ViewPoint
Anabaptists working together on current issues

The Believers' Church

Where Anabaptists Experience Brotherhood

Contents

This is the fourth and final article in a series on Anabaptist distinctives planned to commemorate the 500-year anniversary of Anabaptism's beginnings in Switzerland.

On a cold winter evening in Zurich, a small band gathered in the home of Anna Manz. The events of the last three years had come to a crisis point. Ulrich Zwingli, the peoples' preacher at the Grossmünster, had been working with the city council to implement reforms of the church. He was assisted by a small set of young men, among whom were Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. As these young men read their Bibles, they saw something that called into question the religious and political structures of Europe. They could find no justification for infant baptism. Instead, Christ commanded His disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:15–16). Here was the order: hear, believe, then baptize. Baptism was for believers, not infants. The young men debated this point with Zwingli, but he was tied to what the city council would allow. In the meantime, some of the young men did not present their new-born infants for baptism. On January 18, 1525, the city council ordered them to have their babies baptized. Confronted with this ultimatum, they met on January 21, 1525, where:

> *Fear came over them and struck their hearts. They fell on their knees before the Almighty God...*

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> *They prayed that God grant it to them to do His divine will... They were well aware of what they would have to suffer.*
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> *After the prayer, Georg Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptize him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the Truth. With this request he knelt down and Conrad baptized him... Then the others turned to Georg in their turn, asking him to baptize them, which he did.*[1]

As the earliest account of this event observes, "This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil way."[2] It restored believer's baptism and the church of Christ as a voluntary community of believers. It rejected a political and religious alliance that had developed since the time of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. It also reversed a trend begun in the 1300s that saw the dominance of the state over religious matters.

On November 18, 1302, Pope Boniface VIII, locked in a power struggle with King Philip IV of France, had issued the papal bull *Unam Sanctam,* (meaning "One Holy"). *Unam Sanctam* was an attempt to reassert the political power of the medieval popes in Europe, which had declined from its peak a hundred years before. Among other things, Pope Boniface decreed that governments must be subject to the church, and that *"we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman* Pontiff."[3] But 900 miles to the northwest at the Palais de la Cité in Paris, King Philip IV was not interested in submitting to any pontiff, Roman or otherwise. The following year, in September of 1303, he sent his troops to the Palazzo di Bonifacio in Anagni, Italy, the residence of the pope, where they threatened and reportedly beat him. Possibly as a result of his rough treatment, (the so called "slap of Anagni") Pope Boniface VIII died the following month. King Philip IV seized his chance and installed a French pope which led to an infamous sixty-seven year period known as the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy, with the next seven popes based out of Avignon in France, under the watchful eye of French kings. *Unam Sanctum* was supposed to bring the French throne under papal power, but instead the Roman papacy had become the French papacy.

In 1555 another Latin phrase entered the lexicon of church history, and again it resulted from conflict between the power of the state and the power of the religious authorities. Once again, the state won. Following the upheaval of the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics fought a series of territorial wars. The Peace of Augsburg was an attempt to end those wars, and was encapsulated in the Latin phrase *cuius regio, eius religio,* meaning "whose realm, their religion." This meant that the ruler of a particular realm would be at liberty to choose whether his subjects would be Lutheran or Catholic.

It would be another century before Calvinists would gain such recognition with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

All of these inflection points in church history, from *Unam Sanctam,* to Augsburg, Westphalia and many others, arose from conflicts over who would control the religion of the populace. Would they take orders from the pope first, or from the king? Would they be Protestant or Catholic? As

1 *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*. Volume I. (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 45.
2 *Ibid*
3 Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctum*, last sentence. (https://www.papalencyclicals.net/bon08/b8unam.htm 1302).

with many religions in human history, Christianity had become part of the fabric of European society, weaving spiritual practices tightly into the legal and social practices. It was assumed that chaos and anarchy would ensue in the absence of a strong central authority to regulate and order religious expression. The common man was seen as incapable of wrestling with matters of faith or understanding Scripture without a professional clergy to instruct him.

