; then he returned to the Netherlands in 1531 where is said to have baptized another fifty persons or so. But when Tripmaker and ten others were executed in The Hague on December 5, 1531, Hoffman decided to suspend baptism, perhaps taking a page out of the writings of Sebastian Franck and Casper Schwenckfeld, who advocated what was known as a stillstand, a suspension or a standing still of the implementation of apostolic ceremonies until a new command were to be received by a new prophet from God. Although preaching and admonition were to continue, baptisms, said Melchior Hoffman, were to be suspended for two years. This order was issued from Strasbourg, to which Hoffman had once more returned.

When he was now discovered in Strasbourg, he was once again expelled, and he spent his time probably in Hesse and in the
Netherlands, particularly in Leeuwarden, where he had followers like Obbe and Dirk Philips. In the spring of 1533, he reentered Strasbourg, predicting that the kingdom of Christ would begin in that city; however, as he had predicted earlier, it would be preceded by a terrible slaughter. The city council hearing this prophecy interpreted it as a revolutionary threat and had him imprisoned. In prison, he died a forgotten man some ten years later, events having totally passed him by.

In the meantime, the former Lutheran, Bernhard Rothmann, had begun another Anabaptist movement in Münster. Educated at the universities of Cologne and Wittenberg, Rothmann by the early 1530s was moving through Zwinglianism to advanced radicalism. He knew Melanchthon well and was also acquainted with Luther. Around May 1531, he also came to Strasbourg, where he met Martin Bucer and Capito, the two reformers of the city, and where he may also have come to know Cellarius and Caspar Schwenckfeld. By this time, he was already familiar with Hoffman and the writings of Sebastian Franck. Upon his return to Münster, Rothmann began to reform the city, a reform that was given a radical turn with the arrival of Henric Rol, one of the so-called Wassenberg preachers. Strongly influenced by Franck and Hoffman, Rol confirmed Rothmann in his new direction.

A major milepost on this new road was the Münster colloquy, which took place in the city between Rothmann and his followers on the one hand and some Lutheran and Catholic clerics on the other. In this debate, for which Rothmann prepared by writing his confession concerning the two sacraments, Rothmann rejected infant baptism and any kind of sacramental power in the Eucharist. He challenged both his Catholic and Lutheran opponents to defend their practices on the basis of *sola Scriptura*, as we have seen a fundamental Lutheran principle. Unable to do this, the Lutherans, like the Catholics, were forced to fall back on tradition to defend the practice of infant baptism.

Up to this point, Rothmann also differentiated between the Old and the New Testaments, though not to the extent other Anabaptists, particularly Swiss Brethren, had done. He argued that Adam, Abraham, and other Old Testament patriarchs had been saved on the basis of the same faith as their own. He differentiated them along Melchiorite lines, which asserted that a parallelism existed between the two. The Old Testament consisted, he argued, of pictures, of types of the New, all of which had come to an end when the true reality had appeared in Christ. In other words, the

Circumcision, for example, being a fleshly or tangible sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, had now to be seen as a type of the spiritual and true covenant Christ wished to establish with His followers. In short, he observed, and I quote, “it is not right, nor will it stand the test if we take the figures of the Old Testament and simply impose them upon the truth of the New. That flesh in the Old is made to signify flesh in the New, that the essence is made to conform to the type, that the truth is subordinated to the picture, that the Spirit must answer to the letter.”

By November 1534, as his Restitution of True Christian Teaching makes apparent, a subtle shift had begun to take place in Rothmann’s thinking. The cause of this shift was the appearance of John of Leiden and Gerrit Boekbinder, two disciples of Jan Matthijs, in Münster in January 1534. The latter, that is, Jan Matthijs, who arrived in February, arrogated Hoffman’s mantle to himself when the latter disappeared in Strasbourg, arguing that he was now the true prophet and Münster was to be the city in which the New Jerusalem would arise. With these people came not only a resumption of baptism—Rothmann and his followers were baptized by John of Leiden and Gerrit Boekbinder—but there also came a renewal of Hoffman’s apocalyptic message of the end times with its emphasis not of the restitution of the apostolic church but of the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. And with the shift from the apostolic church to the kingdom of God on earth, there came a renewed emphasis on the Old Testament, even in Rothmann’s thinking.

