

Discipleship

How Christian Faith is Lived Out

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This is the first in a series of four articles on Anabaptist distinctives planned to commemorate the 500-year anniversary of Anabaptism’s beginnings in Switzerland.

It is said that the lush springtime beauty of the Netherlands is unparalleled. However, for the burgeoning Anabaptist community in 1544, the warmth of spring was chilled by an edict outlawing their gatherings. The church authorities declared them heretics, believing their radical ideas undercut societal and spiritual order.

For Maria Van Beckum, a nobleman’s daughter from Utrecht, the joy of her newfound faith came at great cost. Maria had recently been driven from her home by her stepmother and had sought refuge in the home of her brother Jan and his wife Ursula. Before long, the local Catholic leaders heard about Maria’s eviction, and a mob was dispatched one night to arrest her. The household was startled awake by the torch-bearing throng, who demanded Maria be turned over.

Seeing the fear in Maria’s eyes, Ursula bravely asked if she should accompany her sister-in-law to encourage her, so they could “rejoice in the Lord together.” Jan gave his blessing, and these two sisters in Christ were led off together. Imprisoned in a castle in nearby Delden and subjected to demands to recant their “heretical” beliefs, both women held firm. They declared, “We hold to the Word of God, and do not regard the dictates of the pope, nor the errors of the whole world.” Finally, after six months, the exasperated friar charged with convincing the sisters to renounce their faith exclaimed, “The devil speaks through your mouth, away with them to the fire!”


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On November 13th Maria and Ursula were led to the stake singing a hymn of joy together. Maria, who was chosen to go first, encouraged Ursula, who said, “Dear sister; heaven is opened for us; for what we now suffer for a little while, we shall forever be happy with our bridegroom.” Witnesses say Maria died rejoicing, saying, “To Thee, O Christ, I have given myself.” Ursula was offered a quicker death by the sword, but she chose to die as Maria had, exclaiming, “My flesh is not too good to be burned for the name of Christ.” As she was led to the stake, she asked a relative to send her love to Jan and encourage him to serve God.¹

Stories like this have anchored the narrative and framed the theology of the Anabaptist faith community since its inception 500 years ago. The movement was born at a time in Europe when decisions of conscience, especially if they threatened the church-state power structures, could cost a person everything they had. Yet, in the face of this great cost, thousands of brothers and sisters paid the ultimate price for their faith. Countless others suffered severe loss and upheaval at the hands of the state-aligned Magisterial Reformers and Roman Catholics. These tales of heroic belief and resolute conviction stir us to evaluate our own faith commitments and urge us to consider how we might respond in similar circumstances.

By immigrating to the New World in the 17th–19th centuries, many Anabaptists found relief from overt persecution. However, even in modern days, there have been times when members of this faith community have been called to suffer greatly for their beliefs.

One such person was Emanuel Swartzendruber, a young Amish-Mennonite man in his 20s from “the thumb” of Michigan. Early in 1918, less than a year into America’s involvement in World War I, Emanuel received a draft order to report to a train headed for Camp Greenleaf in Georgia. “Our church taught that it is wrong to engage in strife, that Christians should follow the footsteps of Jesus,” he later wrote, “but the church also taught that we should pray for rulers, pay taxes and be good, law-abiding citizens.” As he rode that train southward, he hoped he could find a way to be an obedient citizen while remaining true to his faith, perhaps as a noncombatant. Early in his military orientation, however, Emanuel realized just how incompatible his nonresistant faith was with the goals and culture of the military. Shortly thereafter, he handed in his conscientious objector (CO) papers to his commanding officer.