But the Anabaptists, to whom neither the Peace of Augsburg nor the Peace of Westphalia gave space, loved the Scriptures and were convinced it was written for the common man. In stark contrast to the bloody power struggles raging around them for control of the state church, the Anabaptists slipped away into the woods, caves, and barns and worshiped God together as a community of Jesus followers. That is what they read in Scripture, and so they did it. The members of this believers church would not be baptized as infants into the religion of their kings and magistrates. They made personal choices as informed adults to surrender to Christ in faith, to be born again, baptized into the Kingdom of God, and to practice their faith in committed relationship with others. They would study the Scripture in community with other believers, appoint their leaders from the community, and develop their forms of worship as a brotherhood. They firmly believed that no religious or political authority should coerce the expression of a person's faith and conviction.

This was a radical concept for medieval Europe, viewed by both religious and civil authorities not only as absurd, but also as subversive and dangerous. Allowing individuals to practice their faith according to their conscience seemed as ridiculous as allowing individuals to follow their own whims in civil matters. It was seen as treason and revolution against the state government. It would create anarchy and social chaos, and it must be stamped out at any cost. A functional society, they insisted, could no more allow local congregations to determine how they would worship, pray, and tithe than it could allow individuals to determine for themselves how they would pay taxes, control crime, and claim property.

Why did the European Anabaptists insist upon a free believers' church in the face of fierce resistance? Why did they choose torture and execution rather than defer to a state church? They understood from Scripture, like the first Christians did, that God's Kingdom is born of love and is grown through relationships and that a love relationship cannot be coerced. It is in an atmosphere of freedom, of invitation without coercion, that love most readily appears. The free, voluntary church, they insisted, must be the vehicle through which God grows His Kingdom. A compulsory state church could never bring men and women to worship and serve God from a heart of love. Jesus made it clear that the mark of His Kingdom would not be political power or social influence. Rather, authentic connection, restored relationships, personal compassion, and love among the members of His church would demonstrate His redemptive wisdom and authority over creation (Eph. 3:10).

Sheer power and authority can mold individuals into a kind of integrated body which can function in ways similar to Biblical community, and even inspire its members in similar ways, but so long as coercion exists, true brotherhood community is smothered.

But why have churches to begin with? What is it that draws humans to gather in groups at all, to form fierce loyalty to their group identities, and to give their lives for one another?

Creation: *Imago Dei*

Human history is stitched together with the threads of relationship, good and bad. When the Creator said *"Let us make man in our image,"* He envisioned a conscious being drawn from and modeled after the eternal Trinitarian love and relationship, a being specially formed to reflect its divine origin. Theologians call this the *imago Dei*, Latin for "image of God." Like a river cresting its banks, the overflow of that first eternal Relationship flooded the earth with life, creativity, connection, and meaning. That overflow gave rise to humanity and, though disfigured and distorted, we still bear the traces of our genesis. God formed the human spirit as a reflection of the Trinity, uniquely endowed with a boundless capacity to reach beyond ourselves to love or, in our fallenness, to hatred; to reach beyond simple animal cooperation and conflict, to that *something more* that imbues all our living with mystery and significance. It is the reason we are so easily driven by our relationships, for good or ill, far beyond what can be explained by mere self-interest. The divine imprint reveals itself, at least in part, in our endless hunt for the restoration of authentic community.

This hunger for connection is like a back door built into the human spirit through which God's life-giving, redemptive Kingdom re-enters His fallen creation after the fall and rebellion of humanity. This life-giving Kingdom takes shape as a voluntary human community which embodies the restored relationships, sacrificial love, and practical discipleship to Christ made possible by the transformative power of the resurrection. The believers' church is both the instrument and evidence of God's redemptive work in the world.

Given that we are hardwired by God as relationship-oriented beings, it is no surprise that we find ourselves serving and obeying that which we love most, or, in our brokenness, that which we hate most. One does not need to observe human nature for long to notice that who we love tends to drive our behavior much more effectively than what we say we believe. Thinkers and poets have long eulogized the human spirit's hunger for brotherhood, but there is a key difference between secular brotherhood, or mere humanism, and the Kingdom of God. This difference is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in that many of the loftiest sentiments about human brotherhood have been paradoxically composed in the context of war and violence, a sobering commentary on the sometimes irrational power of human relationships for destruction as well as for good. The Kingdom of God seeks not simply connection and brotherhood, but connection and brotherhood which gives life rather than takes it.

