

# The Church and the Sacraments

by John Christian Wenger

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*The sermon explores the Anabaptist view of the church, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, emphasizing the importance of a free church, voluntarism, and the inner 'baptism' of the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** John 20:21

**Topics:** "Church Government", "Sacramental Theology"

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## Description

John Christian Wenger preaches about the Anabaptist belief in the church as the final goal of God's redemptive acts, viewing it as the Kingdom of the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. Anabaptists emphasized the church's freedom from state control, advocating for a free church where membership is based on personal conversion and faith in Christ. They upheld the importance of freedom of conscience in matters of faith and full religious toleration, resisting state interference in religious beliefs. Anabaptists focused on the spiritual significance of baptism and the inner 'baptism' of the Holy Spirit, prioritizing faith and discipleship over sacramentalism. They believed in the restoration of the apostolic church, aiming to return to the purity and simplicity of the early church's teachings and practices.

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## Transcript

The doctrine of the church stood at the center of Anabaptist thought. The Brethren regarded the church as the final goal of all of God's redemptive acts in history. No other institution will ever displace the church. It is nothing less than the glorious Kingdom of the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. They regarded the church as the fellowship of the saints, the Body of Christ, the Brotherhood of the redeemed, the society in which the Spirit of Christ is at work transforming men into the spiritual image of Jesus, the Body of which Christ is Head, and where his will for men is carried out, "albeit in human weakness."

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A Free Church

First of all, declared the Anabaptists, the church must be free. What is taken for granted in America today, however, was regarded as rank heresy in the sixteenth century. The very worst offense of the Anabaptists was their challenge of the inclusive membership and state establishment of the church. How in the name of all that is holy and reasonable, the state churchmen asked, could anyone dare to defy the corpus Christianum, the sacred union of church and state that reached clear back to the joint edict of Theodosius the Great and Gratianus (A.D. 380)? Such a heresy as wishing to throw wide open the whole matter of

faith, and to allow the church to find its own way without the benefit of a co-operating state, must be punished with nothing less than death. Such views would simply wreck the established order and introduce chaos into a well-ordered society!

The Anabaptists quietly insisted that they had no choice but to follow the Word of God. The church of the New Testament era was a free church, said the Anabaptists. It did not link hands with the state and secure legal recognition. Much less did it call on the secular government to maintain the true faith by law, and to punish dissenters with martyrdom! Christ is the only Lord of the conscience, asserted the Anabaptists, and only those who freely accept Christ and become converted are qualified for membership in the Body of Christ.

In a brief booklet of 1539 entitled, *Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing*, Menno explained:

They verily are not the true congregation of Christ who merely boast of His name. But they are the true congregation of Christ who are truly converted, who are born from above of God, who are of a regenerate mind by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the divine Word, and have become the children of God, have entered into obedience to Him, and live unblamably in His holy commandments, and according to His holy will all their days, or from the moment of their call.[1]

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#### Freedom of Conscience

Involved in this program for a free church was, of course, the matter of voluntarism in matters of faith and full religious toleration. The proper business of the magistrate, insisted the Anabaptists, was to encourage the good and punish the evil; or-to use a modern expression-to maintain law and order. No one ought to be harmed for following the Word of God as he understood it. And yet the Anabaptists were being destroyed in great numbers because they wished to set up congregations of earnest disciples who desired only to follow Christ in holiness and obedience.

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#### Christian Baptism

In his book, *Christian Baptism*, 1539, Menno wrote to the civil authorities:

Take heed, ye illustrious, noble, and reverend sirs. Take heed, ye who enforce the laws in the country against whom it is that your cruel, bloody sword is sometimes sharpened and drawn. . . .

Therefore we pray you, as our beloved and gracious rulers according to the flesh, by the mercy of God, to consider and realize if there be reasonableness in you, in what great anxiety and anguish we poor, miserable people are placed. If we abandon Christ Jesus and His holy Word, we fall into the wrath of God. And if we remain firm in His holy Word, then we are put to your cruel sword.[2]

In 1550 a Dutch Anabaptist named Hans van Overdam submitted a lengthy epistle to the civil authorities which reads in part:

Be it known to you, noble lords, councilors, burgomasters, and judges, that we recognize your offices as right and good; yea, as ordained and instituted of God, that is, the secular sword for the punishment of evil-doers and the protection of the good, and we desire to obey you in all taxes, tributes, and ordinances,

as far as it is not contrary to God. And if you find us disobedient in these things, we will willingly receive our punishment as malefactors. God, who is acquainted with every heart, knows that this is our intention.

But understand, ye noble lords, that the abuse of your stations or offices we do not recognize to be from God but from the devil, and that antichrist through the subtlety of the devil has bewitched and blinded your eyes . . . Be sober, therefore, and awake, and open the eyes of your understanding, and see against whom you fight, that it is . . . against God.

