



Anabaptists: The Church Living in Antithesis to the World

Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm

Introduction

Sometimes it seems that others understand us better than what we understand ourselves. The following article was taken from a book written by Evangelical authors who openly do not profess to be Anabaptists, and who clearly state that they think Reformed theology and practice is better than Anabaptist ideas. Yet, they define and explain “kingdom theology” and outlook better than many Anabaptists have explained themselves.

While we at *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* cannot recommend all the conclusions of the book from which this article was taken (and we would have worded a few points differently in what we quote below), we have found their description of Anabaptism to be clear and honest. The book takes a look at the relationship of the church with the surrounding culture and lays out several different models of relationship. This chapter explains how the Anabaptists envisioned that relationship, a model which we at *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* can endorse. Note that the footnotes are original, with the exceptions of those that begin with THTR (*The Heartbeat of the Remnant*) where a few explanatory notes have been inserted to clarify the text. The Scripture quotations are not from the KJV as we are not changing the article with the exception of the few explanatory footnotes. ~

For some Christians, the pervasiveness of sin in culture precludes confessing Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life. During the Reformation the Anabaptists argued that since all Christians are called by

Jesus to righteousness, they must resist any sinful compromise and intentionally live in opposition to culture’s sinful structures. The Anabaptists called for Christians to separate and establish a community that faithfully heralds Jesus Christ. At the center of this alternative world is the church, the community of Jesus Christ’s faithful disciples evidencing their qualitative difference from this sinful world. While actively persecuted by Christendom and dismissed as eccentrics and even as failures, the Anabaptists measured success not by their influence or impact on society but by their conformity to Jesus Christ. For in the end, that alone counts.

The Anabaptists’ Theological Vision

The Anabaptists’ distinctive theological vision of Christian mission builds on their understanding of sin, Jesus’ radical work, and the church.

Creation and Sin

God created a perfect world for humans to live in love and obedience. Humans were to place their “hope and comfort” on God alone, the source of all good, and “seek diligently to please Him”; they were not to trust the structure of politics, possessions, and family that constitute human society and culture.¹ But humans rebelled and sought “salvation, comfort and help apart from God,” through the state, a “wife, child, house, farm, money, goods or even himself.”² These structures of God’s good creation usurp the place of God. They demand absolute allegiance, claiming that salvation and hope are found only in *this* state or *this* family and not in any other. To ensure this idol’s triumph, no human action or sacrifice is prohibited, for this state, family, or individual determines what is just and right.³ There are myriad contemporary examples: the Bosnian Serbs contort “patriotic nationalism” into “ethnic cleansing”; Planned Parenthood rationalizes abortion as “free choice”; the gay lobby exonerates its “alternative lifestyle” as “the way God created us”; and the CEO justifies laying off thousands of middle-aged employees, without regard for their family or future, as “helping the bottom line.”

Simply put, at the Fall the world and its structures succumbed to Satan’s rule (1 John 2:15-17). Even human-

1 Peter Rideman, *Confession of Faith: Account of our Religion, Doctrine and Faith, Given by Peter Rideman of the Brothers Whom Men Call Hutterians* (Suffolk: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), 50.

2 Ibid., 50-51.

3 THTR—In other words, man sets up his own moral and ethical standard of right and wrong, through civil laws created by a clan, a country, or a dictator. When a group or an individual sets up a standard of right and wrong different from what God has declared, it becomes self-righteousness (*Self* declaring what is righteous rather than submitting to the righteousness of God. Ro. 10:3).

Old Testament

Divorce permitted (Deut. 24:1-4)

Do not love your enemy (Deut. 19:21; Ps. 139:21ff)

*Heretics and false prophets should be put to death.
(Deut. 13:5)*

Believers active in government

Partake in this sinful world

Jesus' Ethic

Divorce prohibited (Luke 16:18; Matt. 19:8)

Love your enemy (Matt. 5:43ff)

*Shun heretics, but commit their judgment to God at
the end of the age (Matt. 13:25-30, 36-43)*

Christians must not be magistrates (1 Cor. 5:12)

Separate from Babylon (2 Cor. 6:14ff)

ity's noble aims—justice, righteousness, and peace—are warped and prostituted to the sinner's own endeavors. The Old Testament recognized evil's present and invincible reality and looked forward to the Messiah's advent and his defeat of evil. As a result, the Mosaic Law could only place restraints on evil and this through compromise. While the Law prohibited unjust retaliation, such as a life for an eye, it sanctioned proportionate retaliation (Deut. 19:21). Its toleration of warfare, divorce, and not loving one's enemies all reflect the incorrigibility of evil.⁴ The New Testament similarly describes creation as under the "dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13), where the "evil one" (1 John 5:19) is its "prince" (John 12:31). These sinful structures with all their "abominations" and "adulteries," the "haunt for every evil spirit" (Rev. 18:2), constitute Babylon (Rev. 17:4-5).