To anyone familiar with the tragedy of human history, this seems hopelessly idealistic. How can broken, selfish humans like you and me ever bear the image and reflection of a holy and life-giving God?

New Creation: Renewing the *Imago Dei*

Jesus taught that to love God more than anything, and to love our neighbor as much as ourselves, is the thing that the entire law and the prophets were hung on. But we human creatures, disfigured and corrupted, find this is an impossible task. Our enemies are too hateful. Our ego is too touchy. Our heart is too hard to love like that. We need to be ransomed out of our

bondage, forgiven of our sins, and healed of our brokenness, all of which we are helpless to do. We need a radically new beginning, a new birth, in fact.

It is exactly at this place of hopelessness and failure that the beauty and power of the gospel is revealed. Jesus inserts himself into that need and accomplishes all these things for us. Jesus humbled himself and became one of us. While we were His enemies, He allowed himself to be put to death on our behalf. He did this in part to make that restored human brotherhood a possibility on earth. Not only humanist camaraderie or unity forged by the threat of a common enemy, but something bigger and older; more difficult, but more durable as well. He is not satisfied with rearranging the dying embers of the divine spark within us, but he is fanning them to flames, hot and bright.

So, when all seemed ruined and lost, he began again. He made us all over again, born anew through faith Jesus Christ. The believers church is the manifest expression of this renewed creation, the embodiment of God's plan to redeem His world (Col. 1:12–14).

By inaugurating His Kingdom on earth, Jesus Christ is reenabling us to fulfil the image bearing vocation given to humans in the Garden of Eden. He breathed new life into His creation by paying the ultimate price of His own life, so that we could live in Him (2 Cor. 5:17). Romans 6 emphasizes that there is a "dying with Him" that takes place, and a "rising again with Him." We identify our fallen nature, the "old man," with His death, and we are given a new nature, a "new man," when we share in His resurrection life. This is the process by which the inner man is born again. As a new creation, he is given a new opportunity to do, in some measure, the kinds of things God had always intended His human creatures to do. The new birth restores right relationship with God, right relationship with one another, and right relationship with creation.

The Church: A Community of Redemption

The power and wisdom of God is demonstrated in this enabling. As Paul says in Ephesians 3:10, humans who were once selfish and ruthlessly competitive can now live together in mutually beneficial care for each other in the church. This vindicates the eternal wisdom of God, as the image of God comes back to life on the faces of once fallen humanity.

What then, is the Christian Church? It is the voluntary brotherhood of redeemed followers of Christ. It is the free gathering of those who love Christ and believe the message of Christ and have been discipled to live by His values. It is the society of those who not only accept the historicity of His supernatural life, death, and resurrection but who are seeking to walk today with the person known in history as Jesus of Nazareth. It is the society organized by God to meet the needs of His children and His creation. It is the place where heaven and earth intersect, the Temple of the New Covenant. It is the apple of God's eye, and the bride of Christ.

This Kingdom society is gathered together both by nature and by choice. By nature, as creatures hardwired for relationship and community. By choice, because in loving and serving the same Jesus, we choose to love and serve one another. God, who alone can teach us to hold both truth and love, not in tension, but in harmony, has set up a powerful virtuous circle where love and truth reveal and reinforce each other. As we choose to love one another despite our natural unloveliness, we see more clearly the deeper truths about God and one another and ourselves.

Those deeper truths draw us into deeper love for God and each other. The more we love one another the more we love God. The more we love one another and God, the more we see the truth about one another and God. The more we know the truth, the more we love, and so on in a virtuous circle, an upward spiral of redemption and healing (John 17:21–23; 1 John 3:18–19, 4:7–21).

