

Anabaptist Exceptionalism

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly tested God's people. Government leaders have implemented restrictions that affect us financially, relationally, educationally, and perhaps most significantly, spiritually. Most churches have experienced some level of restriction to their gatherings. This has ranged from full shutdowns, to holding outdoor meetings, to meetings with only a percentage of members in attendance. In addition, we have been encouraged (sometimes required) to practice social distancing, masking, and regular sanitizing.

While the COVID restrictions are not the primary focus of this article, they do illustrate what appears to many Anabaptist leaders to reveal an underlying problem, a problem that shows itself elsewhere but has been especially apparent in our response to this pandemic. The problem has sometimes been labeled as "Anabaptist Exceptionalism" and means simply the assumption that certain laws do not apply to us. Although the problem can be stated simply, there are often a variety of contributing factors that make it difficult to recognize.

Because we have needed to wrestle with the COVID restrictions for many months, probably most of us have already locked into our positions and our reasons for them. But because it is something we are still dealing with, it is the issue freshest on our minds and serves to illustrate the point. If you don't find yourself agreeing with the positions laid out here in responding to the pandemic, will you at least consider the implications of the larger concern of exceptionalism?

As reflected in the opening paragraph, the COVID restrictions push against deeply held values and practices in the community of faith. We are

called to show fervent love for each other (1 Peter 1:22) and urged not to forsake assembling for worship (Hebrews 10:25). Our fellowship meals are not merely to feed ourselves, but to deepen our relationships, and we take seriously Paul's instructions to "Greet one another with a holy kiss (2 Corinthians 2:12).

The same Scriptures that call us to loving fellowship and regular worship also call us to obey government officials. Writing to believers under the corrupt Roman government, Paul said, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:1-2). Paul went on to say we are to "be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake" (v. 5).

Likewise, Peter earnestly urges believers to obey "every ordinance of man" and have their "conduct honorable among the Gentiles" (1 Peter 2:12, 13, NKJV) so that unbelievers cannot justifiably accuse us of wrongdoing.

While the wording of these texts is not hard to understand, it takes wisdom from above to know how to find a way forward when different biblical principles apply to the same situation and seem to pull us in different directions. This is no doubt one reason the government restrictions to contain the pandemic have generated divergent responses from conservative Anabaptist people, with some people strongly emphasizing the losses to fellowship and encouraging resistance to the restrictions and others strongly emphasizing the need to obey those God has placed over us.

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The complicating reality is that those who ignore or oppose the restrictions do so for a variety of reasons and sometimes for reasons quite apart from the value of Christian fellowship. Some say the government is overreaching its authority, just wanting to prepare us for more control. Others reject the voice of epidemiologists, saying they have read health experts who warn against the wearing of masks or that the better approach is to let herd immunity develop. Some are convinced this is a conspiracy and that the whole pandemic is overblown. And others warn that the “solution” proposed by our leaders is worse than the problem itself—they point to the economic toll on businesses and the psychological and relational cost of distancing.

But our concern here is a mentality—perhaps fed by the above reasons—that we are exempt from following government mandates. The truth is that we have been given exemption from certain obligations required of other citizens, most notably exemption from military service, jury duty, and (for some of us) the social security system. Similarly, we have been allowed to develop our own systems to meet legal requirements in education, liability insurance, and medical coverage (again, some groups have done this more than others).

We should certainly be grateful that we have been granted exemption from military service and that we have the freedom to provide our own liability insurance and operate our own schools. These are great privileges, and it is appropriate to value these exemptions and make grateful use of them.

But there is a vast difference between acting on exemptions granted to us in respect to our religious convictions, and simply deciding on our own to ignore civil laws. It is one thing to “obey God rather than man” when civil directives go directly contrary to God’s commands, and it is quite another to ignore civil directives because

we do not think they are necessary, or we assume our way is better.

Because the COVID restrictions affect deeply held values and practices, we must consider if it is possible to follow the restrictions and still uphold those values. Is this really an either/or situation—either follow the restrictions or have Christian fellowship? While following the guidelines may make for uncomfortable adjustments on our part, can we apply our Anabaptist strengths of ingenuity and persistence to finding ways of continuing worship and spiritual connections within those guidelines?