Therefore we will not obey you; for it is the will of God that we shall be tried thereby. Hence we would rather, through the grace of God, suffer our temporal bodies to be burned, drowned, beheaded, racked, or tortured, as it may seem good to you, or be scourged, banished, or driven away, and robbed of our goods, than show you any obedience contrary to the Word of God, and we will be patient herein, committing vengeance to God.[3]

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### No Sacramentalism

It was the church that was central for the Anabaptists, not ceremonies. Baptism, for example, played a secondary role in Anabaptist thought. "If you are a genuine Christian born of God, then why do you draw back from baptism, which is the least that God has commanded you?" asked Menno in his *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*.<sup>[4]</sup> He continued by setting forth God's demands for holiness of heart and life, and readiness to suffer as his disciple. Then he added, "It seems to me that these and the like commands are more painful and difficult for perverse flesh, naturally so prone to follow its own way everywhere, than to be the recipient of a handful of water. . . . Faithful reader, do not imagine that we insist upon elements and rites."<sup>[5]</sup>

It would appear understandable that the Protestant theologians should have arrived at precisely this same conclusion after they had once been delivered from the sacramentalism of the Roman Church. And this was actually the conclusion of Zwingli in 1523, for he wrote to a friend on June 15, "It is useless to wash a thousand times in the baptismal water him who does not believe." And the next year, on October 20, 1524, Zwingli wrote, "God has commanded to baptize those who have previously believed." But after the battle with the free church Täufer was on, Zwingli defended infant baptism vigorously.

For the Anabaptists the important factor was not the outward water baptism but the inner "baptism" of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual change effected by Christ through the Spirit in those who turned from sin to become his disciples.

Thomas von Imbroich was a young Anabaptist bishop, twenty-five years of age. His native village was Imgenbroich, not far from Aachen. He moved to Cologne in 1554 and united with the Brethren. Soon he was chosen to the ministry, and served briefly before his early martyrdom as an elder or bishop in the Brotherhood. He was imprisoned at Cologne, Germany, in December 1557. His arrest took place December 23, 1557. He was repeatedly examined, cruelly tortured, and finally beheaded on March 5, 1558. In prison he wrote a brief confession of faith for the judges of the Inquisition, and a copy was smuggled out to the Brethren, who promptly had it printed. He also wrote letters to his wife and to the church. These materials were later assembled and published in a book with the curious title, *Goldene Aepfel in Silbern Schalen* (Golden Apples in Silver Bowls).

I believe and confess [wrote Thomas] that there is a Christian baptism which must take place externally and internally; internally with the Holy Ghost and with fire, externally with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Internal baptism is imparted by Christ to the penitent, as John the Baptist said: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but He that cometh after me is mightier than I; whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. . . .

But the external baptism of water, which is a witness of the spiritual baptism, and indication of true repentance, and a sign of faith in Jesus Christ, is administered by the command of the Almighty Father and His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, and in the name of the only God . . . to those who have repented and reformed, believe the Gospel, confess their faith and desire baptism, willingly offer themselves up to God, and yield themselves servants unto righteousness, yea, to the service of God and the communion of Jesus Christ and all the saints.

This is fully comprehended and contained in the words which Christ speaks to His disciples: "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." . . . In Mark we read thus: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. . . . These words of Christ fully comprise the ordination and institution of the Christian baptism, and all that pertains to it; for Christ who is the eternal Wisdom of the Father has expressly and completely thus commanded it. Now as He is the Light and the Saviour of the world we find in this command that teaching and believing must precede baptism. . . .

The Scriptures cannot be broken, neither are we to take away from or add to the Word of God; nay, not even the smallest tittle or letter of the Gospel may be changed. Hence the ordinance of the Lord respecting baptism must remain unaltered, for it is the Word of God which abideth forever . . . . Hence, the words of Christ declare that teaching must take place before and after baptism in order that the person baptized may use diligence to observe after baptism the Gospel (which was presented to him before baptism) and all things commanded him; for he is no more lord over himself; but as a bride surrenders herself to her bridegroom, so he after receiving baptism surrenders himself to Christ and loses his will, is resigned in all things, without name [status], without will, but leaving the name to Christ and letting Him reign in him. For this is the signification of baptism, that the Christian's life is nothing but pure dying and suffering; because we are like unto the image of Christ, and baptized with Him, must die and suffer, if we would reign and live with Him.[6]

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### Spiritual Status of Children

As to the salvation of unbaptized children, Thomas referred to the promise of Matthew 19:14: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

We believe and confess that infants are saved on account of the promise; but that salvation depends on baptism we do not confess; for when Christ promised the children the kingdom of God they were not baptized, nor did He baptize them, but He embraced them, and spoke kindly to or blessed them. . . . Hence, since we are admonished to become as children, it is incontrovertible that as long as they remain in a state of innocence God holds them guiltless and no sin is imputed to them. And although they are of a sinful nature, partaking of the nature of Adam, there still remains some thing in them which is pleasing to God, namely innocence and humility. However they are saved only through the grace of Christ. . . .