This gathering together of truth and love is the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not merely an agreeable byproduct of the gospel. Scripture teaches that God chose to use the church in multiple roles in His eternal plan to rescue His dying creation after it was broken. The church is one of the goals of the gospel. It is one of the means of spreading the gospel. And it can even be said that the church (humans living in harmony under God) is one of the ends of the gospel (Eph. 3:3–11).

The Emblems of Community: Baptism and Communion

Baptism

How does one gain entrance into this society of believers? Is there an esoteric ritual, or secret knowledge, or terrible oaths or feats of courage, strength, intellect or discipline required to gain and keep admission? Or do we become automatically entered by virtue of mental assent, or by submitting the proper paperwork, or by fortuitous timing and place of birth?

According to Luke 9:23 and John 12:25–26, we belong to the King, and thus to His Kingdom, when we experience the new birth. This means we are a new kind of person, the kind who believe Him, follow Him, and love Him. That seems straightforward enough, but Jesus saw fit to give us something tangible to mark our enrollment in His kingdom. Animals seem to be primarily physical beings, angels seem to be primarily spiritual beings, but humans exist at the intersection of spiritual and physical existence. A crucial attribute of God's Kingdom on Earth is this physical and spiritual intersection, it is not one or the other, but both.

So water baptism is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality which declares and symbolizes our new identity and our renewed Kingdom vocation as image bearers of God.

Water baptism is the entrance into the visible body of Jesus Christ. But why water baptism? What does it signify?

Baptism illustrates and declares that we have been cleansed and purified of our past (1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16).

- Baptism symbolizes passing "through the water," a metaphor for death (Isa. 43:2); it is a declaration that this person has died to sin. Baptism typifies the crucifixion of the old nature and being born a new person in Christ (Rom. 6:3, 4).
- Baptism represents the resurrection, being raised into a new life and into a new identity rooted in Christ and His work of healing His world (Col. 2:12, 13).

- Baptism symbolizes the prophesied pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon those who have been redeemed and recreated in God's new Kingdom (Acts 11:15, 16).
- As new creations in Christ, the old breach between God and man has been closed, fellowship has been restored. Just as God walked "in the cool of the day" with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, so the Holy Spirit directs and comforts the people of His Kingdom (Gen. 3:8; John 14:16, 26).

But water baptism is not only a statement about our relationship with God and His work of healing and renewal. It is not only about our allegiance to Christ and entrance into His Kingdom. When we talk of entrance into His Kingdom, we make a clear and unequivocal statement about our relationship with our brothers and sisters, because we cannot come to God apart from coming to the people of God (1 John 4:7–21). Where God is, there His people are with Him. The Kingdom of God is populated with the people of God. Except for the Ethiopian Eunuch, who was baptized by Philip in a stream under unique circumstances, the New Testament consistently pictures baptism as a corporate experience. It is not only a symbol of spiritual reality, not only a public declaration of allegiance to the Kingdom of God. It is the door through which we are brought into the community of believers. When we are "baptized into Christ Jesus," we are also "baptized into one body" (Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13).

One of the last things Jesus taught His disciples was to go and make more disciples, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mat. 28:19, 20). Making a disciple, or a citizen of the Kingdom of God, is more than baptizing a person, as some in church history seem to have assumed.[4] Becoming a disciple of Jesus is to become a follower of Jesus. To become a follower, one must first hear the teachings of Jesus, understand and believe them, and then "have faith" in Him. In other words, choose to make Him Lord of one's life out of love for Him. Baptism then, is the public declaration of all these things.

Christian martyrs through the centuries and across the world, in all cultures and ages, have counted the public testimony of water baptism and all that it signifies to be of such value that they risked their own lives both in performing and receiving it with the community of believers.