Jesus Christ and His Kingdom

In the midst of this sinful world, God in Jesus Christ has supernaturally invaded Satan's realm, disarmed these principalities and powers (Col. 2:15), and established his own kingdom. This kingdom is not simply a spiritual experience of forgiveness, a foretaste of some glorious future, or a sociopolitical program for bettering humanity. Christ's kingdom offers a whole alternative to Satan's kingdom, opposing it at every level. Jesus not only defeated evil's power in his followers, but established a new ethic that is alien to the compromises of this sinful world. This kingdom exists now and fully in the church.

However, the radicalness of Jesus' advent and ethic is seldom recognized. Even Christendom mutes Jesus' radical ethic by viewing him as simply deepening and extending the intent of the Old Testament law. But the

Anabaptists counter that the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) reveals the qualitative newness of Jesus' work and kingdom. For here Jesus replaces the Old Testament law with his kingdom's ethics. Matthew 5:38-39 poses a classic contrast: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person." According to the Anabaptists, Jesus startles the audience by setting aside the Old Testament law of retaliation and establishing a totally new standard: do not avenge evil. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount and in many other passages, Jesus sharply contrasts and even sets up an opposition between the Old Testament prescriptions on divorce, warfare, religious authority, and his own ethic. Rejecting the old law, Jesus insists upon an absolute ethic of righteousness without compromise and love without retaliation.

As the table above indicates, the Anabaptists interpreted Jesus' distinctive ethic as antithetical to the Old Testament law. Why this sharp contrast between the Old and New Covenants? Anabaptists affirm that both are God's Word. However, they interpreted the Old Testament as looking forward to the advent of something radically new, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. During the Old Testament period, the Messiah had not yet arrived. Only the Law was available; and it is "a yoke of bondage, doing nothing but ... demanding."⁵ As a result, evil remained a present and invincible reality, so that compromises with evil—retaliation, divorce, oaths, not loving one's enemies—were permitted.⁶

But with the coming of Jesus Christ, the "new age" has arrived. Jesus has triumphed over Satan's reign and established his own kingdom of righteousness and holiness. Now "something better is come, that is, the covenant of

4 THTR—In other words, man was incapable of conquering evil by himself, so the Law did not demand God's full righteousness—until the Messiah came to liberate man from sin's dominion. The Messiah then gave humanity the full expectation of God's morals and ethics, and provided mankind with the power to actually live it out!

5 Walter Klassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald, 1981), 154.

6 THTR—Compromise was permitted since the Mosaic Law had no provision for power to overcome evil. Grace—power—would be given by the Messiah!

God is more clearly and perfectly revealed and come fully to the light”; and as a result, “that which is dark and imperfect must cease and come to an end.”⁷ Unlike the Old Testament period, God now prohibits evil and makes absolute demands upon his people. Jesus has revealed a new ethic for his people; “the law [is] our schoolmaster until we are in Christ.”⁸ Compromises are no longer permitted; the New Covenant has displaced the Old.⁹ Warfare, arrogance, and selfish ambition must all be abandoned. Jesus demands obedience to a new set of values: humility, righteousness, no divorce, love for one’s enemies, separation from Babylon.