Who will accuse the children for whom Christ shed His blood? Who will condemn them to whom Christ has promised the kingdom of God? Who will deny the holy Scriptures which declare so emphatically that the sin of Adam and of the whole world has been taken away? . . . Hence, he who says that children are condemned, or accuses them on account of original sin, denies the death and blood of Christ. For if the children are condemned because of Adam's death, then Christ "died in vain, Adam's guilt is still upon us and not reconciled through Christ, and grace has not abounded over sin through Christ. God forbid![7]

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Menno Simons, in his book entitled *Christian Baptism*, 1539, wrote:

But little children and particularly those of Christian parentage have a peculiar promise which was given them of God without any ceremony, but out of pure and generous grace through Jesus Christ our Lord who says, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16. This promise makes glad and assures all the chosen saints of God in regard to their children or infants. By it they are assured that the true word of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ could never fail. Inasmuch as He has shown such great mercy toward the children that were brought to Him that He took them up in His blessed arms, blessed them, laid His hands upon them, promised them the kingdom of heaven, and has done no more with them; therefore such parents have in their hearts a sure and firm faith in the grace of God concerning their beloved children, namely that they are children of the kingdom, of grace, and of the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (to whom alone be the glory) and not by any ceremony. Yes, by such promise they were assured that their dear children, as long as they are mere children, are clean, holy, saved, and pleasing unto God, be they alive or dead. Therefore they give thanks to the eternal Father through Jesus Christ our Lord for His inexpressibly great love to their dear children, and they train them in the love of God and in wisdom by correcting, chastising, teaching, and admonishing them, and by the example of an irreproachable life, until these children are able to hear the Word of God, to believe it, and to fulfill it in their works. Then is the time, and not until then, of whatever age they may be, that they should receive Christian baptism, which Christ Jesus has commanded in obedience to His Word to all Christians, and which His apostles have practiced and taught.[8]

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The Lord's Supper

There was no controversy at all between the Reformed and the Anabaptists on the nature of the Lord's Supper. Both groups regarded the emblems as symbols of Christ's broken body and shed blood, which was the teaching of Zwingli. The major controversies which involved the Anabaptists were those relating to the Roman Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation and communion in one kind, and to the lack of discipline in the Lutheran territorial churches, a practice which resulted in the indiscriminate serving of the bread and the cup to those who were living carelessly in sin and who nevertheless presented themselves as communicants at the Table of the Lord.

In 1549 a young woman named Elizabeth Dirks was arrested at Leeuwarden in Friesland. She was interrogated in the town hail by the members of the council. These councilmen were Roman Catholics. Following is part of the record of the examination.

Lords: "What are your views with regard to the most adorable, holy sacrament?"

Elizabeth: "I have never in my life read in the holy Scriptures of a holy sacrament, but of the Lord's Supper."

Lords: "Be silent, for the devil speaks through your mouth."

Elizabeth: "Yea, my lords, this [charge] is a small matter, for the servant is not better than his lord."

Lords: "You speak from a spirit of pride."

Elizabeth: "No, my lords, I speak with frankness."

Lords: "What did the Lord say, when He gave His disciples the Supper?"

Elizabeth: "What did He give them, flesh or bread?"

Lords: "He gave them bread."

Elizabeth: "Did not the Lord remain sitting there? Who then would eat the flesh of the Lord?"[9]

The interrogation then proceeded to other points of Catholic doctrine, only to be continued further at a later hearing. In the final analysis, she was executed by drowning on May 27, 1549. She may have been the first deaconess of the Dutch Mennonites (a deaconess was a woman set apart for the pastoral care of women and girls in the church). Hymn 13 in the Anabaptist hymnbook, the *Ausbund*, is devoted to the story of her testimony and death.