Communion

There is another foundational premise of Jesus' Kingdom which Jesus wanted to drive home, to imprint on His followers. He held a special meal with His disciples, as a representation and physical manifestation of their new life and shared identity with Him and one another. This meal that commemorated the first Passover lamb became the basis for remembrance of Jesus as the final sacrificial Lamb of God

The story of Jesus' last supper with His closest followers is told in Luke 22. Jesus took the bread and the wine and served His disciples. He told them that just as He was breaking the bread and

4 For example: the mass "Baptism of Rus" in the Dnieper River, Kiev, by Prince Vladimir in 988 AD, the forced baptisms of the Islamic Moriscos in Spain in the 1600s, the forced mass baptisms of the Saxons by Charlemagne in the 700s AD, the forced baptism of the Incan emperor Atahualpa and others in the New World, etc.

pouring out the wine, so also His body would be broken and His blood poured out. And just as the bread and wine give life and strength to those who eat and drink it, so also His broken body and shed blood bring eternal life and spiritual strength to those who accept Him (John 6:54).

"Do this," Jesus said, "in remembrance of me."

To help us remember, Christ's followers have always shared a special meal of bread and wine. It reminds us that we have been changed and the world is a different place because of the broken Body of Christ. Sometimes it has been called the Eucharist, or Abendmahl (Evening Meal), or The Lord's Supper. Other times it has simply been called Communion, an English transliteration of the Greek *koinonia* found in 1 Corinthians 10:16, meaning "participation" and/or "fellowship." Sometimes there is only a symbolic meal, other times there is a full meal following the ceremonial observances. Whatever it is called, or however it is practiced, it is a special, formal service in which the followers of Christ serve one another bread and wine in honor of the death, resurrection, and new manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Christians have long recognized the multiple layers of meaning built into the metaphor of bread as the body of Christ. Just as Jesus' body was broken and sacrificed and became a kind of nourishing spiritual bread, so too we must be broken and become that bread. Like individual kernels of grain, we must die, be crushed and ground together into flour which, when mixed with water and salt and subjected to high heat becomes a nourishing loaf of unleavened bread. And just as the grapes must be crushed and the wine mingled together, so our old man must be crushed, put to death, and blended with others. Just as with the bread and wine, a new creation is formed in this process, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17; Eph. 4:13).

Community

But true brotherhood community is a thing that is lived, not merely believed. It is not only a theory and ceremony, but a way of living, and Jesus taught His followers to practice community both formally and in daily life. What good is a shared communion meal, however much it reminds us of powerful truths, and however packed it might be with moving metaphors, if it is not manifested in the real practice of Kingdom community? The purpose of a symbol is to represent a meaningful reality. If there is no concrete reality behind it, there is no reason for the symbol to exist. Such a ceremony makes liars out of its participants, rather than members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27–29).

We remember not only what He taught, but what He did for our sakes. And we not only remember what He did for our sakes, but we follow Him, doing the kinds of things He did. We pour out our lives for the sake of others, die to self, heal the hurting, and love not only our friends but also those who want to harm us. In doing these things, those who believe in Him will be joined together in Him and become His body (1 Cor. 12:12–27). Once again, we find that the teachings of Christ make little sense apart from a group of believers coming together to live out His teachings. We are called to live them out, not only with the help and encouragement of one another, but as a way of loving and serving one another.

The idea of undergoing a spiritual transformation which enables our joining with other people as the literal manifestation of the Body of the God of Creation might sound mystical or utopian, but the Kingdom of God is anything but that. Jesus keeps His body's feet planted sturdily in the unpretentious dirt of the world He created. It is true that there can be no besmirching of His body with the unclean muck of the gutters and sewers, but the clean, honest dust and soil of human relationships and growing things darkens the fingernails of our hands, streaks the sweat on our faces, and stains the knees of our garments. And it is truly His darkened fingernails, His dirt-streaked face, and His stained knees at work among us. Living out of community as the body of Christ on earth is not utopia where there is an absence of all that is difficult or messy or dirty, but it is the promise of a good, wholesome place in which the human struggle becomes meaningful and worthwhile in the light of God's friendship and grace. This is what it looks like when the believers church is at work embodying the transformative power of God's Kingdom in bringing healing and new life to His world.

The Two Kingdoms: Allegiance to God

All of this talk of the Kingdom of God raises a pressing question; how does it relate to the existing countries and kingdoms on earth? Can a citizen of the Kingdom of God also be loyal to the United States, or the United Arab Emirates, or Canada, or Cameroon?

