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# MissioDei

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## What is an Anabaptist Christian?

Palmer Becker



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Series editor  
James R. Krabill

*Missio Dei* is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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# What is an Anabaptist Christian?

Palmer Becker

## Introduction

Christians with an Anabaptist perspective on faith and life have existed from the very beginning of the Christian era. Even today, in nearly every group of churches and perhaps in nearly every congregation, there are people who have understandings of the Christian faith similar to those held in the Anabaptist tradition. Anabaptist is a way of being Christian. Just as there are Anglican, Baptist and Lutheran Christians, so there are Anabaptist Christians.

“Anabaptist” is an invented name meaning “re-baptizers.” It was given to 16<sup>th</sup>-century Christians who saw little value in infant baptism and, therefore, baptized each other as adults upon confession of faith. These Anabaptist Christians were the forerunners of today’s Mennonite Christians and many others in the Free Church tradition.

Anabaptist/Mennonite Christians hold many beliefs in common with other believers. They believe in a personal three-in-one God who is both holy and gracious, in salvation by grace through repentance and faith, in the humanity and divinity of Jesus, in the inspiration and authority of Scripture, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the church as the body of Christ. But they often hold these convictions somewhat differently than others.

Anabaptists are sometimes identified as the left wing of the Protestant Reformation. They rose up in a time of social and economic upheaval and were intent on carrying further the reformation begun by Martin

Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. Christians of an Anabaptist perspective have throughout history placed strong emphasis on following Jesus in daily life, being covenanted with each other in Christ-centered community, and seeking to overcome conflict in nonviolent ways. Are you a Christian with an Anabaptist perspective?

The mainline reformers brought us to the clear understanding that salvation comes through faith by grace alone, but in many ways they limited themselves to the structures and thinking set in motion by Constantine and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries. Mennonite Christians have sometimes also limited themselves by merely seeking to continue what was initiated by Menno Simons and the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptists. We can all learn from the various renewal movements what it meant to be a Christian at that time and in that culture. Ultimately, we all need to return to Jesus, the author and founder of our faith, to find the basis for what it means to be Christian in our time.

The problem of Christianity is not necessarily its many denominations, but rather the hesitancy of its parts to learn from each other. Anabaptist Christians have much to learn from Christians of other cultures and traditions in regard to such matters as the sovereignty and grace of God, the importance of the creeds, and patterns of participating in larger society. Christians of other backgrounds may also have much to learn from the Anabaptist tradition in areas such as following Jesus in daily life, interpreting the Scriptures from an ethical Christ-centered point of view, and giving primacy to the Lordship of Christ in everyday life.

The body of Christ is one with many parts. If a group within the body loses its unique gifts and insights, it will be like salt that has lost its saltiness. In his book, *Differentiate or Die*, Jack Trout says, “If an organization does not have something unique to offer, it will die.”<sup>1</sup> What life-giving insights do Anabaptist Christians have to offer, and what is there for them to receive?

While programs and goals may change, the unique core values that bring an organization into being are sometimes said to be “sacred” and should not be changed.<sup>2</sup> What are the “sacred” core values of Anabaptist Christians? This booklet will explain them in the form of three key statements. They are:

1. **Jesus is the center of our faith.**
2. **Community is the center of our lives.**
3. **Reconciliation is the center of our work.**

Being a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective is a combination of *believing* in Jesus, *belonging* to community, and *behaving* in a reconciling way.<sup>3</sup> Some things for which Anabaptists lived and died are now accepted and taken for granted by most Christians. Other practices and teachings may still seem challenging or perplexing. But more and more people are finding Anabaptist understandings of faith and practice to be very helpful as they seek to follow Jesus faithfully in today's world.

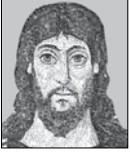
The three principles developed in this booklet are a modern-day adaptation of *The Anabaptist Vision*, a well-known statement made in 1943 by Harold S. Bender, then president of the American Society of Church History.<sup>4</sup> Bender explained that from his understanding of Scripture and Anabaptist history:

1. Christianity is *discipleship*. It is following Jesus in everyday life.
2. The church is a *brotherhood* or *family*. Members not only commit themselves to Christ, but also individually and voluntarily to each other.
3. Followers of Jesus have an *ethic of love and nonresistance*. As transformed persons, they seek to be reconcilers who reject involvement in violence and war.

These three core values had multiple beginnings. This booklet will describe how they developed in history, and suggest how they apply to today's world. It will then present them in contrasting statements with questions for discussion. I readily recognize that I have emphasized the positive contributions of the early Anabaptists and minimized the negatives. My purpose here is to give inquiring persons an opportunity to ask and respond to the question, "What does an ideal Anabaptist Christian look like?"