Another factor to consider is the reason for the restrictions. It is one thing if restrictions are intended to oppose Christianity, and it is another if they are intended to do good—as in this case to avoid the spread of a virus. Because the health of our neighbors and particularly the care of the vulnerable is a Christian value, we ought not to pit one Christian value against another. If we assume that we ought to intentionally disregard the restrictions for the sake of our fellowship, it immediately raises other significant questions:

How are our gatherings contributing to the spread of the virus in our communities?

Can we really justify more people being sick in our community, hospitals shutting off services, medical workers being overworked, and some people dying as a result of our refusal to comply with the restrictions?

How will our neighbors view our continued gathering in church when they are not allowed to attend their sports events?

Even if we were to find a way to justify not complying with the restrictions in our meetings, how are we exempt from the mandates when we circulate in society?

What are we saying to the public when in a store requiring masks (where it is mandated by the

state) most of the ones not complying are plainly dressed Anabaptists?

What are we saying about the biblical value of submission to authority when a veiled Anabaptist woman walks around in public places simply ignoring state requirements?

What are we saying to other businesses when an Anabaptist-owned business ignores state regulations for masking and social distancing and neither the owner nor the workers comply?

What are we saying to those who are especially vulnerable to the virus or to those who have lost loved ones when we refuse to take precautions against its spread and brush it off as overblown?

What are we saying to those in government positions attempting to control the virus when the hot spots in their jurisdiction are the Anabaptist localities?

What are we saying to the health care workers who regularly work with the sick and dying and carefully follow health protocol when we adamantly declare their precautions don't work? And what are we saying to those in health care when they are working extra shifts, exposing themselves regularly to the virus, while we resist or even mock the virus and the attempts to control it?

The above questions relate specifically to the current situation, but do we have the same mindset elsewhere?

Do we fudge hunting and fishing laws when no officers are around?

When Anabaptists are convicted of crimes, do we assume they should have leniency?

Do we ignore environmental laws, conservation laws, safety laws, or agricultural laws because we think the people who make them don't know what they are doing?

Why do many Anabaptists regularly get taken in by investment scams that are not registered with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission?

What are we saying to our children when we ignore laws we think are unimportant? Or what are we saying to our young church members who think the things we require of them don't make sense?

Common sense is a good thing, and we certainly must use it in the application of laws—even God's laws, as Jesus illustrated in referencing pulling an ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath. But the question we must ask is if our posture is one of understanding the intent of those over us and cooperating with them to the best of our ability or a posture of indifference and the assumption we are exempt.

So the question we must honestly consider is if we have the mindset that the laws that apply to general society do not apply to us. Our actions in too many cases seem to say that we don't have to follow civil laws or honor our civil leaders when we think they are ridiculous, that we know better than the experts, and that it really doesn't matter to us how our behavior might be affecting others (in the case of COVID, increasing the load on our health care facilities and ignoring the effects on the elderly or vulnerable). Are we assuming a mindset of exceptionalism and unthinkingly sending messages to our civil leaders, to our neighbors, and to our children that will cost us dearly?

How would it change our approach if we viewed the pandemic as giving us opportunities to honor the name of Jesus and demonstrate Christlike virtues to a watching world?

What testimony might we give if civil leaders could know they can count on the Anabaptists to comply with laws and to help them deal with large problems? What would they think if they saw us doing our best to find creative ways to practice

our values while still honoring their guidelines? What could we communicate to our communities if we not only were careful with health guidelines but offered assistance where we could, blessing and caring for the sick and supporting health care workers? What example could we be setting for our children and youth if we honored our civil leaders and followed their guidelines with a good attitude, even when doing so was inconvenient or seemed unnecessary?

Exemptions extended to us for conscience' sake are wonderful privileges. We should thank God for them. But these great privileges do not place us above the law or give us freedom to pick and choose what laws we obey. Cheerful disobedience is still disobedience. Plain-clothed trust in our own understanding is still trust in our own understanding.

“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king” (1 Peter 2:13-17).