> *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).*

Jesus tells Pilate, a man consumed with the power and politics of kingdom, "now is my kingdom not from hence." It is here, but it is not *from* here. It comes from somewhere else, and it brings its values and priorities from that somewhere else.

Jesus' kingdom is as real as any other, but it is different. It doesn't compete for the same resources or on the same premises that the kingdoms of the world compete on. It does not battle other people groups for control of geography, natural resources, economies, or to establish military dominance. It competes for the hearts of men and women, not for their tax dollars. It leverages the incomparable power of suffering love, rather than the threat of coercive violence (Rom. 12:19–21).

Because of the differing values and operating premises, followers of Jesus find that they must often choose between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. We live within kingdoms of the world, and as we are taught in Romans 13 and in 1 Peter 2:17, we obey their laws, pray for their leaders, pay their taxes, and try to be good citizens and neighbors. But for followers of Christ, His kingdom must always take priority. Wherever there is a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, we must choose Christ. As Jesus asked His followers, "why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Given this tension between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, there is an unsurprising pattern in history that whenever the church has attempted to gain control of its host country through political power or ideological movements, the results have ended with

dishonor to God, dishonor to the church, and often dishonor to the country. Human society has been enriched and has flourished where the influence and values of Christ have been absorbed into the culture. However, from the Crusades to the Inquisition, from Münster to the Thirty Years War, from the Prohibition movement to the Moral Majority, attempts to advance the kingdom of God via the kingdom of the world have ended with a loss of credibility to the church, and little discernable improvement in society.

Discipleship: A Disciplined Church

Is the body of Christ not concerned then with working for a just and fair society? It absolutely is. But the body of Christ is a community which works for justice, not through coercive activism but through love and service to one's enemies, through cultivating and multiplying Christlike virtues, and through helping each other overcome the destructive strongholds of vice and sin. Loving one's enemies is far from ignoring one's enemies. It is the most sure and effective way of turning them from their violence and injustice. It means overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:20, 21). Discipline is not just the work of condemning and pulling out weeds, but the work of cultivating fruitful plants. This is also messy and dirty work. It finds ways of loving its neighbors as itself. It is not content with a theoretical love of one's enemies which is able to lovingly kill them in battle.[5] Nor does it accept the subtle resentment which also pretends to love one's neighbor while working to destroy him or his reputation behind the scenes. Loving one's brother is at times more challenging than loving one's enemies.

As the embodiment of Christ's transformative power, the believers church is not content merely to affirm high ideals and lofty principles. It digs into the human heart, turns over the fallow ground, and plants the seeds of change. It swings its hoe down into the wet dirt and draws out the weeds of human brokenness. It knows that some plants are producing grain, and some are robbing moisture and nutrients from the grain and seeks to know the difference. But Christ was not rough or cold-blooded and neither is His body. His gentle touch does not threaten bruised reeds. Flickering candles wicks are not extinguished by His breath but brightened and strengthened. These are the ways that a disciplined and discipled church effects positive change in our society; by providing a positive example of Godly virtues and by gently helping our fellowman to overcome vices.

The believers' church is a place where sin is confronted and condemned, and where strongholds are destroyed and overcome (2 Cor. 10:4–6). Grace is one of the earmarks of the believers church, but there is no grace in overlooking and dismissing sin (Mat. 1:21, 18:7–9, 18:15–17).

And yet the church must strive to remember that it is never called to exercise retribution or vengeance for offences against itself (II Thess. 3:15; 1 Cor. 4:14). Removal from membership of the local body is the strongest discipline that Christ has authorized His disciples to perform. Any form of physical or spiritual or emotional coercion must be rejected, not only because it

5 A concept suggested by Augustine: Omid Moludy. "Love for Enemies in Augustine's Ethics: An Examination and Analysis." The St. Aphrahat the Persian Sage Church Website. Persian Church, Manchester. July 14, 2025. www.aphrahat.com/en/post/love-for-enemies-in-augustine-s-ethics-an-examination-and-analysis

is unloving, but because love for Christ cannot be coerced. Attempts to coerce our fellowman always betray a motive other than love. The believers church always seeks to heal and redeem and renew as long as there is any hope, because that is what Jesus, the head of the body, does for us. It must be guided by love, asking what path forward will give the best opportunity for a redemptive outcome (1 Cor. 5; Gal. 6:1).