I wish to express special appreciation to Jeff Wright, former conference minister for the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, who sparked the imagination for this work. I am also grateful for a theologically diverse group of persons, including my brother-in-law, Theodore A. Weathers; my insightful wife, Ardys; plus Myron Augsburg; David Martin; John Roth; James Reimer; André Gingerich Stoner; Alan Kreider; Marlene Kropf; John Rempel; David Pfrimmer; Neal Blough; and James Krabill, who vigorously critiqued various drafts of this paper. I take full personal responsibility, however, for the final content of this booklet, recognizing that many Christians will find themselves somewhere between the positions that I attempt to describe here.

# Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith



**Jesus** began his ministry in approximately 30 CE by gathering together a group of disciples. For three years these disciples lived, ate and worked together with Jesus. They observed how he cared for the poor, healed those who were ill, gave sight to the blind, forgave sinners, and taught the multitudes. During these years of ministry, and also in the days after his resurrection, Jesus became central to their faith and life. They came to *believe* in him as their Teacher, Savior and Lord in contrast to the teachers, saviors and masters of their time.

To be a Christian meant more to these early disciples than being a believer or worshiper. It meant being a Spirit-filled person who was obeying Jesus in daily life. Because of their commitment to Jesus and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, people noticed that they were being transformed to become Christ-like in their attitudes and lifestyles. If you had asked those first disciples, I believe they would have said with enthusiasm, *“Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!”*

For 250 years, the first Christians continued to experience the Spirit of Jesus in their midst. But then over the next centuries, so many changes were introduced to the Christian faith that it nearly became another religion.<sup>5</sup> Two men, in particular, have become symbols for this shift. One was a politician. The other was a theologian.



**Constantine**, the politician,<sup>6</sup> was the leader of the Roman Empire. As a result of having a spiritual experience in which he saw a vision of the cross, he stopped persecuting Christians and allowed Christianity to become a recognized religion of the Roman Empire. However, during his reign and afterward, people came to be judged more by the creed that they held rather than by the life that they lived.



**Augustine**, the theologian,<sup>7</sup> came to importance some time later. He had a profound conversion experience and some would call him the greatest theologian of the Western church. But gradually, different trends and perspectives emerged that were in contrast to the first disciples. Instead of focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, the church shifted toward giving primary attention to the death of Christ. The Apostles' Creed, which came to prominence during this time, makes no mention of the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Instead of

# Core Value #1

saying “*Jesus* is the center of our faith,” the followers of Augustine tended to say, “*Christ’s death* is the center of our faith.”

Dramatic changes took place. While early Christians were a persecuted minority worshipping in secret, now they met in ornate buildings. While new converts in the first centuries underwent significant training, received adult baptism, and joined an alternative community, now infants were baptized and all citizens except Jews belonged to a church aligned with the government. Whereas the early church emphasized following Jesus, now the focus was on correct doctrine, elaborate ritual, and defending themselves against enemies. While members of the early church had shared their faith daily with their neighbors, now evangelism meant primarily extending the boundaries of the “Christian” empire. While the majority of early Christians had rejected military service, by the time of Augustine’s death, only Christians were permitted in the Roman Army.

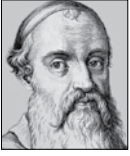
Between the years 1200 and 1500 CE, a variety of concerned persons and groups began to realize that there were serious inadequacies with widely accepted understandings of salvation and the church. **Martin Luther**, a German monk, who was thoroughly schooled in Augustinian theology, was one of these reformers. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss pastor, and John Calvin, a reformed theologian, were others. They came forward to introduce significant changes.



Luther was especially offended by the practices of priests and popes who offered forgiveness and deliverance from purgatory on the basis of works and by selling indulgences. On October 31, 1517, in an attempt to call for public debate, he nailed a list of 95 theses, or arguments, to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This act launched the Protestant Reformation.<sup>8</sup>

Luther and Zwingli affirmed the Scriptures as the sole authority for faith and practice, and insisted that salvation is by grace through faith alone. However, this salvation was largely understood to mean receiving eternal life. Some would call it soul salvation instead of whole salvation. While Christians were expected to respond in faithful service to God and neighbor, the church’s teaching on following Jesus in daily life and of belonging to each other in community was not strongly emphasized.

Several students of Ulrich Zwingli, including Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and George Blaurock, gathered regularly for Bible study in Zürich, Switzerland. Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marpeck and Jakob



Hutter were on a similar pilgrimage in South Germany and Moravia. Somewhat later, **Menno Simons**, a former Catholic priest, taught and coordinated groups that were emerging in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup>

These students of the Bible continued their studies of Jesus and the first disciples. Hebrews 12:2, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,” became central for many. 1 Corinthians 3:11, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ,” became the motto for Menno Simons. In time, the Sermon on the Mount, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, was seen as being normative for the Christian life.