As to the Catholic doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Menno Simons wrote:

They have made the bread in the Holy Supper into the actual flesh, and the wine into the actual blood, of Christ, and that by virtue of Christ's Word taken literally: "Take, eat; this is my body." They fail to notice that John says in John 6 (where he instructs us plainly how we are to eat His flesh and drink His blood) that it is useless to eat His flesh literally and to drink His blood. Nor could it be done, because He was about to ascend to the place where He was before; therefore we are not to understand this eating His flesh and drinking His blood literally but spiritually. As He Himself says, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." All those who confess this from the Scriptures (by many disdainfully called cursed heretics and profaners of the sacrament) must suffer for it by water, fire, and the sword. [10]

In two brief summary statements on the sacraments, Menno wrote:

And these are the sacraments which Christ Jesus has instituted and taught. First, the holy baptism of believers in which we bury our sinful flesh and take unto ourselves a new life, seal and confess our faith, testify to the new birth and a good conscience, and enter into the obedience of Jesus Christ . . . Second, the Holy Supper in which is represented the death of the Lord who died for us in His great love, and in which is represented true, brotherly love, and also the righteous, unblamable Christian life which must be lived inwardly and outwardly in full measure of death unto sin and unfeigned love, conformable to the Word of God." [11]

It is not the sacraments nor the signs, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, but a sincere, Christian faith, with its unblamable, pious fruits, represented by the sacraments, that makes a true Christian and has the promise of life. [12]

Menno was also quite indignant against communion "in one kind" as practiced in the Catholic Church. At least twice in his writings he makes mention of the wrongful withholding of the cup from the laity.

Truly, I do not know how a worse heresy could be invented, notwithstanding that these miserable men cruelly cry against us, saying, "Heretics! heretics! Drown them, slay them, and burn them!" And this for no other reason than that we teach the new life, baptism on confession of faith, and the Supper in both elements in an unblamable church, according to the holy Gospel of Christ Jesus.[13]

For Menno, one of the most distressing situations in the sixteenth century was the offering of the Lord's Supper to the rank and file of the population, all of whom were recognized as good Christians because they had been christened, and because they partook of the Lord's Supper, although their church required neither faith nor holiness as conditions for being communicant members. "Of the Supper of the preachers," wrote Menno in one of his sharp polemical attacks on the state churchmen,

we hold and confess, first, that it is a false and idolatrous consolation and symbol of peace to those who delight in walking upon the broad way, such as the greedy, avaricious, usurers, the adulterers, the lying, deceiving, proud, and unrighteous. It is praised to them by their preachers that the remission of their sins is announced thereby. Therefore they console them selves and think that if they partake of it, they are the people of the Lord. Oh, no! The ceremony makes no Christian, for so long as they do not become converted and do not become new men, born of God, of [a] spiritual mind, all baptizing and partaking of the Lord's Supper is meaningless, even if it were administered by Peter or Paul.[14]

In a severe tone Menno declared:

The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, with out any assistance by works. They emphasize this doctrine so as to make it appear as though works were not even necessary; yes, that faith is of such a nature that it cannot tolerate any work alongside of it. And therefore the important and earnest epistle of James (because he reproves such a frivolous, vain doctrine and faith) is esteemed and treated as a "strawy epistle." What bold folly! If the doctrine is straw, then the chosen apostle, the faithful servant and witness of Christ who wrote and taught it, must also have been a strawy man. . . .[15]

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## Restoration of the Apostolic Church

The Anabaptists had a deep conviction that the ancient church started out well but rapidly declined in purity of doctrine and in spiritual power, especially in the fourth century when toleration came, when the church began to link hands with the rulers of this world, and when Christianity was finally made the state religion of the Roman Empire (A.D. 380). The Brethren therefore were not content to remove a few obvious corruptions in the Roman Church of the sixteenth century. They thought Zwingli was on the right track when he decided to abolish whatever in the church was not taught in the Scriptures. But they held that Zwingli did not consistently carry out this principle; they felt that he did not go far enough. They were determined to return fully to the apostolic church of the New Testament for their model. They had a strong sense that the Anabaptist Brother hood was a restoration of primitive Christianity, that their reformation was a genuine restitution of the New Testament church. To take only one writer, this strain runs through all of Menno Simons' writings.

In the preface to a later edition of his *Foundation* of 1539, Menno commented:

I perceive that our work which I published a few years ago under the title, Foundation of Christian Doctrine, has through the grace of God (to whom be eternal praise and thanks) been productive of much good to some. God's holy Word which was obscured for such a long time has through our little talent been brought back to light.[16]

And near the end of this book he added:

Behold, beloved sirs, friends, and brethren, here you have the leading parts and chief articles of a Christian position or system, together with a plain instruction and exposition of the anti-Christian abominations and Babylonian traffic by which the true apostolic truth, because of the long time, was wiped out and demolished.[17]

In his book, Christian Baptism, Menno labeled the Bible doctrine which he had set forth, "this heavenly truth of Christ," and described it as "for so many ages lost and now regained." [18]

In The True Christian Faith, about 1541, he became oratorical:

Again I say, reform! Too long you have erred; too long you have mocked God; too long you have worshiped Antichrist instead of Christ; too long you have walked in the perverse and broad way of death. Awaken, it is yet today! Behold, the true book of the Law, the saving, pure Gospel of Christ which was hid for so many centuries by the abominations of Antichrist, has been found! [19]