Jesus’ life consistently proclaimed his kingdom’s demands. Jesus conquered evil by entering sinful structures and unmasking their idolatrous pretensions and resultant evils. He challenged idolatrous Jewish pride and its related stigma toward tax collectors, adulterers, and other outsiders in Jewish society. Despite a life of threats and suffering, Jesus did not take the path of human rebellion and retaliate. He “loved everyone without measure” (Luke 6:27-36).¹⁰ Nor did he coercively impose his kingdom through military power. Using the sword would only have elevated allegiance to temporal powers above trust in God, reintroducing idolatry. Rather Jesus conquered through the cross by “entrust[ing] himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

In conquering evil Jesus instituted an alternative life of love and righteousness. Christ’s kingdom embodies those people who are empowered by his Spirit to live in obedience to his standards and not the world’s. And this kingdom exists now in the church. Presently, though, Christ’s kingdom exists in a hostile environment, the kingdom of Satan. This world is Satan’s territory and his reign will cease only at the Sec-

ond Coming.¹¹ In his original proclamation, Jesus accentuated the ineradicable opposition between Satan’s and his own kingdom: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 4:17). The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, entails an about-face, a repudiation of the past. Similarly, Jesus’ demand for repentance poses an “either-or” decision: Satan or Christ. There are no other options and no room for the lukewarm. For sin so pervades the cosmos that unless the world’s values and structures are consciously opposed, obedience to Christ is inevitably compromised. That is why Paul exhorts believers not to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). This is the narrow road that alone leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14).¹²

The Church

The Church as a Covenant-ed Community

Seeking to fulfill Jesus’ command to “be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), the Anabaptists reconstituted the idea of the church on the model of Christ’s kingdom.¹³ The church is conceived as a qualitatively new reality in history, the only place where Christ now rules. As a result, Jesus’ disciples must reflect Christ’s life and standards, not Satan’s. In addition the Anabaptists contend that Babylon’s grasp can only be resisted if the church separates from the world’s sinful structures.

The need to separate from the structures and values of the

prevailing culture resound throughout Anabaptist writings. Note the first Anabaptist confession at Schleithem (1527):

11 Jesus acknowledged the pervasiveness of Satan’s kingdom when he did not challenge Satan’s offer of “all the kingdoms of the world” at his temptation (Luke 4:5-8).

12 For further elaboration of these two antithetical kingdoms, see Robert Friedmann, “The Doctrine of the Two Worlds,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1957), 105-18.

13 THTR—In other words, they did not *reform* the current church, they *remade it from scratch*.



Sin so pervades the cosmos that unless the world’s values and structures are consciously opposed, obedience to Christ is inevitably compromised.

7 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 156.

8 *Ibid.*, 154.

9 *Ibid.*, 156.

10 *Ibid.*, 87.

A separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; ... we shall not have fellowship with them [the wicked] and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. ... For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who [have come] out of the world ... and none can have part with the other.¹⁴

They viewed separation positively as the way to enhance one's piety and obedience to Jesus Christ. For this sinful world can quickly divert our allegiance to Jesus Christ, even without our recognition, unless the church vigilantly cultivates discipleship.

Anabaptists maintained that Christians were to live in opposition to society, not as individuals or hermits, but in *Gemeinde* or community—true church.

In addition, the church is differentiated from the world because her members have freely covenanted to follow Christ. The Anabaptists detached religion from political power, for Christ rules inwardly, through the Spirit's work, not through physical coercion. Nor is religion a solitary quest in their view. The church is a brotherhood, a community

that intentionally disciplines and guides the believer. The Anabaptists maintained that Christians were to live in opposition to society, not as individuals or hermits, but in *Gemeinde* or community—true church. Jesus' work established a new order, which overcame the sinner's pride and selfishness. As a result, believers have been transformed so that they can put others ahead of themselves and thereby love each other with a self-sacrificial love. Jesus set down the criterion of brotherly love: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35, NIV:ILE). Simply put, the church is the people of God, a voluntary brotherhood and a fellowship which reflects Christ's love.

According to classic Anabaptist teaching, *believer's baptism* was the rite of "entry into the holy church." In this ceremony the adult believer publicly confesses that he or she has died to this world and has surrendered the self to Christ through the church and "pledges to live and die according to His will."¹⁵ To ensure that their communities imitated Christ's righteousness, the Anabaptists

maintained a strict discipline. Those who did not display a Christian life were disciplined. At the extreme, this could mean exclusion from the community (Matt. 18:15-17). The banned could be readmitted, but only if they demonstrated their repentance through godly lives.

The result is a church that is sharply distinguished from the prevailing culture. This is what sociologists call a "sectarian church,"¹⁶ one that seeks no worldly sanction and separates itself as much as possible from the world's sinful compromises.