While these first Anabaptist Christians affirmed the Apostles’ Creed and much of what Luther and Zwingli were preaching, they wanted to go further. They preferred to talk about being “born again” rather than about being “justified by faith.” While salvation was indeed by the grace of God, they called for a more radical response of obedience on the part of believers. They insisted that salvation, made possible by Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, should lead to the transformation of a person’s moral, social and economic life. Adult baptism became a sign that this salvation and transformation had taken place. If you had asked those first Anabaptist Christians, I believe they would have joined with the first disciples in saying “*Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!*”

What does this mean for us today? Christians from an Anabaptist perspective seek to apply their understanding of Jesus in three important ways:

## 1. Jesus is to be followed in daily life

Being a Christian means more than having a spiritual experience, affirming a creed, or being justified before God. To be a Christian means to follow Jesus in daily life. Christians from an Anabaptist perspective say, “Christianity is discipleship!” In German it is *Nachfolge Christi* or “following after Christ.” Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist, stated it clearly when he said, “No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him.”<sup>10</sup>

Salvation, in the Anabaptist tradition, means being transformed from an old way of life to a life that exemplifies the spirit and actions of Jesus. Salvation is not merely a change of God’s attitude toward



us. It is a change in our attitudes and actions toward God, toward people, and toward the world. This change is made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who empowers disciples to follow Jesus in daily life.

Many Christians, even after salvation, continue to see themselves as hopeless sinners, who are unable to live a victorious transformed life. Some say, “I’m not different. I am only forgiven.” Christians from an Anabaptist perspective disagree. They believe that the teachings and Spirit of Jesus make it possible for committed followers to be transformed and to overcome the powers of evil. They are encouraged to a radical following of Jesus in daily life.

## **2. The Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view**

Many Christians have what might be called a “flat” Bible, which assumes that the words of God as understood by Moses in the Old Testament hold the same authority as the words of Jesus in the New Testament. When political or social issues such as war, capital punishment, or treatment of deviant people are encountered, those with a “flat” Bible often claim Old Testament texts as the basis for their belief and action, even when these texts differ from the teachings of Jesus.

Other Christians interpret the Scriptures from a dispensational point of view. To know God’s will, they must first know for which dispensation or period of time a passage was revealed. In this approach, obedience to the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount is generally postponed until the kingdom age of Christ’s return. During the present time, Jesus receives worship, but not daily obedience.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective seek to interpret all Scripture from an ethical Christ-centered point of view. Jesus is seen as the fullest revelation of God and God’s will, which means that sometimes the teachings of Jesus transcend previous teachings. Jesus himself said, “You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43). Likewise, the writer of Hebrews declares, “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son ... who is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being ...” (1:1-3). Missionary Peter Kehler once said, “If all the Scriptures do is introduce me to Jesus Christ, that is enough!”<sup>11</sup>

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective affirm that all Scripture is inspired, but they are not strict literalists. They seek to hold the written word and the Spirit of Jesus in creative tension. All Scripture needs to be interpreted in the Spirit of Jesus. Followers of Jesus get into trouble when they either elevate *the written word* over the Spirit, or raise *the Spirit* above the word. Word and Spirit need to be held together.<sup>12</sup>

While Christians from an Anabaptist perspective see the Scriptures as the ultimate source of information, they see Jesus as the final authority for faith and life. He is Lord of Scripture and is normative for both personal and social ethics. No text is an authority other than in the way it is honestly related to the teaching and Spirit of Jesus. Thus, when Anabaptist-minded Christians face an ethical question, they go first to Jesus for their primary guidance and then to other Scriptures for further background and understanding. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, they let Jesus be the referee!

### 3. Jesus is accepted as both Savior and Lord

Many Christians affirm Jesus as their personal Savior from sin, but place less emphasis on following him as Lord in daily life. They look to Jesus as Savior from personal bad habits, but when they face larger social or political problems, they give their obedience to an employer, civic leader, military general or president. As a result, many Christians today are more obedient to the commands of earthly leaders than they are to those given by Jesus.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that government needs to be obeyed to the extent that Christian discipleship will allow. Government's purpose is to preserve life and create order in a secular world. Obedience to laws does not mean that we give blind obedience to whatever government commands. Since our highest loyalty always belongs to Jesus and the kingdom of God, we may on occasion need to disobey a government order because it is contrary to the teaching and spirit of Jesus. When there is a conflict between the ways of Jesus and the ways of Caesar, we say with the early disciples, "We must obey God rather than any human authority"<sup>13</sup> (Acts 5:29).

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective are a *believing* people who seek to:

1. Follow Jesus in daily life.
2. Interpret the Scriptures in the Spirit of Jesus.
3. Promise their highest loyalty to Jesus Christ.

*Jesus Christ is at the center of their faith.* Are you an Anabaptist Christian?

## Core Value #2: Community is the center of our life

One of the first things that **Jesus** did when he began his ministry was to form a community. He invited Peter and Andrew and then James and John to join him. Soon, there were many followers from whom he chose 12 disciples. They learned, ate, traveled and served together until at Pentecost they became the core of a new society called the church. In Acts 2, we note that the first believers met day by day, not only in the Temple, but also in their homes where they ate with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of the people.

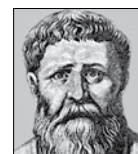
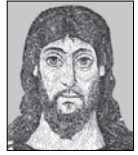
The New Testament church provided an alternate way of living to both the religious and political realities of that day. This way of life was taught and celebrated in the temple court and was discussed and applied in home groups.