Emanuel was soon transferred into a company whose leaders were known to “convince” COs of their error. Upon his arrival, the sergeant demanded that he and a fellow CO put on military uniforms. They refused and were kicked and beaten for their choice. One day the young men were led to an outhouse that they and two other COs were ordered to tear down. As they worked, they were pushed and struck with boards. Then, without warning, the soldiers threw one of the COs into the open cesspool. They mockingly “baptized” him with shovels full of excrement poured upon his head. “If he’s your brother,” the sergeant barked, “then go get him out!” Emanuel helped pull his friend from the pit, and then the sergeant focused attention on Emanuel, asking three times “Are you ready to accept military service now?” Emanuel quietly answered, “No.” He was then grabbed by the legs and dunked head-first into the filth. The dunking only stopped when some of the watching soldiers shouted, “Don’t put him in any further! You’ll kill him!”

1 Braght, Thieleman J. Van. *Martyrs’ Mirror*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1951: pp 467–468.

Before long, Emanuel was thrown into the camp guardhouse, subsisting on bread and water while he awaited his court-martial trial. Eventually, Emanuel was sentenced to ten years of hard labor at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. He was imprisoned until the following year when, months after the armistice, the War Department finally released all COs. Emmanuel was one of hundreds of Christian COs who suffered greatly or lost their lives during WWI, remaining true to his convictions despite the cost.²

What was the source of such a determined and powerful witness? Were these people spiritual giants? Or were they normal people just like us, facing extraordinary circumstances with a supernatural strength? What gave them the boldness and clarity to withstand the challenges put before them, even when it meant great suffering or forfeiting of their lives? How can we tap into that same strength as we seek to live faithfully for God?

Before all else, we must recognize that such a faithful Christian witness transcends typical human ability. Strength of character, strong beliefs, or good theology alone cannot explain the grace that was given to our Anabaptist forebears as they endured such brutal persecution for their faith. Ultimately, frail humanity finds strength like this in “Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20). Those of us who confess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit should pray to the Father, that we would be “strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:16).

But how does a person of faith decide what is worth suffering and dying for? In times of persecution and war, what can provide such a clarity of purpose? For the Anabaptists, along with the Spirit’s strength in their lives, their convictions were animated by a unique way of understanding what was at the core of their Christian faith. It was this unshakable foundation that enabled them to boldly live out their principles, even at great personal cost.

A Third Way: The First Anabaptists Find Their Center

Anabaptism has often been called “a third way,” emerging during the Reformation as neither Catholic nor Protestant, but something radically different. Sixteenth-century Catholicism grounded its authority on the traditions and hierarchy of the state-aligned church. Church leaders held tremendous interpretive, political, and economic power, with the Pope holding the “keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.” Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers attempted to correct what they saw as Catholicism’s misplaced locus of authority with a call to recenter the Church on scripture alone, in Latin *Sola Scriptura*. The reformers confessed the Bible as their final authority for faith, keying especially on the epistles of Paul for their theological foundation and looking to the Old Testament for affirmation of their approach to the church-state union. By doing so, they never fully eschewed the coercive and political power of Christendom.

The first Anabaptists were certainly supportive of the reformers’ critique of the Catholic hierarchy and their call to biblical authority, but according to Anabaptist scholar Stuart Murray, “they were

2 Peachy, Titus and Peachy, Linda Gehman. *Seeking Peace*. Lancaster, PA: Good Books, 1991

disappointed by what they regarded as a half-hearted reform movement and by the reformers' apparent unwillingness to countenance interpretations that might result in social upheaval or personal cost."³ Driven by their new understanding of the crux of Christianity, they envisioned a more radical break from what they saw as the misguided and corrupt church-state power structures of both Catholicism and Protestantism.

Ultimately, the Anabaptists committed to a different center of authority—one that was born out of their love for their Lord Jesus and that represented a return to what they believed was the convictions of the first Church. They chose to place obedience to the person, teachings, and example of Jesus Christ at the core of their understanding of faith and life. As early Anabaptist leader Dirk Philips put it, "Jesus with His doctrine, life and example is our Teacher, Leader and Guide, Him we must hear and follow."⁴ This simple yet profound commitment charted a radically different path for this small band of Christ-followers, one that echoes on in the theology and practice of Anabaptism these 500 years later. Their commitment to the centrality of Jesus provided a tremendous spiritual strength that reverberates to this day through the witness of sisters like Maria Van Beckum, who with her final words declared, "To Thee, oh Christ I have given myself," or brothers like Emmanuel Swartzendruber, who was willing to suffer greatly because of his belief that "Christians should follow in the footsteps of Jesus."