In his Confession of the Distressed Christians, 1552, he declared,

The brightness of the sun has not shone for many years; heaven and earth have been as copper and iron; the brooks and springs have not run, nor the dew descended from heaven; the beautiful trees and verdant fields have been dry and wilted-spiritually, I mean. However, in these latter days the gracious, great God by the rich treasures of His love has again opened the windows of heaven and let drop the dew of His divine Word, so that the earth once more as of yore produces its green branches and plants of righteousness which bear fruit unto the Lord and glorify His great and adorable name. The holy Word and sacraments of the Lord rise up again from the ashes by means of which the blasphemous deceit and abominations of the learned ones are made manifest. Therefore all the infernal gates rouse themselves, they rave and rant and with such subtle deceit, blasphemous falsehood, and bloody tyranny that if the strong God did not show forth His gracious power, no man could be saved. But they will never wrest from Him those that are His own. [20]

And in his Instruction on Excommunication, 1558, Menno exclaimed,

We see all this and observe that now the bright light of the holy Gospel of Christ shines again in undimmed splendor in these latest awful times of anti-Christian abominations. God's only-begotten and firstborn Son, Jesus Christ, is gloriously revealed; His gracious will and holy Word concerning faith, regeneration, repentance, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the whole saving doctrine, life, and ordinance have again come to light through much seeking and prayer; through action, reading, teaching, and writing. Now all things (God be praised for His grace) proceed according to the true apostolic rule and criterion in the church, by which the kingdom of Christ comes to honor and the kingdom of Anti christ is going down in shame. [21]

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## Society Must Be Evangelized

The Anabaptists saw as the major function of the church the evangelism of all men with the gospel. This position they based on such statements of Christ as "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21), and "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The ancient Christian church did a remarkable work in carrying the gospel over the then-known world in the first century without the benefit of modern travel facilities or trained personnel; the happy witnesses simply told the Good News as they moved about in daily concourse with their fellows, and the light of Christianity spread rapidly across Europe and North Africa. This took place in spite of severe persecution, even Empire-wide in extent at times, especially in the reigns of Decius in the middle of the third century, and of Diocletian early in the fourth century. Constantine's Edict of Toleration had come in A.D. 313, and on February 28, 380, by a joint edict of Theodosius, the Eastern Emperor, and of Gratianus, the Western Emperor, Christianity became the official state religion of the Empire. From that date it was a crime not to be Christian! Infants were "made Christians" (christened) by baptism, and Europe gradually settled into the comfortable status of consciously being no longer pagan but Christian, for were not all citizens members of the great universal or catholic church? Long before the time of the Reformation the baptism of infants had become universal and all Europeans were thought of as Christians. Not all of them were pious in life, of course, but what of it? And no matter that some of the clergy were also somewhat carnal. For did not the grace of God operate through the seven sacraments regardless of the character of the officiating priest, and were not many of the most unspiritual prelates of the church after all excellent rulers? How could there be any thought of evangelism in such a satisfactory arrangement?

And yet all was not well. Somehow the gospel had lost its clarity in this institutionalized Christendom. Many devout Christian thinkers in various lands—Waldo, Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Zwingli—labored to cleanse the church of its obvious abuses and to restore the great truths of the gospel: justification by faith alone, the Christian life as one of holiness and obedience to God's Word, the church as the fellowship of the redeemed, the priesthood of all believers, the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture as a spiritual guide, the headship of Jesus Christ over the church, prayer to God only. In 1517 Martin Luther inaugurated a glorious reformation which enabled the church to discard compulsory fasts, the required celibacy of the clergy, the institution of popery, the twin doctrines of indulgences and purgatory, the use of images and relics, the Roman doctrine of Tradition (whereby all nonbiblical practices and doctrines were justified as apostolic), all notions of human merit, the doctrine of the Mass as a bloodless repetition of Calvary. The debt of modern Christendom to Luther for the inaugurations of the sixteenth century is simply enormous. God used him mightily to recover the truth of the gospel and to purify the church of the unscriptural accretions of more than a millennium of time.

The doctrine of evangelism was not recovered adequately by the Reformers, however. They labored manfully to restore biblical Christianity to Europe, and they did not hesitate to link hands with the secular rulers to carry through their reforms. But they never reached the point of setting up free churches of voluntary members. The corpus Christianum was reformed but retained. Luther regretfully set up what he called the landesherliche Kirchenregiment, a system of territorial churches in which the civil ruler of each territory determined the faith of his realm. Every priest and layman then had to change his faith to that of the ruler, or migrate to another land on pain of persecution. The corpus Christianum was badly broken from one land to another, but it survived through the state church system which enforced conformity to the established religion in each country.