By referring to his followers in family terms, it became evident that Jesus wanted his followers to not only *believe* in him, but also to have a strong sense of *belonging* to each other. Observers were amazed at what God did in and through these groups of early Christians. They had the gifts, insights and courage to continue doing what Jesus had begun to do while he was with them. If you would have asked those first followers of Jesus, I believe they would have said, “*Christ-centered community is the center of our life!*”

Instead of stressing the church as a family of brothers and sisters that met together for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship, **Constantine** emphasized the church as an organization that met in large, impersonal sanctuaries. Wealthy men, who hitherto had resisted conversion, were willing to join a church that was associated with the emperor. Large numbers of people were baptized whether or not they were true followers of Jesus. As a result, instead of the church being in the world, “the world” came into the church.

With the encouragement and help of his mother, Constantine began building large churches in Rome and on the sites of Jesus’ birth and death. Soon, church buildings were erected in nearly every town. Instead of saying, “Christ-centered community is the center of our life,” Christians began to say, “A church building is in the center of our city.”

**Augustine** struggled hard to nurture a personal life of obedience in the context of a society that considered everyone to be a Christian. For him and his followers, it was impossible to distinguish between



those who belonged to the body of Christ and those who did not. “The wheat and the weeds grow together,” he said.

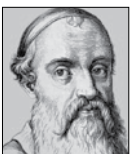
Instead of experiencing the presence of Christ in community, Augustine emphasized experiencing the presence of God through the sacraments. A sacramental faith developed in which to be forgiven of original sin, one needed the ritual of baptism. To be forgiven of ongoing sin, believers needed the mass. As centuries passed, the understanding developed that to be released from purgatory, one needed to pray to the saints, give money to poor people, and buy grants from the pope.

Over time, the idea of belonging to Christ and to each other in close-knit community was largely lost. Those who wanted to follow Jesus obediently and to experience close community chose to become monks and nuns who lived in monasteries and convents. This gave the impression that following Jesus in daily life and living relationally in Christ-centered community was impossible for common people.



**Martin Luther** and other reformers originally intended to reform the church to its biblical basis. They separated themselves from Rome, and in their preaching of the Bible, they began emphasizing the priesthood of all believers. Many followers of Luther and Zwingli also became eager to free themselves from the cruel feudal systems of the time. When some peasants took up arms to challenge the unjust practices of the feudal lords and princes, Luther and Zwingli, in the interest of maintaining order, sided with the rulers. While they admonished rulers of their responsibilities toward the poor, they unintentionally forged a new alliance between church and state. In the process, they lost the confidence of many peasants.

Luther and Zwingli were prevented by the Peasants' War and other political circumstances from implementing many of their intended reforms. They continued with the basic structures of Constantine and the theology of Augustine, retained the state church as the polity of the church, the sanctuary as the structure of the church, infant baptism as the introductory rite into the church, the use of the sword by government as the tool for discipline, and the private interpretation of a flat Bible as the primary way of knowing God's will.



Early Anabaptists, including **Menno Simons**, were disappointed with the incompleteness of the Reformation. They did not want to merely *reform* the church back to the structures set in motion by Constantine and the theology of Augustine. They wanted to *restore* the church to its original New Testament pattern and form. They

believed that the church needed to be an independent and alternate society in the world.

Due to persecution, early Anabaptists, like the first believers in the early church, were forced to meet in secret for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship. In homes and secret settings, they often experienced Christ in their midst. As new believers placed their faith in Jesus Christ and pledged to follow him in daily life, they were baptized and received into a specific congregation where they had a strong sense of belonging.

These small groups had a powerful witness in their communities. After a study of 62 doctoral dissertations on Anabaptist beginnings and thought, Pastor Takashi Yamada, a scholar from Japan, came to believe that “the uniqueness of both the Early Church and the early Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Anabaptist Christians spoke repeatedly of the power to live differently. They expected a “saintly life” from all their members and especially from their leaders. Rather than merely being free of guilt, they described faithful Christians as those who were living Spirit-filled, ethical lives. Those who stopped following Jesus in daily life or persisted in non-Christ-like living were excommunicated from the body of Christ.

The Anabaptists saw the church as being composed of transformed believers who were committed to Jesus and each other in covenant communities. Both Protestant and Catholic leaders viewed this as a threat to the established church. As a result, they imprisoned and severely persecuted many Anabaptists. More than 4,000 were drowned, beheaded, or burned at the stake as martyrs for their faith.<sup>15</sup>

Much diversity was evident among these early Anabaptists. Some were overly concerned about the end times. Others reverted to using violence. A group in the city of Münster, Germany, went so far as to replace the elected city council with 12 elders who declared themselves to be the New Israel, introduced polygamy, and took up arms in self-defense. This action by a fringe Anabaptist group placed a negative reputation upon Anabaptist and Mennonite Christians that has in some circles persisted until the present time.