The believers' church will discipline itself to follow Christ in many practical ways; here are just three ways congregations can apply the concept of discipline in the church.

Modesty and temperance: Being disciplined entails finding ways to apply principles of modesty, not using liberty as an opportunity to feed the flesh (Gal. 5:13). A disciple of Christ practices modesty as a lifestyle, not only as a dress code. For the follower of Christ, modesty also governs business practices, vacations, hobbies, and the homes we live in. It defines guidelines and traditions to guard against cultural relativism, consumerism, and status seeking, while also guarding against traditionalism and a self-righteous hypocrisy based on commandments of men (Col. 2:20–22).

Giving: Being a disciplined body means finding ways to give generously and systematically, not only giving to ourselves so that we can build nice facilities and fund good schools and programs for our young people, but in ways that meaningfully impact the needs of the poor and disadvantaged around us. It is not content to give out of its excess, but it gives all in the service of Christ (Luke 21:1–4). It volunteers on work projects, it fills up the signup sheet for meals, it invites strangers to the table. It gives time, money, and resources, seeking to impact real people with the love of Christ (James 2:15, 16) by sponsoring refugees, or supporting the local homeless shelter with meals and services, or donating hygiene kits, blankets, and food parcels though relief organizations. Being disciplined in giving means forming habits of generosity, taking on an identity as a giver, rather than a taker. Sometimes giving is less about addressing the needs of the poor than addressing the need of the rich to love Christ and love like Him (Mat. 25:40; Acts 20:35; 2 Cor. 9:6–12).

Accountability: As a disciplined body, the believers church works together in forming applications to following Christ in local settings. They will not hide behind policies and procedures and technicalities and official language but show themselves to one another openly and intentionally. Such trust takes time to develop, but a follower of Christ seeks to learn the discipline of accountability, not neglecting the messy challenge of orthopraxy (right living) in favor of the tidy idealism of orthodoxy (right thinking).

Evangelism: The Work of the Church

Is there a purpose, or a goal, or an intent behind Christ's establishment of the believers' church, or is it simply a byproduct of humans getting saved?

The church is far more than a byproduct. The ingenuity of God is unveiled as the church rises to its task (2 Cor. 5:18; Eph. 3:9–10, 4:13).

God has designed humans, like bloodhounds following a scent, to be powerfully drawn toward the healing and joy and peace we find in connection with God and other people. There is a

reason Jesus presented love for God and neighbor as the two greatest commandments. This love forms us as authentic humans and make us whole. At the same time, and for the same reason, this healing, sustaining connection with God and other humans has always been the thing that Satan has targeted for manipulation and distortion. Starting in the Garden of Eden, his first move was to drive a wedge of distrust between God and His human creatures, and then between the humans themselves. First, they hid from God. Then, they blamed each other. Finally, they competed against each other for control and for resources. And so it has gone for much of human history. Human against human, neighbor against neighbor, nation against nation.

The church of Christ turns all this upside down by relinquishing control back to God. The believers church is being changed and conformed to the image of Jesus. As we conform to His image our relationships with our fellowmen are also transformed (1 John 1:7). When we cede all power and authority to Christ, our fellow humans are no longer threats, but friends. The woman no longer seeks to control the man, and the man no longer dominates the woman[6] because in the renewed Kingdom of God both have ceded the throne back to Christ as He works to transform the world into what it was always meant to be—His Kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace.

In a post-Eden world where Satan has taken the most central thing about our humanity (relationships with God and others) and turned it into a source of tension, risk, strategy, and zero-sum competition ending in suffering and disappointment, how can we be healed? By God working through the church, not merely as an institution but as a community of believers.

Through the church and in the church, He is drawing His creation back into wholesome relationships which build up rather than consume one another (James 4:1).