In comparison to the ecclesiastical authority of Catholicism, the Christ-centered approach of the early Anabaptists did not mean they rejected the importance of the Church as the bride of Christ, but that they emphasized the authority of Jesus as the head of that Church. Thus, everything the Church taught and did was predicated on the witness and way of Jesus. Their commitment to His Church was evident in their insistence on gathering regularly, even at great personal risk. It was also apparent in the intentionality of their mutual sharing of goods (including some who even practiced a common purse), and in their desire to exercise redemptive church discipline in accord with the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18. Their Christ-informed understanding of Church polity was much more servant-oriented and communitarian than the hierarchical Catholic model. They also believed that Scripture and the will of God were not meant to be discerned only by a *Magisterium* of high-level church leaders, but rather by the Spirit-informed insights of the gathered brotherhood; or as some have called it, "the hermeneutical community."⁵

In a similar sense, in comparison to the biblical authority claimed by the Protestants, Anabaptists' focus on the centrality of Christ did not mean they were less committed to the Bible than the reformers. On the contrary, Anabaptism grew out of an unflinchingly high regard for obedience to Scripture, simply and directly understood. Anabaptist leader Menno Simons underscored this commitment saying, "Above all, brethren, I want you to understand that I do not tolerate human

3 Murray, Stuart. "Anabaptists and the Bible." *Anabaptist Mennonite Network*. <https://amnetwork.uk/resource/anabaptists-and-the-bible/>

4 Murray, Stuart. *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000: p 72. Originally from Philips, Dirk. *Enchiridion*. 1602

5 For use of the phrase "hermeneutical community" see Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*; pp. 157–158 and Ens, Adolf. "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought" in Huebner, Harry, *The Church as Theological Community*. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990: p. 80

doctrines, clever reasonings, nor twisting of the scriptures, nor glosses, nor imaginations... but only the plain Scriptures.”⁶ Their fealty to Christ resulted not only in a commitment to conforming one’s life to His image, but a hermeneutic that sought to understand all of Scripture in light of the teachings and example of Christ. “They had a Christ-centered Bible” said theologian J.C. Wenger, “seeing the Lord Jesus as both key to, and ‘Lord’ of the canonical Scriptures.”⁷ Menno Simons framed it this way; “All the Scriptures point us to the Spirit, Gospel, example, ordinance and usage of Christ.”⁸

The Anabaptists began their quest to understand the Bible and God’s calling upon their lives together by examining the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Gospels. They also took note of how he practiced what he preached. Building upon that foundation, they then sought to understand and apply the New Testament teachings of His apostles and the Old Testament law and prophets, viewing all they read in Scripture through the lens of what they first learned from Christ. Anabaptist leader Peter Riedemann explained their approach this way: “The light of divine truth hath appeared more brightly in Christ, who hath revealed to us the real will of the Father... the law was given to Moses, but truth came by Christ.”⁹ They understood Jesus as the focus of the New Testament and the fulfillment of the Old, therefore, they could not accept any interpretation of Scripture that ran counter to the witness of Christ. For example, they were convinced by the teachings of Jesus and the later instructions of His apostles that the use of “the sword” was “ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ.”¹⁰ Thus, in response to the commands of Christ, they rejected how the reformers used magisterial power and violence to advance what the reformers claimed was the will of God.