The early Anabaptists’ strong sense of belonging to Jesus and their loyal support of each other helped them to live devoted ethical lives in the context of a hostile world. If you would have asked them, I

believe they would have said with the first disciples, *“Christ-centered community is the center of our life!”*

In today’s world, Christians with an Anabaptist perspective understand and practice Christ-centered community in three distinct ways:

### **1. Forgiveness is essential for community**

Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. He prayed fervently that we would be one with each other even as he is one with the Father. A warm sense of community and all the benefits pertaining to it emerge when members of the body of Christ are committed to asking each other for forgiveness. Confession and forgiveness remove the barriers that prevent fellowship with God and with each other. Anabaptist Christians believe that forgiveness is essential for creating and nurturing community.

The central problem of humanity is not the lack of finances, the lack of education or the lack of power. The central problem is that we offend each other. From the very beginning of time, human beings, both as individuals and as groups, have offended God and each other through their attitudes and actions. The result has been broken relationships with God, with each other, with our inner selves and with the whole earth.

The turning point in resolving an offense usually comes when one party sincerely repents and asks for forgiveness. Unfortunately, in the non-Christian world, attempts are made to forget without forgiving. Often, denial and defensiveness take the place of honest confession and forgiveness.

### **2. The Scriptures are interpreted in community**

Many Christians limit themselves to the private study of Scriptures and then proclaim to others what they have personally understood them to say. When individuals limit themselves to such private interpretation, they often arrive at and proclaim confusing and false understandings of Scripture.

Other Christians see trained pastors, priests and instructors as being the only ones who are capable of properly interpreting the Scriptures. As a result, lay people often neglect personal study and application.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that the Scriptures need to be studied both privately and in the context of a Spirit-guided community where fellow believers give and receive counsel. Generally,

community members who come together in small groups, classes and conferences in the Spirit of Christ can best determine what a Scripture is saying to them about a particular situation.

### 3. Community is experienced in face-to-face groups

The church has sometimes been described as a two-winged bird. One wing represents the larger worshipping community where vertical relationships with our transcendent, holy God are emphasized. The other wing represents small face-to-face groups where close horizontal relationships are emphasized.<sup>16</sup> Both wings are needed.

Some aspects of Christian living happen best in relational groups of 12 or fewer people. This is often true as we give and receive counsel, discern gifts for mission, and have fun and fellowship. Healthy congregations are structured for community. They are often networks of small groups. Some would go so far as to say that the small group is the basic unit of the church.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective experience *Christ-centered community as the center of their life*. They tend to see:

1. Forgiveness as being essential for community.
2. Dialogue and group discernment as necessary for the interpretation of Scripture.
3. Small face-to-face groups as central to the life of the church.

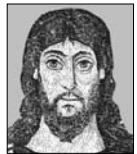
*Believing* in Jesus, *belonging* to the church, and *behaving* in a new way become real in the context of community.<sup>18</sup>

Are you an Anabaptist-minded Christian?

## Core Value #3: Reconciliation is the center of our work

God sent his Son, **Jesus**, as the solution to the problem of sin. Jesus came to reconcile all those who would respond to God and to each other. He addressed brokenness and injustice of all kinds, and trained a group of followers who became ambassadors of reconciliation.

Jesus outlined specific steps for reconciliation within the faith community as recorded in Matthew 18:15-20. Offended persons and groups are to go to each other one-to-one to seek a solution to the



presenting problem. If the injustice or offense remains unresolved, further steps are to be taken enlisting more community members.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples that peace and justice come through seeking first the kingdom, repenting of wrong, and treating people as they themselves would like to be treated. “Don’t just love those who love you,” Jesus said. “Even the pagans do that much! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus meant what he said and he meant it for us! Being a follower of Jesus means *behaving* in a new way.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21). “Go into all the world and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20). As a result, the early disciples went throughout the known world preaching, teaching and practicing a new way of life so that people everywhere might be reconciled to God and to each other.

One of the greatest challenges facing early Christians was the racial, religious and cultural conflict between Jews and Gentiles. After seeing people from diverse backgrounds being filled with the Spirit and coming into the family of God, the Apostles agreed that it was through faith in Christ, not laws and rituals, that people from different backgrounds would become one body and develop a culture of peace.

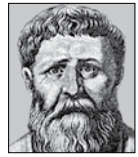
For the first several hundred years, followers of Jesus refused to engage in military combat. They understood that they were under orders to love their enemies, not kill them. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,” said the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18. If you would have asked the first Christians, I believe they would have said, “*Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!*”



When **Constantine** began to merge church and state, major changes came to the church. Jesus had said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” yet Constantine was a king. Over time, the difference between the voluntary kingdom ruled by Jesus and the kingdom ruled by the emperor became blurred. The clear convictions of the early Christians were compromised. Within the church some became rich and others became poor. Christians became persecutors. The former peacemakers went to war. Instead of spending their energies on evangelism, peacemaking and ministry, enormous amounts of energy were given to constructing great cathedrals in nearly every province of Europe. Constructing these buildings became the center of their work.