In his Restitution of 1534, he rejected those who held that the Old Testament was irrelevant to Christians. While he still differentiated between shadows and true reality, he now saw a greater continuity between the two, that is, between the Old and the New Testaments, arguing that Christ and his apostles knew no other Scriptures than the Old Testament. And of the many prophecies given to the prophets yet unfulfilled, the one concerning the kingdom of God was the most important. Just as there was only one God, he argued, they possessed only one gospel.

There was, thus, a shift in thinking in Münster that came about under the influence of Jan Matthijs, a shift from the apostolic church to the kingdom of God on earth, and this shift was justified
by a renewed respect for the Old Testament. Rothmann argued that this church, restored in Münster through the introduction of believer’s baptism, had been fully prepared to suffer, as had the true believers during the age of the apostles, but in the very midst of their suffering, God has revealed a time of harvest to them. He had revealed to them the day of God’s wrath. And I quote from Rothmann’s *Restitution*: “It was, God knows,” he said, “our heartfelt desire when we were baptized to suffer for Christ’s sake whatever might befall us. But it pleased God and continues to please Him to do otherwise, revealing to us that we and all true Christians may at this time not only defend ourselves against the might of the godless with the sword, but that since He has given the sword into the hand of His people to wreak vengeance on all that is evil and all who act wickedly over the whole world, for He wishes to renew the world so that only righteousness will reign in it, and this shall be fulfilled. The time is at hand.”

Having discerned the time, the time of harvest, the transition from the suffering church to the avenging inauguration of the kingdom of God could take place. This justified not only the defensive use of the sword but also the offensive use of the sword on behalf of the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. Having gained control of the city through the support of the guilds in early 1534, the transformation of the New Jerusalem began under John of Leiden after the death of the Jan Matthijs in the early summer of 1534. In August, John of Leiden proclaimed himself the new King David. Rothmann became his royal orator, and Bernhard Knipperdolling, a former mayor, became his chief minister.

John of Leiden married Matthijs’s beautiful young widow and collected a harem of fifteen wives. Community of goods was introduced, as well as polygamy. For about a year, from 1534 to June 24, 1535, the city was under siege by a combined force of Hessian troops and the troops of the Catholic bishop of Munster, Franz von Waldeck. Food gradually ran out, and there were rumors of cannibalism. In early June, some of the escapees told the enemy how they might gain entrance to the city, and on June 24 entry was accomplished. A great slaughter took place, but John of Leiden, Knipperdolling, and a few others were taken alive. Rothmann, however, was never found dead or alive. Rumor later had it that he had been seen in one of the Hansa cities or that he had lived out his days as a tutor to the family of a Dutch nobleman, but no hard evidence as to what happened to him has ever been found.
The other leaders were tortured and then executed. Some of them made confessions. John of Leiden made one. Their bodies were then placed in three separate cages and raised to the top of the spire of the Saint Lambert Church in Münster. There these cages hung until the nineteenth century, bones and all, as symbols to all who would rise in revolution against the authorities in church and state. Was Menno Simons one of these or was he not? And how can we tell? That is to be the subject of our next lecture.

Here in conclusion, we want to ask the question, Where did this apocalyptic speculation so prevalent in the age of the Reformation have its source? Part of the answer must be the crisis atmosphere of the age. With respect to the Netherlands in particular, social historians have pointed to severe famines in the area during these years, and there was always the ever-present plague that kept coming back again and again and again. Some scholars have argued that all of this speculation was fed by the Trinitarian scheme of history presented to the world by Joachim of Fiore in the late twelfth century. He argued for three ages of the world—the age of the church being the age of God the Son, soon to be superseded by the age of the Holy Spirit. That was to be the age of perfection. Whatever the case, even Luther in a famous sermon on Matthew 24 in the year 1524 argued that all of the signs of the end of the age were in place. It was as a direct result of this belief that Luther expected the Jews to be converted in great numbers to Protestantism, and when that failed to take place, he wrote rather viciously against them.

Thomas Müntzer based his expectations of the time of harvest on the same passage of Scripture, that is, Matthew 24, and there is a strange similarity in Müntzer’s transition from his pursuit of the new apostolic church to his conviction that the kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated. Certainly for him, that is, for Müntzer, as for the Müntzerites, the parable of the tares with its argument for the separation of the wheat and the tares in the time of harvest, that is, in the end time, was of paramount importance. In this respect, discerning the time, as Rothmann wrote, was of the utmost importance. The attempt to pinpoint this time, despite the fact that Christ had explicitly said that that time was known only to the Father, is still very much with us today. But the only thing that all of these attempts have in common is that they have all been wrong.