Of course, the Anabaptists saw Christ as much more than an inspired teacher. Along with the rest of orthodox Christianity, they understood Jesus as Savior and Messiah. They believed that Christ’s atoning death and resurrection was the capstone of the Father’s plan for reconciling Adam’s fallen race to Himself, and that “new birth” in Jesus was essential for inclusion in the eternal Kingdom of God. However, they did not envision a relationship with Jesus in devotional or theological terms alone. According to historian Harold Bender, “The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity that made regeneration, holiness and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective ‘experience,’ rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience.”¹¹ For the early Anabaptists, accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior was not just a decision of faith, but a decision to live a new life in Christ.

Above all else, the early Anabaptists dearly loved Jesus. They longed to sit at His feet, like Peter and John, Mary and Martha, and learn how He wanted them to live. Philosopher Robert Friedmann summarized it this way: “Anabaptism was essentially a movement which insisted upon an earnest and uncompromising endeavor to live a life of true discipleship of Christ, that is to give expression

6 Simons, Menno. *Complete Works 1496–1561*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, p 452

7 Wenger, J.C. *Our Christ-Centered Faith: A Brief Summary of the New Testament*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973

8 Simons, Menno. *Reply to a Publication of Gellius Faber*, Elkhart, IN: Tr. John F. Funk, 1871

9 Riedeman, Peter. *Confession of Faith 1545*, Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1970: p. 196

10 *The Schleithem Confession*. Yoder, John H. (trans.). Scottdale, PA: Herald Pres, 1977: Article VI

11 Bender, Harold: “The Anabaptist Vision” *Church History*, March 1944, No 13

in fellowship and love to the deepest Christian faith.”¹² They recalled Christ’s words; “If you love Me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15), and they understood that obedience was often the key to deeper spiritual understanding of the truth that sets us free.¹³ This interrelationship between faith and following was perhaps best summarized by early Anabaptist Hans Denck, who famously said “No one can truly know Christ unless he follows Him in life.”¹⁴

How Anabaptists Understand Discipleship Today

“Discipleship” as a guiding principle within contemporary Christianity is almost universally claimed, but even the casual observer can see that the term means vastly different things to different people. Some folks spiritualize discipleship, focusing primarily on the heart relationship with Christ rather than seeing it as a call to action. Others have an expansive view of discipleship, extending it to “the whole counsel of God” rather than centering it primarily on the person and teachings of Jesus. Still others conceptualize discipleship as the adoption of a number of generalized Christ-sourced principles, adapted to the contemporary context, rather than a focus on the plain sense of Christ’s teachings. Ultimately, none of these perspectives capture how Anabaptism has historically lived out discipleship.

At its most basic level, discipleship is the state or condition of being a disciple. The term “disciple” comes from a Latin term meaning “learner.” However, because of how it is used in the Bible, the word has come to signify much more than just a student-teacher relationship. A “disciple” is a person who is deeply devoted to the one they follow, a believer, an adherent. For believers, Jesus framed the depth of this relationship saying, “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). He also declared, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23–24). In other words, you are My disciples if you follow Me, stay close, and are willing to give your all for the cause.

By the end of their training time on Earth with Jesus, the first disciples (and later the Apostle Paul) began articulating the calling of the life of the believer in terms of imitating Jesus: to “walk as He walked” (John), that we “might follow in His steps” (Peter), and be “conformed to the image of the Son” (Paul). So effective was this message of Christlikeness among the nascent Church that as the gospel started to spread around the Mediterranean Sea, the growing number of disciples of Jesus quickly began to be called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), literally “Christ-like ones” or “followers of Christ.”

12 Friedmann, Robert: *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries*. Goshen, IN: Goshen College, 1949

13 According to Stuart Murray, the Anabaptists were convinced that “the basis of a true knowledge of Christ, and of understanding scripture, was a life of discipleship.” Murray, *Anabaptist Hermeneutics*, p.2. This echoes what was written in John 8:31–32 where, according to Jesus, following His teaching is foundational to knowing “the truth that shall make you free.”