Against this program the Anabaptists protested. The Reformation which they hailed initially with great joy was to them in its later development a keen disappointment. In the polemical style of that era they accused the Reformers of falling to go all the way with a biblical reformation, and even of being the second beast of Revelation 13! They were particularly bitter when Catholic and Lutheran and Reformed rulers set about to crush the Anabaptist free-church movement by fines, confiscations of property, banishment, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom.

The Anabaptists first of all looked at the moral and spiritual level of the populations about them and pronounced them as for the most part in need of evangelism. Such people are not born again, they declared; they are lost. They imagine that they are Christians because as infants they were baptized but they give no evidence of new life in Christ. "They console them selves," declared Thomas von Imbroich, "only with this, namely, 'I am a Christian; for I am baptized.' Thus they speak, thinking that it is sufficient if one is only baptized; but they know little what baptism signifies. For they have not yet drank of the living fountain. . . .

In the second place, the Anabaptists denied the right of any ruler to determine the faith of his subjects. For them, only Christ was the Lord of the conscience.<sup>22</sup> No man dared to step into the sacred realm of faith to specify what other men should believe, be he judge, ruler, king, or emperor. The Anabaptists wanted to follow the Scriptures as closely as God gave them grace. But in attempting to do so they ran straight into the hands of the law, for Anabaptism was made a capital crime in one land after another.<sup>[23]</sup>In his Foundation Menno protested to the civil authorities:

But the reviling, betraying, and agitation of the priests and your unmerciful mandates and edicts must be our scriptures, and your rackers, hangmen, wrath, torture chambers, water and stake, fire and sword (O God) must be our instructors and teachers, to whom we sorrowful children must listen in many places, and finally make good with our possessions and lifeblood. . . . This I know for certain, that all bloodthirsty preachers and all rulers who propose and practise these things are not Christ's disciples. The hour of accounting when you depart this life will teach you the truth.<sup>[24]</sup>

Finally, the Anabaptists declared that no ruler had the right to hinder the free teaching of God's Word. Since the whole state church system was an unscriptural and unfortunate arrangement, so far as they were concerned, they cared nothing at all for any sort of state recognition of their clergy. Indeed, although they did choose and ordain deacons, preachers, and elders (bishops), they made little difference between the ordained and the unordained; all members were expected to be born-again witnesses of Jesus Christ, authorized by him to tell the Good News of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. Because of their doctrine of nonresistance they tended to arouse suspicion when they traveled without arms, especially without the common sword or rapier. Then when they refused to set up drinks in inns, and when they ventured to speak a word to a stranger about the salvation of his soul, and when they bowed their heads in silent prayer at the beginning and end of their meals, someone was sure to summon the authorities with the report that the Anabaptist sectarians had arrived. In many cases they were summarily executed, even without a formal trial. Thus they continued to go out as sheep in the midst of wolves, seeking for those who were willing to amend their lives and live according to the Word of Christ, even though large numbers of their members were imprisoned, tortured, drowned, beheaded, strangled, and burned. The missionary motif in Anabaptism has been ably demonstrated in the Frank S. Brewer Prize Essay by Franklin H. Littell.<sup>[25]</sup>

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## The Church Must Exhibit God's Will

In addition to the evangelistic and missionary function of the church, there was also the obligation of Christians corporately to exhibit the will of God for his covenant children. Salvation for the Anabaptists was not a private ticket to heaven. It was much more a calling to live out the precepts of Christ and the New Testament in the power of a faith-union with the Lord Jesus. This does not mean that the Anabaptists were perfectionists in ethics; they made no claim to absolute holiness. On the contrary they spoke much of their need for divine grace, of their personal weakness, and of the perversity of their flesh. When Thomas von Imbroich lay in his prison cell in Cologne in 1558, he wrote to his church a typical Anabaptist epistle:

Therefore, my brethren, and my dear wife, let us be valiant; for the apostle says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." . . . Hence I deem it good to be in weakness, (mark) if it be followed by being in reproach, distress, persecution, and fear for Christ's sake. . . .

Yea, if the Lord should count me worthy to testify with my blood to His name, how greatly would I thank Him. For I hope not only to bear these bonds with patience, but also to die for Christ's sake that I may finish my course with joy; for I would rather be with the Lord than live again in this abominable wicked world. However, His divine will be done. Amen.