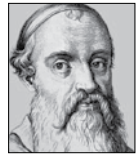
**Augustine** was very concerned about personal moral issues such as drunkenness, covetousness, gambling and adultery, but his teaching and practice related to peace and justice were severely restricted in a church closely linked to the empire. Instead of seeking reconciliation with enemies, Augustine came to believe that the Christian faith needed to be defended against them. A “just war” theory developed, which permitted Christians, in certain situations, to participate in violence and war. This approach to war has remained the position of many Christian traditions.



**Luther, Zwingli and Calvin** did much that was good. Luther developed the idea of the “community chest,” and Calvin sought to influence society to live by Christian principles. However, they, like Augustine, emphasized personal forgiveness and obedience to the Ten Commandments, but provided less specific teaching and practice related to transforming grace, evangelism and peacemaking.



Early Anabaptist Christians under the leadership of **Menno Simons** and others struggled to find common understandings on how to live as the body of Christ in the world. They came to believe that due to the work of the Holy Spirit and their commitment to each other, followers of Jesus could become Christ-like and *behave* in a Christ-like way.



Early Anabaptists often assembled in homes and small group settings where they sensed the Spirit’s presence and studied the Scriptures as a basis for giving each other counsel on how to live. Anabaptists wanted the Scriptures to be their only “weapon.” In their studies they emphasized economic sharing, peace with God, peace with each other, and peace with their enemies.

The Anabaptist movement was in some ways the charismatic or Holy Spirit movement of the Reformation era.<sup>19</sup> Anabaptist leaders spoke more about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit than did the other reformers. They believed that the Holy Spirit empowered them for discipleship, evangelism, peacemaking, and living the simple life.

The Anabaptist movement was also the evangelistic movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With persistence and passion, key leaders – at the cost of their lives – went throughout Europe seeking to reconcile people to God and to each other.<sup>20</sup> By the thousands, people came to a personal relationship with Jesus, and joined the Anabaptist fellowships that were springing up throughout much of Europe.

In addition, Anabaptists also played key roles in promoting the cause of social justice in their day. Many local groups within the movement were known for their economic sharing and their emphasis on

treating people justly. Their leaders and followers addressed many of the economic and social concerns being raised by peasants who were revolting against the dictatorial nature of the feudal system. Small fellowships functioned as alternative societies to both the Empire and the feudal system. It was inconceivable that genuine followers of Jesus, who had been transformed by the Spirit of God and baptized into the one body of Christ, would cling to surplus goods or wealth when they saw fellow members in need.<sup>21</sup>

Through the study of Scripture and an unwavering commitment to following Jesus in everyday life, Anabaptist Christians came to believe that it was wrong to participate in war. Like the early disciples, they refused to join the military even though Muslim Turks were attempting to invade Europe. Rather than fighting back against their enemies, Anabaptists chose to follow the example of Jesus, who “did not retaliate when people hurled their insults at him and made no threats when he suffered” (1 Peter 2:23).

If you would have asked them, I believe that Menno Simons and most early Anabaptist Christians would have joined the first disciples in saying, *“Reconciling people to God and to each other is the center of our work!”*

What does this mean for us today? Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that:

## **1. We are to help reconcile people to God**

Just as God took the initiative in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other, so God is asking us to take the initiative to do our part in reconciling others to him in our Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias, and broader worlds. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation!

Present-day Christians from an Anabaptist perspective are commissioned to make disciples, to baptize them, and to instruct them in all that Jesus lived and taught. They want their acquaintances to *believe* in Jesus, to *belong* to a Christ-centered community, and to *behave* in a transformed way.

When seekers “surrender as much of themselves as they can to as much of Christ as they can understand,” they are born again.<sup>22</sup> They are given a new start in life. They have new values and Holy Spirit empowerment to live those values.

Being reconciled to God leads to transformed living. Jesus changes the thinking, the friendships and the behaviors of those who accept him.

They become transformed mentally, emotionally, physically, socially and politically. This places them in stark contrast to the world.

## 2. We are to help reconcile people to each other

Reconciling people not only to God but also to each other is at the center of our work. This may mean exploring the cause of a conflict and helping the parties to reconcile that conflict through careful listening, honest confession, unselfish forgiving, and appropriate restitution.

Forgiveness removes the walls of offense that exist not only between us and God, but also between us and others in the church. Eating the Lord's Supper together becomes a fellowship experience made possible by the forgiveness that we have received from God and each other.

Christians are to be a blessing to people of all backgrounds, genders and convictions. When we encounter individuals or groups in conflict with one another, we are to "think reconciliation" rather than judgment. But we cannot help others to go farther than we ourselves have gone. Even as we seek to help others to be reconciled, we must keep growing in our own understanding of how we need to be changed.

## 3. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world

Evangelism and peacemaking are brought together in the concept of reconciliation. While some Christians say that evangelism is at the center of our work and others place peacemaking there, it might be best to say that "*reconciliation is the center of our work!*" The purposes of God are "to reconcile to himself all things through Christ" (Colossians 1:19).