14 Citation found in Jones, Rufus M. “Hans Denck and the Inward Word.” In *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, 17–30. London: Macmillan, 1928. https://biblehub.com/library/jones/spiritual_reformers_in_the_16th_and_17th_centuries/chapter_ii_hans_denck_and.htm, from: Denck, Hans: *Was geredet sey doss die Schrift sagt Gott thue und mache guts und boeses* (“What does it mean when the Scripture says God does and works Good and Evil”), 1526

Over the centuries, this term has grown to include cultural, religious, and even ethnic connotations, but in its first use in Asia Minor, it undoubtedly linked the believers to the likeness of their Lord, Jesus of Nazareth.

Within Anabaptist circles, a clear discipleship ethos has echoed down through roughly twenty-five generations now, and to this day much of Anabaptism continues to be distinguished within Christianity by its commitment to practical Christ-centered discipleship—that is, a straightforward and faithful adherence to the teachings and example of Jesus. We see this commitment today in the lives of the spiritual descendants of the first Anabaptists, many of whom continue to eschew the swearing of oaths, suing another person, divorce, sexual immorality, participating in war and violence, or taking part in the coercive power of the state. Furthermore, these Anabaptists teach humility in giving and in prayer, encourage remarkable forgiveness and selfless generosity, strive to live simply as a tenet of faith, and endeavor to trust God for provision rather than storing up treasures on Earth. These practices, which are all derived quite literally from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), provide a clear picture of how Anabaptist discipleship is applied. Of course, the Anabaptist commitment to the way of Christ extends well beyond the commands found in the Sermon on the Mount. However, their response to this profound sermon illustrates a distinctive approach to *obedient and active discipleship* that is grounded quite simply on belief in three core propositions:

- 1) That Jesus is who He says He is,
- 2) that He means what He says, and
- 3) that He’s talking to us.¹⁵

First and foremost, Anabaptism’s call to discipleship is predicated on the belief that Jesus is who He says He is: God incarnate, King of God’s eternal Kingdom, the fullest revelation of God to humanity, God as God wishes to be known. Thus, the Father’s agenda on this earth ultimately hinges on the work and will of Christ. To Anabaptist Christians, everything starts and ends with Jesus. He is the crux of it all, the “chief cornerstone” (Psalm 116), the “wheel in the middle of the wheel” (Ezekiel 1), the “Logos” of God who “was with God and was God” (John 1) from the beginning, “the Heir of all things” and God’s “express image” (Heb. 1), “the King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Rev. 17 and 19). When Jesus tells us that “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30) and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), we believe Him, and we do well to pay attention. When Jesus says, “Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.” (John 12:50), and when His Heavenly Father declares “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him” (Luke 9:35), we do well to listen.

Second, Anabaptists prioritize discipleship because we understand that Christ makes it abundantly clear to His followers that He means what He says and expects them to follow.

On numerous occasions Jesus told His disciples that obedience to His teachings was confirmation of their love for Him: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word” (John 14:23), and “If you keep my

¹⁵ The lead writer first heard these three propositions articulated in mid-1990’s by Mennonite minister Lynn Miller of West Liberty, OH. The lead writer has found this framework not only helpful in conceptualizing Anabaptist discipleship but is also useful in encapsulating the Anabaptist hermeneutic (see Ziegler, Daniel. *Following Jesus into the Bible: How Anabaptists Understand Scripture (parts I & II)*: AnabaptistPerspectives.org, March 5, 2022).

commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10). Before all else, genuine discipleship is rooted in love. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). As Jesus works in our lives, we disciples learn that our devotion to Him and His ways comes not as a legalistic attempt to earn divine favor, or as a behavioral "get-out-of-jail-free" card, but as a heart-level response to Christ's extravagant love for us, rooted deeply in a personal relationship with Him.

Jesus illustrated the importance of this relationship of obedience when He shared His expectations via notable parables like "The Sheep and the Goats" (Matt. 7) or "The Wise and Foolish Builders" (Matt. 25), which were not about the difference between those who know Christ and those who don't, but between those who "hear these words of mine and do them" and those who choose not to. These lessons highlighted for His followers the relational and spiritual significance of choosing whether or not to live out the teachings of their Master.