The Church as Christ's Kingdom

Christ is not only the Savior of sinners, but also their Lord and thus the norm for every aspect of life. As a result, the Anabaptists define the true church through four criteria derived from Christ's life.¹⁷ The first is *holy living*. Christ has established a church that has no "blemish, wrinkle, or any such thing, but [is] pure and holy, as He, himself, is holy."¹⁸ The Anabaptists explicitly reject the traditional move in the church's history to spiritualize Christ's kingdom by incorporating all that are sacramentally graced or have faith without regard to whether they live righteously. Faith must be evidenced by fruit: Jesus' disciples must "live unblamably in His holy commandments."¹⁹

Second, the believer's life must be one of *self-sacrificial* love or servanthood. Jesus' disciples must put themselves last and serve the other (Matt. 20:25-27; Phil. 2:3-5). As a result, the ways of the world—pride, selfishness, retaliation, and even coercion—had absolutely no place among the Anabaptists. Attempting to evade all forms of "self-seeking," they even prohibited Christians from "eating and drinking the sweat of the poor (that is, making one's own people and fellow-creatures work so that one

16 THTR—Note that this (sociological) use of the word "sectarian" is in reference to being "separated from the rest" in the sense of being cut off from general society. It is not used in the usual sense of "cut off from other true believers" as in Titus 3:10, a schismatic.

17 *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1956), 743. These criteria are an addition to the traditional Protestant signs of "pure doctrine" and a biblical use of "the sacramental signs." See also the important article by John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World," in John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 65-101. For another important exposition of these points see J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1957), 135-51.

18 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 111.

19 *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 300; Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 112. Ironically, during the Reformation period, one could be cleared of the crime of being an Anabaptist by cursing, dancing, getting drunk, quarreling, or coveting. Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), 143.

14 John Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Church*, 3d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 285-86.

15 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 177.

can grow fat).²⁰ Nor could possessions be used solely for oneself, for the disciple of Christ “was not the lord but only the servant of His goods.” The Anabaptists’ acts of generosity and love for fellow believers as well as the stranger were renowned, a heritage that continues to this day.²¹

Third, *the way of the cross* is not only Christ’s calling, but his disciples’ calling as well: “Those who do not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciples: (Luke 14:27, NIV:ILE). Bearing the cross refers to Jesus’ nonretaliatory suffering resulting from his social nonconformity.²² Through the way of the cross Jesus conquered Satan (Col. 2:15). In his servanthood (Phil. 2:3-11), Jesus denied the sinful powers their claim to absolute allegiance by trusting entirely in God (1 Peter 2:23). The disciple of Jesus shares in this same destiny (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 2:21; 4:1, 12-16). In the times of insult, persecution, or death, Anabaptists regarded the “holy cross of Christ” as their “highest shelter and shield,” as “we have surrendered with holy patience (not obliged or forced patience) to overcome all our enemies in the victory of Christ.”²³ So by bearing the cross, the disciple trusts in Christ’s victory over the powers of the age.

Finally, Christ’s Great Commission was every disciple’s charge. Anabaptists traveled throughout Europe to preach, live, and suffer for Christ’s sake. Even more crucial, the Anabaptists understood a *witness* not as one who simply believes or proclaims a message, but as one who embodies this message in the face of hostility from the world, even at the price of martyrdom. Indeed, the Greek term for witness (*martys*) is the origin for the English “martyr” and means bearing testimony at the expense of

oneself. Similarly, they embodied Jesus’ life and teaching, offering an alternative kingdom in this world.

The Church as an Alternative Culture

While insisting that the church must separate from the prevailing culture, the Anabaptist is not suggesting that Christians hide from the world. One is separated in order to be known and recognized as qualitatively different from the world. The Anabaptist community of believers is an “assembly ... gathered and led together by the Holy Spirit ... so that they want only to be like Christ, to partake of his nature, and diligently do his will.”²⁴

Offering an alternative, even a counterculture, is the church’s mission. As Peter Rideman recounts, the church is: a lantern of righteousness, in which the light of grace is borne and held before the whole world, that its darkness, unbelief and blindness be thereby seen and made light, and that men may also learn to see and know the way of life.

Therefore is the church of Christ in the first place completely filled with the light of Christ as a lantern is illuminated and made bright by the light: that his light might shine through her to others.²⁵

The church’s mission is simply to exist, to be a beacon in the world, showing the world that sin’s power no longer controls her and that Christ’s kingdom has arrived.