And if anything should be defective yet in my life, that I may not have been diligent enough (which I confess), may the Lord blot it out and purge it through the fire of His love and mercy in the blood of Jesus Christ. . . Dear brethren, I desire that you will all pray to God for me that He will keep us through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.[26]

The church fulfills this second aspect of its mission (exhibiting God's will) insofar as the members individually and corporately manifest the fruit of the Spirit and walk in the ethic of love and holiness as taught by Christ. No member was to live in any known sin; the works of the flesh were to be overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians should also manifest only love to all men, especially to the members of the church. This love was not merely to be a matter of words, but believers were to help each other in any and every need, be it spiritual or material. The practice of mutual aid, in which each member makes his resources available as needed, was a major Anabaptist emphasis. In only one group, the Hutterian Brethren of Austria, was this principle carried so far as to renounce the individual ownership of property-although the charge of "community of goods" was frequently hurled against the Anabaptists because their mutual-aid concept was not rightly understood by either the civil or religious leaders of the day.

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## State and Church Contrasted

The Anabaptists drew a sharp contrast between the church and the state. They regarded the state as having a merely human head, while the head of the church was Christ. The state included all men, good and evil, while the church was made up of the regenerated, the true believers. The state is entered by the natural birth, while the church is entered (after the age of personal accountability) by conversion and the new birth. The function of the state is to maintain law and order, while that of the church is to evangelize the world and to create a body of Christian disciples who obey the Word of God and thus exhibit his will before men. The state controls by law, while the church is governed by the Word and Spirit of God. The state employs such sanctions as fines, imprisonment, and death (although some of the Anabaptists

opposed capital punishment), while the church can but exclude those who turn away from following Christ. The state will end with the return of Christ, while the church has before it an eternity of glory. One of the earliest summaries of this general point of view is in the Swiss Schleitheim Confession of Faith of 1527.<sup>27</sup> So absolutely were these contrasts taken that not only did the Anabaptists reject the military because they could not take life; they went so far as refuse the magistracy because they did not wish to deal with people on any other basis than with the redemptive message of the gospel. They felt that God did not hand over the sword of Moses (the maintenance of law and order by force) to the church, but to the state. And they held absolutely to the separation of church and state.

It does not follow, however, that the Anabaptists were anarchists. They were not. They did not believe that it was their calling to administer justice in a sub-Christian society which requires the sanctions of law and force. Yet they regarded the state as a divine institution. Christians are duty-bound, they held, to obey the laws, to pay their taxes, and to render honor to the civil authorities as "ministers of God" (Romans 13:1-7). But they held that when the state attempted to stop the teaching of God's Word it had stepped out of its divinely prescribed sphere. The state had no right to establish any creed by law, nor to punish religious dissenters. The magistrates ought to mind their proper business of rewarding the good and punishing evildoers.

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### The Church Must Be Disciplined

The Anabaptists were most unhappy about the lack of discipline in the state churches of their day. They regarded the presence of any unrepentant sinners in the church as fatal to its life and witness. (This applied particularly to the Lutherans, in the judgment of the Anabaptists.) It is not that the Brethren were perfectionists; it was simply that they felt that the church needed to maintain a biblical discipline. In 1551 several Anabaptists fled from Lier in Brabant to Ghent in Flanders. There they were betrayed into the hands of the authorities, who imprisoned them, and finally burned them to death without strangling. One of them, a man named Wouter Denijs, made the following critical remarks before his execution: "Citizens of Ghent, we suffer not as heretics or Lutherans who hold in one hand a beer mug, and a Testament in the other, thus dishonoring the Word of God and dealing in drunkenness; but we die for the genuine truth."<sup>28</sup> As the fire was about to be kindled the martyrs said to one another, "Let us fight valiantly for this is our last pain. Hereafter we shall rejoice with God in endless joy."<sup>[29]</sup>

The Anabaptists and the state churchmen both appealed to the parable of the tares in Matthew 13. The state churchmen held that the parable justified the retention of sinners in the church, for the Lord commanded to let the wheat and tares grow together until the harvest. (Yet the state church clergy favored the persecution of the Anabaptists in accordance with the imperial decrees, for did they not go about at night and hold secret meetings in unseemly times and places, often in the forests, seeking to lead from the faith the members of the state churches?) The Anabaptists, however, held that the parable of the wheat and tares supported the principle of toleration. Saints and sinners (specifically religious dissenters!) should be allowed to live together in the world until Christ's return. The church, however, should restrict its membership to converted people who took the Christian life seriously, and who gave evidence of newness of life in Christ.