Third, discipleship is important to Anabaptists because we believe that Jesus was not only talking to His first-century Middle Eastern contemporaries, but that He is talking to us today as well. His teachings may have been given 2,000 years ago in a Jewish cultural context, but His calling upon the lives of His followers is timeless. At the end of His earthly ministry, shortly before His ascension, Jesus made it clear that He expected His teachings to live on through the witness of believers yet to come. In what was likely the last charge He gave to His disciples while physically on the Earth, He directed them to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. He then confirmed the timeline of this commission when He promised to be with His disciples in their quest, "to the end of the age" (Matt. 28: 19–20).

Jesus further ensured the perpetuation of His teachings by promising the Holy Spirit would come to the believers after His departure to "bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). According to Christ, the work of the Spirit would continue to guide His followers "into all truth" (John 16:13). Inspired by the Spirit, His Apostles did their Rabbi's bidding and went into all the world, not only proclaiming Christ as Savior and Lord, but also teaching all the lessons they had learned during those glorious days in His presence. Now, some 2,000 years later, because of their Spirit-filled efforts, we who are His newest disciples are privileged to share in these same life-changing lessons, which are as relevant and transformational today as they were when Christ physically walked the Earth.

Seven Perspectives of a Disciple

If we belong to the fellowship of those who accept that Jesus is who He says He is, that He means what He says, and that He's talking to us, then we are by definition *His disciples*. As we take on this mantle of discipleship, a simple yet profound identity begins to frame our life together, just as it charted a new course for our Anabaptist forebears, and initially for those first-century Christ-followers. We become imitators of Jesus—fellow sojourners on a lifelong quest to be more like Him. More than anything else, our life becomes committed to being formed by Christ, and that formation results in a number of key spiritual perspectives.

1. Disciples Strive to See the World Through the Eyes of Jesus

We who follow Jesus make it our life's work to deeply know Him and His will for our lives. The Apostle Paul challenged us, as Christ's followers, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12)—to take on “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2). To those who fully embrace discipleship, Jesus is not only the source of spiritual deliverance, but His teachings and example define how we understand the world around us. They drive us to be in tune with Christ's agenda on this earth. His priorities become our priorities. His passions become our passions. His hermeneutic becomes our hermeneutic. His theology becomes our theology. As disciples, we long to see the world through His eyes, love our neighbor with His heart, and understand the Father's will with His mind.

2. Disciples Seek the Message of Jesus in All of Scripture

With the Spirit as our guide, we search the Scriptures, finding Jesus in the prophecies, types, and shadows of the Old Testament, in the eyewitness accounts of His words and deeds in the Gospels, and in the Spirit-led affirmations and teachings of His Apostles found in the New Testament. We read Scripture like Jesus read Scripture: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). Ultimately, disciples see Jesus as the object of the entire Biblical narrative. History is *His* story!

3. Disciples Apply the “Jesus Test”

Knowing the mind of Christ provides a basis for discerning the validity or even relative significance of the many doctrines and theories that seem to capture the imaginations of those within the brotherhood, often divisively. Scripture tells us that we will find unity as we together mature in our “knowledge of the Son of God,” and that this knowledge will keep us from being “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4: 13–14). In other words, as we disciples come to deeply understand the wisdom of Jesus, we can apply “the Jesus test” to all that we hear, using our knowledge of Christ to determine whether a particular doctrine is in harmony with Him or not. It is said that D.L. Moody once declared, “The best way to show that a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick alongside it.” As disciples, we know that Christ is the perfect measure of the will of God. When we lay a questioned perspective (e.g. the prosperity gospel or just war) down beside the teachings of Jesus, we can clearly see whether such a doctrine is crooked or straight.