ViewPoint builds on the Anabaptist value of community wisdom. A team comprised primarily of older, ordained men forms the core executive group. Subcommittees are then formed to address particular issues, drawing in people experienced in the subject. ViewPoint was formed in response to repeated calls for help in addressing issues facing conservative Anabaptist leaders. A number of church leaders asked Faith Builders (Guys Mills) to facilitate the effort. The ViewPoint executive committee includes Steven Brubaker (PA), Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblentz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), and David Yoder (KS). Materials produced by ViewPoint are intended to assist and encourage church leaders, not to dictate or control them. Leaders are free to use the uncopyrighted materials as best suits their needs.

To sum up:

- The resistance among some Anabaptists to follow government restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19 reflects a dangerous mindset that we are exempt from following government mandates that don't make sense to us.
- When we openly disregard civil laws and contribute to societal problems, we are damaging our witness to civil authorities, showing disregard to our neighbors, and undermining our credibility with our children.
- We should look for creative ways to live out our values within the government restrictions where we can, and be a help, not a hindrance, to solving large societal problems.

This article was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues. Writing group: Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblentz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), and David Yoder (KS). Before release, this article was reviewed by a number of conservative Anabaptist leaders.

We welcome your response. Write us at contact@anabaptistviewpoint.org or send a letter to:

ViewPoint
28527 Guys Mills Rd
Guys Mills, PA 16327

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a summary

1. The restrictions imposed to slow the COVID-19 pandemic. . .
 - Should not be equated with or viewed as religious persecution
 - Make the practice of Christian values such as fellowship, openness, and corporate worship more difficult
 - And at the same time correspond to Christian values such as obedience to authority and love for neighbor
 - Are ignored or opposed both in general culture and by some Anabaptists for a wide variety of reasons
 - Have revealed a weakness in many Anabaptists who see themselves as exempt from compliance to laws that do not make sense to them
2. Anabaptist exceptionalism . . .
 - Is the assumption that certain laws do not apply to us
 - May be partly rooted in our separate lifestyle
 - Seems specifically to rise from exemptions we have been granted, such as exemption from military service and freedom to operate our own schools and insurance programs
3. The pandemic gives us the opportunity. . .
 - Takes legitimate exemptions to illegitimate applications
 - Is damaging to our testimony to civil authorities and to our neighbors
 - Demonstrates to our children that they may ignore directives they do not think are necessary
3. The pandemic gives us the opportunity. . .
 - To practice the biblical command to honor civil authorities and help them accomplish good objectives
 - To find creative ways to live out biblical values in difficult circumstances
 - To show our concern for the sick and vulnerable, and to honor the elderly
 - To demonstrate to our children the value of willing obedience even when it is difficult or inconvenient
 - To focus on the many blessings we have instead of our inconveniences
 - To honor our Lord Jesus with humble, godly lives

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some additional thoughts for church leaders

This pandemic and the resulting restrictions have the danger of creating significant dissension among members and distraction to the church's focus and mission. We are already well into the pandemic, and many churches (and leaders) have settled into their positions and responses. The following suggestions and reflections are not intended to answer all the questions or to fuel debate. The article focused on the problem of exceptionalism, however, not so much on the restrictions themselves. Situations vary, and you may not find these thoughts helpful, but here are a few more considerations:

- Be a good listener. People do need to be heard when they are frustrated, even when they are immature in expressing themselves.
- Avoid arguing (2 Timothy 2:23-26). The combative political and societal scene is feeding unrest and side-taking, and it is tempting to counter strong opinions with stronger responses. Church leaders are to "avoid foolish and ignorant disputes" and to "be gentle to all." Call your members to be peacemakers and to avoid engaging in inflammatory tactics. The free-for-all posting and bashing on social media is not becoming to followers of Jesus. Actually, arguing with "earthly wisdom" tends to entrench people in their own position, rather than bring them to peace.
- Provide guidance for your congregation (1 Peter 5:2, 3). In the situation we are facing, it may seem easier to avoid giving guidance because you will no doubt face disagreement or even strong criticism no matter what you say. But groups do need guidance in difficult times, and letting every person choose for himself leaves your congregation open to the ravages of the most strong-spoken (and perhaps the most poorly informed).
- In providing guidance for how to respond to civil mandates, consider acquainting yourself firsthand with those mandates, not the interpretations of them, whether by news media, social media, or self-educated individuals.
- How might you urge your members to focus on how love should inform our actions, rather than on having the most accurate information? No one person understands the pandemic completely or can be certain about the best response—every stance, every approach has some "expert" claim to validate it. "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