Some idea of the importance of church discipline in the minds of the Anabaptists may be gained from the fact that on no other topic did Menno Simons write three books; they were *A Kind Admonition on Church*

Discipline, 1541; A Clear Account of Excommunication, 1550; and Instruction on Excommunication, Over and over be hammers away at the theme: To be a true church calls for biblical discipline. This does not mean a merciless expulsion for a transgression done in weakness and followed at once by penitence. In fact, church discipline begins with brotherly assistance:

"If you see your brother sin," wrote Menno in 1541, "then do not pass him by . . . if his fall be curable, from that moment endeavor to raise him up by gentle admonition and brotherly instruction before you eat, drink, sleep, or do anything else."[30]

Furthermore, discipline shall be tempered with kindness and love, not be harsh and severe. Indeed, it is the very last step when all else has failed. "Wherefore, brethren, understand correctly. No one is excommunicated or expelled by us from the communion of the brethren but those who have already separated and expelled themselves from Christ's communion either by false doctrine or by improper conduct."[31]

All church discipline must proceed according to the Word of God, not according to human laws and standards. In 1550 Menno wrote near the close of his second book on discipline:

I have written this out of pure love, and in the interest of peace, according to the direction of the holy Word, before my God who shall judge me at the last day. I know, however, that by some I will not earn much thanks, for to some what I have written will be too stringent and others too lenient. I must bear this as I have done these fifteen years. Still I would pray you for the sake of the merits of the precious blood of my Lord Jesus Christ, that if any one should find fault with this my treatise, be it on account of mildness or stringency, not to do so except with the authority of the Word, Spirit, and life of the Lord, and not recklessly and thoughtlessly, lest he make blunders. Whatsoever any person can advance and prove I will gladly bear and obey; but I dare not go higher nor lower, be more stringent or lenient, than the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit teach me; and that out of great fear and anxiety of my conscience lest I once more burden the God-fearing hearts (who now have renounced the commandments of men) with more such commandments. Willfulness and human opinions I roundly hate, and do not want them. I know what tribulation and affliction they have caused me for many years.[32]

But when all necessary safeguards have been set up, the main point still stands for Menno. The church has no choice; discipline must be exercised! Menno wrote in 1558:

It is evident that the congregation or church cannot continue in the saving doctrine, in an unblamable and pious life, without the proper use of excommunication. For as a city without walls and gates, or a field without trenches and fences, and a house without walls and doors, so is also a church which has not the true apostolic exclusion or ban. It is the distinguished usage, honor, and prosperity of a sincere church if it with Christian discretion teaches the true apostolic separation, and observes it carefully in solicitous love according to the ordinance of the holy, sacred Scriptures. It is more than evident that if we had not been zealous in this matter these days we would be considered and called by every man the companions of the sect of M<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>nster and all perverted sects. Now, however, thank God for His grace, by the proper use of this means of the sacred ban, it is well known among many thousands of honorable, reasonable persons in different principalities, cities, and countries, that we are innocent of and free from all godless abominations and all perverted sects. . . .33

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## Limitations of Public Discipline

Church discipline does not apply to private transgressions in the life of a true believer when those transgressions are known only to the believer and His Lord:

If at any time one should in a carnal abomination sin against God in private (from which may His power preserve us all), and should the Spirit of the grace of Christ, which alone works genuine repentance in us, once more take hold of our heart and grant genuine repentance: in this matter we are not so to judge, for it is a matter between a man and his God. For since it is evident that we seek our righteousness and salvation, the remission of our sins, satisfaction, reconciliation, and eternal life, not in or through the ban, but solely in the righteousness, intercession, merits, death, and blood of Christ: therefore, since the two objectives for which the ban is commanded in the Scriptures have no legitimate function in this case (in the first place, because the sin is private and no infection can for that reason be occasioned, and in the second place, because his heart is already touched and his life penitent, and consequently no mortification and regret are necessary) . . . we have no binding key of Christ nor any commandment wherewith to punish him yet more, or . . . shame him before the church.[34]

Finally, in a letter of Menno to a church in Franeker in Friesland, Menno urged:

"Not the weak but the corrupt members are cut off, lest they corrupt the others. . . . I seek to use the ban in a noble, fraternal spirit, in faithful love according to the doctrine of Christ and His apostles. . . ."[35]

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## No Fellowship with Apostates

The knottiest problem for the Dutch and North German Anabaptists was how far to break spiritual and social fellowship with the excommunicated. For example, how deeply should excommunication cut as between a faithful married partner and the excommunicated mate? Instead of leaving the matter to the good judgment of the individuals involved, the congregations were forever trying to formulate rules on the subject which were difficult to carry out. In vain did Menno plead for tolerance on the subject. He was indeed clear that excommunication was normally to be followed by the "shunning" of the impenitent ex-member (he based this on various passages of the New Testament such as I Corinthians 5:9-11; Romans 16:17; II Thessalonians 3:14), but when it came to married partners Menno's counsel generally was, "Hands off! Do not be too strict in the matter." It may be noted that the Swiss Brethren interpreted these passages as applying primarily to the communion of the Lord's Supper, not to ordinary social intercourse. If only the Dutch "Mennists" could have exercised similar discrimination and tolerance!

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