It is due to their view of salvation as transformation that today's Anabaptist Christians refuse to be involved in war. Modern warfare trains soldiers to lie, to hate and to destroy. Transformed people do not do such things.

Peacemaking is not the same as appeasement. As transformed followers of Jesus, we are to "fight" evil and injustice as vigorously or more than anyone else, but we need to "fight" differently. We are challenged to say with the Apostle Paul, "... though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

History and experience indicate that violence generally leads to more violence. Violence can only be reduced by nonviolence and by correcting the injustices that motivate it. At all times and in all situations, we are called to imitate the example and spirit of Jesus. Jesus used words, caregiving and nonviolent action, not guns and bombs, to reconcile conflict and to draw people into God's family. Our attitude "should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Reconciliation is hard work. It calls us to be willing to give our lives so that people in our world can be reconciled to God, to each other, and even to their enemies. But there is no greater joy than to live a reconciled life and to bring others into a reconciled relationship with God and each other.

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe they are called to:

1. Help reconcile people to God.
2. Help reconcile people to each other.
3. Serve as God's ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

*Reconciliation is at the center of their work.* Are you an Anabaptist Christian?

## Conclusion

What are we to think of the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian faith? What can we learn from it? One hundred years ago, Professor Rufus M. Jones claimed that "the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, which are so essential to democracy, are derived from the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation period. These courageous leaders clearly enunciated these principles and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice."<sup>23</sup>

Do the following statements summarize your understandings of the Christian faith? If they do, you are a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective!

### Jesus is the center of my faith.

- I fix my eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of my faith.
- I interpret the Scriptures from an ethical Christocentric point of view.
- I see Christianity as discipleship, and seek to follow Jesus in daily life.

## Community is the center of my life.

- \_\_\_ I believe forgiveness makes community possible.
- \_\_\_ I study the Scriptures with others to discern their applications for our time.
- \_\_\_ I affirm that face-to-face groups are essential to a healthy church.

## Reconciliation is the center of my work.

- \_\_\_ I am called to help reconcile people to God through faith in Jesus.
- \_\_\_ I believe that reconciliation includes both evangelism and peacemaking.
- \_\_\_ I reject all forms of injustice and violence, and encourage peaceful alternatives to war and other conflicts.

## Endnotes

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10. For primary sources related to themes that were important to the Anabaptists, see *Anabaptism in Outline*, edited by Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981).
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14. From a personal conversation at a Mennonite World Conference meeting in Wichita, Kan., 1978.
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16. William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Houston, Texas: Touch Outreach Ministries, 1998), pp. 25-26.
17. For more on the theology and practice of small groups, see two of my publications, *Called to Care* and *Called to Equip* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1993).
18. See Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, pp. xiv-xvi.
19. Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992), chapter 4, “The Age of the Spirit.”
20. Hyoung Min Kim, *Sixteenth-century Anabaptist Evangelism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: ProQuest, 2002).
21. For a contemporary application of how discipleship relates to issues of justice and social action, see Ronald J. Sider, *I Am Not a Social Activist* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2008).
22. Samuel Shoemaker, *How to Become a Christian* (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 71.
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# Perspectives and questions for discussion

## Core Value #1: Jesus is the center of our faith

*Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author  
and perfecter of our faith.*  
(Hebrews 12:2)

<b>Many Christians emphasize:</b>	<b>Anabaptist Christians emphasize:</b>
<p><b>1. Christ's death</b> Many Christians focus primarily on the holiness of God and the need for personal salvation. They emphasize "Christ came to die" and focus less on the life, teachings and empowering Spirit of Jesus. Christianity is primarily forgiveness.</p>	<p><b>1. Christ's life</b> Anabaptist Christians affirm the holiness and forgiving grace of God, but emphasize that "Jesus came to live." His death resulted in part from the way he lived. Jesus as Risen Lord empowers us to follow him in life. Christianity is primarily discipleship.</p>
<b>Do you agree with the statement, "Christianity is discipleship?"</b>	
<p><b>2. A "flat" Bible</b> Many Christians tend to see the Scriptures, rather than Jesus, as their final authority. Guidance for daily living comes from various Scriptures that seem to fit the situation. All decisions do not need to coincide with the teachings and Spirit of Jesus.</p>	<p><b>2. A "Christ centered" Bible</b> Anabaptists affirm that while all Scripture is inspired, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and the final authority for decision-making. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, and is the norm for both personal and social ethics.</p>
<b>Explain the difference between a "flat" and a "Christ-centered" Bible.</b>	
<p><b>3. Government as final authority</b> Many Christians believe that since government leaders are ordained of God, they must be obeyed even if their demands are contrary to the teachings of Jesus or the dictates of conscience.</p>	<p><b>3. Jesus as final authority</b> Anabaptists recognize that government is ordained of God to preserve life and maintain order in a secular world. However, the demands of government shall not overrule the Lordship of Jesus.</p>
<b>What does it mean for you to say, "Jesus is Lord?"</b>	