4. Disciples Embrace the Good News of The Kingdom

As our worldview conforms to the worldview of Jesus, we begin to adopt His way of seeing the spiritual boundaries that divide the world around us, namely, the Kingdom of God versus the kingdoms of this world. For any serious disciple of Christ, the centrality of this framework is hard to miss. In fact, in the Gospels, Jesus mentions the Kingdom of God and Heaven more than 100 times! If we have ears to hear, we soon realize how crucial this teaching of the Kingdom of God is in providing the historical and spiritual context for all that Jesus came to accomplish.

As Jesus teaches us to see Christ's Kingdom more expansively, even familiar terms like "the gospel" take on new meaning, not just as the promise of personal salvation, but as the "good news" of God's everlasting Kingdom, which Christ was sent to proclaim (Luke 4:43) and establish "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). We soon discover that, as Anabaptist teacher John D. Martin says, "Salvation is not an end in itself, rather it is a means to an end —the end being the Kingdom of God."¹⁶ Christ invites His disciples to participate in the history-changing movement of His everlasting Kingdom, actively turning the darkness of this world into light.

5. Disciples Guard their Allegiances

Disciples of Christ, attuned to this Kingdom paradigm, also understand that as citizens of His Kingdom we must guard our allegiances and loyalties. Dual citizenship is not a Christ-centered concept. Even so, many who claim to belong to Jesus also pledge their allegiance to earthly principalities, and many well-meaning Christians seek to promote their view of the will of God by aligning with the political power of the state. In the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus reminds us that we "cannot serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). Disciples who reserve their fealty for Christ alone understand that His Kingdom is not of this world (Matt. 18:36). The Kingdom of God is not a consortium. Nor does Jesus ask us to use the "necessary evil" of earthly weapons to help advance His holy agenda. "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds." (2 Cor. 10:4).

Thankfully, Scripture tells us:

- that the increase of His government will know no end (Is. 9:7),
- that all authority in heaven and Earth has already been given to Him (Matt. 28:18),
- that in the end, God will put all things under His feet (Heb. 2:8),
- that every knee will eventually bow to the Lordship of Christ (Phil. 2:9–10)
- that a new heaven and new earth will be created for His eternal reign (Is. 65, Rev. 21).

¹⁶ The lead writer heard this quote from John D. Martin at an Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium held in about 2010 at Rosedale Bible College, Irwin, OH.

If we believe the prophetic witness of the Bible, we can be confident that God already has the trajectory of history covered. The die has been cast, God's "endgame" has been set in motion, Christ's victory is assured! Jesus only asks that we "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) and the rest will take care of itself in God's good time. Therefore, as disciples, we give our loyalty solely to our King and His transcendent Kingdom of love.

6. Disciples Learn to Walk "Upside-down"

We who strive to follow the way of Christ also learn that we are called to walk a radically different path from those around us. In so many ways, the guiding principles of Jesus' "upside-down Kingdom"¹⁷ upend conventional wisdom. The world retaliates; we forgive. The world values strength; we value service. The world seeks comfort, prosperity, and individualism; we aspire to take on Christ's way of sacrifice, simplicity, and community. The world celebrates hedonism, power, and pride; we strive to exemplify the Christ-like virtues of purity, servanthood, and humility. We belong to a Kingdom where the last shall be first, the least shall be greatest, the humble will be exalted, because Christ became poor so we could become rich in Him. As disciples, we are committed to God's redemptive plan, where sacrificial love turns the world on its head.

7. Disciples Understand Faith in Relational Terms

Finally, those who learn at the feet of Jesus understand that discipleship is a relational endeavor. By revealing Himself in human form, Emmanuel—God with us—became accessible to humanity as never before. He came not only as Lord and Savior, but as Rabbi and Guide. He is a God not just to be feared and worshipped, but a God to relate to and learn from, to talk with like we did way back in the Garden. Jesus confirmed this relationship by giving a promotion to those who walk in His ways: "You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:14–15). Friendship with God is a sign of the transformational power of what Christ came to accomplish as we follow His ways!