- This may be an opportunity to discuss sources of information and the need for discernment. The left-leaning media is notoriously biased in reporting, and we have good reason to be cautious about what we read in the news. At the same time, right-leaning sources that point out the left-leaning bias and “correct” it, may be just as skewed in another direction. And social media is a source of increasingly twisted information—it is one of the primary sources and spreaders of misinformation.
- You might discuss with your congregation ways to take advantage of opportunities (Ephesians 5:15, 16). How can you show Christ’s love during this time? What are creative ways to fill in with fellowship, faith, and love during restrictions? Restricted fellowship is nothing new for God’s people—persecution, illness, or even mission work often have placed limitations on fellowship, sometimes for short seasons, sometimes for an extended time. How have believers compensated (even thrived) in these settings?
- Beware of proof-texting. Paul called Timothy to “rightly divide” the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15). We need to base our responses solidly on Scripture, but that means faithfully interpreting what Scripture says in its context. Proof-texting is pulling a Scripture out of context, or it is basing a position on one verse when multiple Scriptures bear upon the subject. Two examples:
 - We might quote Hebrews 10:25 because it urges us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. This clearly holds high the value of Christian fellowship, and we ought to continue to hold that value no matter how we respond to the current restrictions on church gatherings. But in the context, the writer is urging Christians who were discouraged by persecution not to give up (“hold fast,” v. 23; “stir up,” v. 24). The writer is concerned that persecution for their faith (see vv. 32-39) would cause them to lose heart and turn back. This is very different from our situation where we are asked temporarily to limit the number of people together to slow the spread of sickness. The value of fellowship certainly applies to our situation, but numerous other Scriptural principles apply as well. And we ought not to try to make the text say we have to keep meeting as always, or even more often, during a pandemic. In keeping with the writer’s concern that God’s people not lose heart, what are we doing for those whose fellowship opportunities are especially limited due to the pandemic? If we “go on as normal” and consequently make it unsafe for our elderly or for members with existing health concerns, will they lose heart?
 - As another example, we might quote 2 Timothy 1:7, “God hath not given us the spirit of fear” either in resistance to getting the vaccine or in support of getting it. Those who think we should not be vaccinated, can assume those who get it are doing so in fear and should instead trust God. Those who support getting vaccinated could quote this verse to those who won’t due to some people having reacted to the vaccine, or to those who say the government is just trying to exert control, or to those who are convinced the vaccine is “tainted.” (Vaccination, of course, is a subject itself.)

- Be willing to address concerns brought to light by the pandemic (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Some of the more concerning issues include:
 1. How strongly some of our people have aligned themselves politically.
 2. How susceptible some people are to “authorities” that resist the experts.
 3. How much input people are getting from things posted online, and the resultant arrogant stances they take.
 4. The attitudes and tactics used to engage opposing viewpoints—belligerence vs. humility, mockery vs. respect, attack vs. openness, quick to speak vs. quick to hear, etc.
 5. How affluence tends to increase entitlement.
 6. The attitude/stance of not wanting to be told what to do.
- What opportunities is this pandemic affording believers? Early on, some Anabaptists made face coverings to help with the shortages in health care. Others prepared meals for people especially hard-hit by the pandemic. Some people are obviously fearful in this time—are we taking the opportunities to share our faith in Jesus? Are there elderly people or people with health concerns in our churches or communities who are being neglected?
- Divisive issues easily pull our focus away from things that matter most. What are we in danger of forgetting in the midst of differences over government restrictions or vaccines or whether the election was fair? What really does matter most in the Kingdom of God, and how can we keep our focus on Jesus and His Kingdom?