Rejection of Christendom as the Compromised and Apostate Church

Christendom (institutionalized Christianity that prevails in a culture) has resisted the Anabaptist’s conception of the church living in opposition to the prevailing culture as too radical and disruptive to the social order. The excuses are well-rehearsed: Jesus’ lifestyle of humility and non-resistance is unpractical; the world just does not operate like that. But Jesus challenged that response, “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24).

The Anabaptist interpretation of the church’s history supports this contention. Beginning with the Constantinian period, the church exchanged the image of itself as a community of saints for an institution integrally coupled with the broader society. The church and society formed an organic whole which in turn shaped the church’s own

Witness:

~~One who simply believes or proclaims a message.~~

One who embodies the message in the face of hostility.

20 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 234. Some Anabaptist groups, such as the Hutterites, even repudiated the idea of private property for the sake of brotherly love.

21 Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, 187; Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 241.

22 THTR—The author fails to include here that “taking up the cross” also includes the daily mortification of selfish desires ... I die to my desires so that Christ may live in me. This dying to egotism will sometimes bring persecution, which means the cross must then be taken up anew to die to the desire for retaliation or bitterness towards the persecutor. But individual instances of dying to “my desires” do not always bring persecution; thus, “taking up the cross” goes beyond nonretaliation.

23 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 99.

24 Rideman, *Confession of Faith*, 38.

25 *Ibid.*, 39-40.

self-understanding. Church attendance became a civic duty, supported by the state's coercive power. Of course, not everyone who attended was a believer. As a result, theologians proclaimed that the true church was invisible. And, since believers were known only to God, all "pew-warmers" had to be treated *as if* they were Christians, even if they showed no signs of faith.

The Anabaptists rejected this spiritualized or invisible church. Jesus commands that the church visibly bear his witness (John 13:34-35; Acts 1:8). Peter similarly envisions the church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him" (1 Peter 2:9). If the church is identified with society, then the existing social and political order defines the adjectives "chosen," "holy," and "belonging to God." And in the end, doesn't this mean that Christ's demands are equated with the status quo?

The Constantinian church did in fact curtail Jesus' absolute demands so they were within the reach of their culture. The bonds of fellowship and nonresistant self-sacrificial love, by which the apostolic church offered a welcome alternative to pagan society, were soon eclipsed.²⁶ Instead of following Christ's commands that his disciples be servants of all, selfish ambition and its trappings pervaded the church. Hierarchy and social status replaced community. Even the emperor's political arrogance entered the church. Rather than willingly suffer martyrdom for Christ's sake, now the church sanctioned the state's own restricted notion of justice and the state's demand for the ultimate sacrifice. In only a matter of time the church began employing political power for its own ends. This scenario has been repeated throughout church history. This betrayal of Jesus' commands, the Anabaptists conclude, is inevitable when the church collaborates with the world.

The Reformation did not escape such compromise. The magisterial Protestant Reformers, the Anabaptists charged, proclaimed faith in Christ but without any moral

demands. As Menno Simons derisively observed, "They strike up a Psalm, ... 'Snapped is the cord, now we are free, praise the Lord' while beer and wine verily run from their drunken mouths and noses. Anyone who can but recite this on his thumb, no matter how carnally he lives, is a good evangelical man and a precious brother."²⁷ The Anabaptists conclude that as long as the prevailing culture shapes our values, the church will be little different from the rest of society.



As long as the prevailing culture shapes our values, the church will be little different from the rest of society.

The Christian's Mission: The Church Living in Opposition to the World

This theological vision provides the framework for exploring the Anabaptists' conception of the Christian's mission.

Jesus is Lord over All

Only if Jesus is our sole norm, judging every other aspect of reality, the Anabaptists insist, is he truly Lord over all. While Christendom typically supplements and thereby moderates Jesus' commands with cultural or practical concerns, the Anabaptists demand that Jesus' ethic must define every other obligation. As a result, the church replaces sinful institutions.

Believers Must Separate from Sinful Structures

Obedience to Jesus Christ necessitates separation from the prevailing culture and its domineering values and expectations, for the social reality in which one is most rooted shapes one's values and priorities. The church, consequently, must provide an alternative context for nurturing disciples of Christ strong enough to resist the system of the world. Similarly, believers are not responsible for coercively transforming the sinful structures of this world, but demonstrating their own freedom from Satan's enslavement and the reality of Christ's kingdom.