Humans betrayed God, choosing to rebel against Him in the Garden of Eden and triggering millennia of suffering and death in God's world. And yet He inexplicably, or perhaps poetically, chose to entrust exactly those fickle, faithless, self-interested creatures who rejected Him the first time around to serve as His primary argument for convincing humanity to return (John 13:35; John 17:21–13). But Jesus was never really threatened by Satan's attack in the Garden of Eden. Perhaps because Jesus understood human nature as Satan never could. Having made them in His own image, and with a deep craving for connection and loving relationship, He knew what would happen when He came to earth and gathered a few humans together in loving relationship with God and each other. It would spread like fire.

This was God's plan to vindicate Himself and His work. Not only would it show humanity the truth about God and invite them into His redemption and work of renewal, but also the believers' church would demonstrate once and for all God's wisdom and authority to the spiritual realm (Eph. 3:9–10). It is both the instrument and evidence of God's redemptive work in the world.

6 Genesis 3:16b is possibly alluding to a power struggle that has arisen between Adam and Eve. Genesis 4:7b has similar language describing Cain's struggle to control his sinful passion. See ESV or NET translations. See also Ephesians 5:22–33.

Conclusion: A Sacred Vocation

In the New Covenant God has chosen to dwell among His people. There in the community of believers is found the presence of God, the place where heaven and earth meet. "Temple" is the Biblical term given for such a place; a place where heaven and earth overlap or intersect. It is a portal of sorts where the heavenly and the earthly meet and communicate. It is a holy, sacred place, and worshipers disrespect it at the cost of their own life.

> *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy,* ***which temple you are*** *(1 Cor. 3:17).*

It is a sacred vocation to bear the image of God in the world. It is a vocation too heavy for any one person to bear. Even in Genesis it is "them" who were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27, 5:1a, 2b). Together, Adam and Eve were created in His image. It is still in the togetherness of God's people where the glory of God dwells, where His good creation is healed, and where His human creatures can exist as they were meant to be, in communion with God and their fellowman (1 John 1:7).

> *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*
>
> *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*
>
> *Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:13–22).*

This is the Believers Church, the Body of Christ. It is normal fallible human beings living together in community, baptizing one another, serving one another, disciplining and forgiving one another, encouraging one another to follow the way of Christ. Normal people demonstrating what it is like when God rules His people and transforms His world. The Church is the instrument through which God's Kingdom advances His work of redemption on Earth. Its very existence is His most powerful appeal to win back the rebel hearts and minds of His human creatures and to drive out the powers of darkness from His good creation.

Suggestions for pastors

- Have a discussion at a members' meeting (or do a survey) asking, "What parts of our services or activities are life-giving, and what parts need to be revitalized, dropped, or replaced?" (List the things to be evaluated: Sunday morning service, prayer meeting, song services, summer Bible school, etc.)
- Preach a clear salvation message at least once a year.
- In a series of discussions (Sunday school or Wednesday evening class), go through Gary Miller's book *Church Matters* or Jonathan Leeman's book *Church Membership* to strengthen conviction for the church as a voluntary brotherhood, following Jesus together.
- Make baptisms significant by encouraging applicants to invite extended family members and friends, by including a congregational response (see, for example, #724 and #725 in the *Mennonite Hymnal*), by encouraging members to welcome the new members, and by having a fellowship meal following the baptism.
- Periodically preach the "two-kingdom" theme, including stories of believer's baptism among early Anabaptists and how they paved the way for other churches to practice believer's baptism.
- In the communion service, keep the focus on remembrance of Jesus, but note also the significance of the kernels ground together to become "one bread" and the individual grapes crushed to become "one cup."
- Encourage accountability by organizing small groups and one-on-one mentoring relationships. Provide guidance so that these interactions promote spiritual development and don't focus only on spiritual problems.
- To minimize individualism and promote body life, arrange for interaction across age differences so that younger members profit from the wisdom and maturity of older members. This can happen in places like Sunday school, prayer groups, small groups, or social events.
- Where discipline of erring members is necessary, involve the congregation, setting an example of open, kind, truthful, and respectful communication.

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