## Core Value #2: Community is the center of our lives

*Every day ...  
they broke bread in their homes  
and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,  
praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.  
(Acts 2:46-47)*

<b>Many Christians emphasize:</b>	<b>Anabaptist Christians emphasize:</b>
<p><b>1. Vertical forgiveness</b> Many Christians focus more on vertical forgiveness from God than on horizontal forgiveness from each other. Forgiveness is seen as a means for receiving individual salvation and eternal life.</p>	<p><b>1. Horizontal forgiveness</b> Christians need both vertical forgiveness from God and horizontal forgiveness from each other. Forgiveness builds community and is a means to peaceful relationships with each other.</p>
<b>How does forgiveness contribute to community?</b>	
<p><b>2. Individual interpretation</b> Many Christians seek to interpret the Scriptures out of their own understanding and experience. On the other hand, some rely almost totally on trained teachers or pastors to interpret the Scripture for them.</p>	<p><b>2. Corporate interpretation</b> Anabaptists believe that individual study of Scripture must be combined with group study. Group members commit themselves to giving and receiving counsel from others in the Spirit of Jesus.</p>
<b>In what ways do you study the Bible together in your church?</b>	
<p><b>3. Meet in sanctuaries</b> Many Christians tend to think of the worshiping congregation as the basic unit of the church. Often, the church is seen as a structure, an organization, or as a Sunday morning performance.</p>	<p><b>3. Meet in small groups</b> Anabaptist Christians tend to see the church as a family. Healthy churches are often organized as networks of small groups in which members fellowship, study, share and pray together.</p>
<b>If small face-to-face groups are basic to the life of a healthy church, how might they become a greater reality in your congregation?</b>	



## Core Value #3: Reconciliation is the center of our work

*All this is from God,  
who reconciled us  
to himself through Christ  
and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.  
(2 Corinthians 5:18)*

<b>Many Christians emphasize:</b>	<b>Anabaptist Christians emphasize:</b>
<p><b>1. Justification by faith</b> Many Christians primarily emphasize the holiness of God and the need to be justified through faith in the sacrificial work of Christ. Conversion means being forgiven for sin and destined for heaven.</p>	<p><b>1. Transformation of life</b> Anabaptist Christians tend to emphasize the loving/nurturing nature of God. They desire to be transformed by the Spirit to become Christ-like in attitude and action. Conversion means being reconciled to God and empowered to live like Jesus in daily life.</p>
<b>Both natures of God are equally important. Which nature do you emphasize?</b>	
<p><b>2. Personal salvation</b> Many Christians tend to think of reconciliation in personal terms. Peacemaking and social action are add-ons rather than essential to the gospel.</p>	<p><b>2. Reconciled living</b> Anabaptists tend to think of reconciliation in both personal and social terms. Evangelism and peacemaking come together in the term reconciliation.</p>
<b>What are the steps for mediation as outlined in Matthew 18?</b>	
<p><b>3. Military service</b> Many Christians obey authority even if it requires actions contrary to the teachings of Jesus and conscience. Some believe in “redemptive violence” and the just war theory. When the government asks them to perform military service, they accept to do so.</p>	<p><b>3. Alternative service</b> Anabaptists obey authority insofar as obedience to Christ will allow. They will refuse orders to participate in violence. Correcting injustices and being reconciled to enemies are important. Alternatives to military service that seek to resolve conflict are strongly encouraged.</p>
<b>What are some peacemaking alternatives to military service?</b>	

## For further reading

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- No. 17 Conrad L. Kanagy, *No Purse, No Bag, No Sandals: A Profile of Mennonite Church Planters, 1990-2005* (2008).\*
- No. 18 Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* (2008). Revised edition (2010).\*

\*Available in Spanish.

# What is an Anabaptist Christian?

Palmer Becker

People in many parts of the world have become disillusioned with institutional, politically-compromised forms of Christianity. And as this occurs, there is increased interest in learning more about Anabaptism and other Free Church traditions that have called for a radical return to New Testament faith.

In this booklet, Palmer Becker, a lifelong Mennonite pastor and educator, attempts to summarize Anabaptist understandings in three key statements, namely that: (1) *Jesus* is the center of our faith; (2) *Community* is the center of our lives; and (3) *Reconciliation* is the center of our work.

By contrasting these affirmations with divergent views held within the broader Christian family, Becker challenges readers to take a new look at Jesus, to engage more fully in building the body of Christ, and to embrace more passionately the reconciling work of God in the world.

*Palmer Becker received his training from Goshen College, Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Regent College, and Fuller Theological Seminary. He has spent a lifetime serving the church as a pastor, church planter, missionary, conference executive, author and educator. Becker has led many workshops on small groups, served as director of the Hesston College Pastoral Ministries Program, and most recently traveled extensively on teaching assignments to various international locations. He and his wife, Ardys, live in Kitchener, Ontario. They are the parents of four grown children.*



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