Certainly this understanding of the church's mission allows believers to evade the controlling confines of certain sinful structures. Take, for example, participation in the ordinary social and political hierarchies. Through the centuries, Christians have adorned their superior positions in society—as politician, administrator, magistrate/lawyer—with Christian values. But the Anabaptists re-

²⁷ *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 334.

²⁶ Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1957), 127.

ject this option as a compromise. How can a magistrate wield power in managing society yet at the same time obey Jesus' command that his disciples must be last, even a slave to others? (Matt. 20:25-27) For in the end—no matter what rhetoric is employed, whether “law,” “justice,” or “individual rights”—the use of even legal power entails imposing one's views upon others. Or take, for example, the administrator, bureaucrat, or the so-called “civil servant”—those who apply institutional rules to particular situations. Are those “servants” as Christ demands—“to the least of these” (Matt. 25:40, 45)—or as the institution prescribes? Who actually is their lord?

In our sinful world, if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Likewise, if you stab me, watch out!

Moreover, social hierarchies are symptoms of a whole system of disobedience. As the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector portrays (Luke 18:10-14), haughty arrogance is an irresistible temptation accompanying social achievement: “I made it to this place; you could as well, if you'd only work at it!” The disciples' fight for the seat nearest to Jesus (Mark 10:35-45) shows the powerful lure that more status and a higher position on the social ladder holds for us all. The problem is not simply prideful desire, but the distorting effect of reciprocity on morality. In our sinful world, if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Likewise, if you stab me, watch out! A tit for a tat is inescapable, and it quickly escalates to more violent forms of retaliation. By contrast, Jesus commands his disciples to return good for evil.

The way of the cross is not an Anabaptist strategy for transforming the world. They never claim that innocent suffering will shame this evil world or that the acceptance of suffering allows one to succeed in life. The way of the cross simply reflects trust in and obedience to Jesus alone. The resulting disengagement from the prevailing culture frees the Anabaptists from the world's idolatrous temptations.

Through Servanthood, Believers Show Victory over Sin
Not even the Anabaptist can evade every aspect of our sinful world, for these structures form human life. The political order, for example, provides a peaceful civil order necessary for a stable life. While refraining from the active participation in certain structures, some passive involvement is inevitable. But how could the Anabaptist participate without being affected by that idolatrous structure?

The Anabaptist stance toward governmental powers provides an important case study and illustrates their response. The Anabaptists insist that the political order—the state and its power of the sword—was ordained by God in order to restrain evil only after the Fall. Since those in the kingdom of Christ evidence the new reality of Christ's righteousness, believers do not need the sword for restraining evil. Like the Old Testament law, the state's authority and coercive power is God-ordained only where evil is invincible. Simply put, the governmental authorities exist only for the wicked, not for the saved.

Christians must obey Jesus' command, “Do not resist an evildoer” (Matt. 5:39, NRSV) and so must not actively participate in political institutions or carry out their decisions. In the words of the Schleithem Confession, the government is “outside the perfection of Christ.”²⁸ But the Anabaptists were not naïve about evil; the sword is necessary, but only nonbelievers should employ its power.

On the other hand, Anabaptists accepted Paul's counsel, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom.13:1 NIV:ILE). They supported political institutions, giving them “what we owe them before God according to divine testimony ... be it taxes, interest, the tithe, service ... whatever does not contribute to the destruction of man.”²⁹ But severe restrictions are placed upon governmental power. The state can never stand in the way of obedience to God. If the state crosses this line, the Christian must refuse its demands, but then accept the penalties imposed. Again, Jesus' command to not resist evil must be obeyed. As in the early church, the Christian must refuse to worship Caesar, yet submit to Caesar's persecution.

While participating indirectly in the political structures, the Anabaptists refused to conform to its sinful values. By witnessing to the lordship of Jesus Christ and embodying his self-sacrificial love, they repudiated and even subverted the prevailing ethos. Similarly, when they were condemned because of their obedience to Jesus Christ, Anabaptists saw their submission to the state's penalties as following the way of the cross. For despite political threats and suffering, they trusted on God's final victory, and denied these structures their claim to absolute allegiance (1 Peter 2:23). ~

©2001 Used by permission. Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm, *A Family of Faith: An Introduction to Evangelical Christianity*, Baker Academic (A division of Baker Publishing Group), Grand Rapids MI, 182-192.

28 Leith, *Creeds of the Church*, 287.

29 Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 252.