Not only did Jesus offer us friendship, but He offered us a new forever-family as well. "And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother'" (Mark 3:34–35). Disciples understand that with Christ as head of this family (Col. 1:18), we are meant to do His work together. Jesus did not call just one disciple, or individuals apart from each other, but He called His disciples into a cohesive and accountable group. As a faith family, He commands us to love one another (John 15:12), He prayed for us to be one like He and the Father are one (John 17), and He gave us tools to help us resolve our differences (Matt. 18). The discipleship quest to grow into the likeness of Christ is also a journey toward each other, "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Under the headship of Jesus, we are joined to

17 The concept of Christ's "upside-down Kingdom" was popularized in the broader Anabaptist community by Donald B. Kraybill's 1978 book *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald Press), and in more conservative circles by David Bercot's 2003 book *The Kingdom That Turned the World Upside-Down* (Scroll Publishing).

one another for the work set before us. As the Anabaptist saying goes, “No one is in Christ apart from his brother.”¹⁸

The way of Jesus is the way of the disciple, the quest to “put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). It is the ongoing act of giving our lives to Jesus. As disciples, we recognize Jesus for who He is, and in response we echo the sentiment of John the Baptist who declared, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). The Apostle Paul, who in the end gave everything for Jesus, said it this way: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The good news is that, according to Jesus, “he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). We were created to find fellowship with God, and according to Scripture, as we together join our hearts and minds to Christ, we find in Him “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). There is no higher calling on this earth, no more significant relational context, than to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Anabaptism’s Crown Jewel

If there is a crown jewel within the 500-year history of Anabaptism, a treasured idea of such immense value that it must be secured at all costs, it is the commitment to *practical Christ-centered discipleship*. In the early years of the movement, this idea gave this small and defenseless band of believers the courage to stand firm for their convictions, even in the face of deadly opposition. It called the faithful to radical obedience to Christ, which included love for both neighbor and enemy, exceptional forgiveness, extraordinary sharing of goods, baptism upon confession of faith, separation from worldly pursuits and lusts, and rejection of the state-church and its carnal use of power.

The path the Anabaptists chose to follow was not an easy one, and thus Anabaptism has always been a relatively small community of faith, but its influence within Christianity has reached far beyond its size. Ideas like believers’ baptism and the believers’ church, which were once deemed heretical in medieval Europe, are now commonplace within Evangelical Christianity. The Anabaptist ideal of separation of church and state is, to some degree at least, recognized within much of Christianity and even enshrined within the constitutions of many modern democracies. Christ-inspired commitments to simplicity, community, and marital faithfulness within the Anabaptist tradition continue to draw the attention of those longing for an answer to the increasingly hedonistic and fractured template of modern life. In addition, the steadfast witness of non-resistance, while never very popular, has always served as a prophetic reminder to the broader Church of what could be if people took the teachings of Jesus at face value.

As we celebrate the quincentenary of the beginning of Anabaptism, we cannot help but wonder what the next half-millennium might hold for this family of faith. Should the Lord tarry, will Anabaptism remain significant in any meaningful way through the next 500 years? We already know the answer to that. The Apostle Paul articulated it for us: “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it

¹⁸ The lead author first heard this quote roughly 15 years ago, cited by a speaker at an “Anabaptist Identity Conference” in Lancaster County, PA.

will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:11-13). We are part of a faith family that, in the past, has been tested by fire. If we hold true to Jesus, the fire will doubtless come again. For Anabaptism to continue to find ongoing significance, Christ MUST be the foundation upon which this fellowship of believers continues to stand! Our task, during the time we are given on this earth, is to build upon that foundation with material of enduring substance: the gold of Christ's atoning sacrifice, the silver of His teachings, and the precious stones of lives devoted to following in His footsteps. In light of eternity, the next 500 years of Anabaptism only matter if we are participants in Christ's great redeeming work on this earth. That is exactly what disciples do.

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