



# Discipleship Without Borders: Anabaptist Lessons for Baptists on Rejecting the Idea of a Christian Nation

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## Abstract

This article offers an Anabaptist-informed critique of the tendency in contemporary politics to conscript Christian identity into the service of nationalistic agendas. By drawing upon the historical witness of the Anabaptists, I argue that the idea of a ‘Christian Nation’, despite its seductive appeal, is not a sacred archetype, but a profane illusion and a self-contradiction. Instead, I will argue that Baptists today are called to a transformative engagement with the world that is grounded in radical discipleship and inspired by shared Baptist–Anabaptist convictions, such as freedom, dignity, and the importance of living out our faith as Baptists in a way that transcends political and national boundaries.

## Keywords

Anabaptism; nationalism; authoritarianism; freedom; discipleship

## Introduction

In an increasingly polarised political landscape, the intertwining of Christian identity with nationalistic rhetoric has become a significant feature of politics today in many countries, including the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Since the Brexit Referendum, there has been a resurgence of claims that Britain is a ‘Christian Nation’, which reflects a global trend where religious faith is instrumentalised to provide legitimacy to authoritarian political ideologies.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that the

<sup>1</sup> Philip W. Barker, *Religious Nationalism in Modern Europe: If God be for Us* (Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp. 45–74.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Niklas Collet, ‘Rechte Normalisierung und kirchlich-theologische Normalität’, in *Rechte Normalisierung und politische Theologie: Eine Standortbestimmung*, ed. by Jan Niklas Collet, Julia Lis, and Gregor Taxacher (Pustet, 2021), pp. 158–182.

degeneration of Christian faith into an instrument of political power harms the witness of the church to the world.

The argument proceeds in several key stages. Firstly, I will explore the historical context of Anabaptism, focusing particularly on the conviction regarding the separation of church and state, and the voluntary nature of faith. Next, I will examine the current political climate marked by the rise of Christian Nationalism. In this section, I will illustrate how this ideology distorts the message of the gospel and conflates faith with political power. This discussion leads naturally into an elucidation of the Anabaptist critique of authority and its contemporary significance. This section emphasises the need for Baptists to recover their nonconformist prophetic voice that challenges oppressive structures and advocates for justice, peace, freedom, and dignity. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the significance of the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement. By reinterpreting the Anabaptist vision of radical discipleship in today's context, my aim is to delineate a vision of discipleship without borders: a vision that prioritises the kingdom of God above national identities and allegiances and encourages Baptists and our ecumenical partners to rediscover the radical call to live differently and to witness to the world the saving power of the gospel.

## **What Baptists Can Learn from Anabaptists about Political Power and Christian Witness**

Anabaptism emerged in the sixteenth century as a radical movement within the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> The Anabaptists' experience of persecution made them inherently suspicious of political power and the risks of coercion and violent persecution that result when the church and state are united into the totality of a single institution. Anabaptists were often subjected to oppressive decrees imposed by legislators acting on behalf of the Church-State who equated dissent with blasphemy and nonconformity with treason. The early Anabaptists maintained that the

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<sup>3</sup>William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 15–24.

church should avoid seeking dominance over society. Many argued that followers of Christ should avoid involvement in political affairs at any level.<sup>4</sup>

Out of this conviction arose the Anabaptist commitment to the separation between church and state. This belief was derived from the conviction that faith in Christ was a voluntary commitment rather than something that could either be imposed by law or conferred automatically simply by the contingency of one's birthplace or cultural milieu. The Anabaptists believed that civic religion was no substitute for costly gospel witness. The essence of faith consisted in a radical trust in God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> As Menno Simons insisted, 'It is vain that we are called Christians, that Christ died, that we are born in the day of grace, and baptised with water, if we do not walk according to His law [...] and are not obedient to His word.'<sup>6</sup> Such faith in the crucified and risen Christ was a matter of deep, inward conviction of a free conscience responding to the call of Christ, rather than a cultural or national identity that could be endorsed by an outside institution, such as a church or a government.<sup>7</sup> This foundational conviction also underpinned the Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence, because Anabaptists interpreted Christ's teaching as advocating for a community characterised by love and costly obedience, rather than by worldly security enforced by the use of coercive power.

One of the aspects of the Anabaptist vision that I cherish is its emphasis on real and visible transformation of the world, not through force or coercion, but through the embodied witness of a community covenanted together in love and loyalty to Christ and his teachings.

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the diverse range of political convictions of the early anabaptists, see James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Wipf and Stock, 2002), pp. 27–29.

<sup>5</sup> Inseo Song, 'Baptism', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*, ed. by Brian C. Brewer (Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 271–286 (p. 277).

<sup>6</sup> Simons, cited in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. by L. Verduin, ed. by J. C. Wenger (Herald Press, 1956), p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> These convictions are set out with force and clarity in the writings of Hans Denck (1500–1527). See especially Denck's *Nuremberg Confession* (1525). See Geoffrey Dipple, 'The Spiritualist Anabaptists', in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, ed. by John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Brill, 2007), pp. 257–297 (p. 262).

Harold Bender expressed this transformative emphasis in a famous lecture on the Anabaptist vision:

The whole life was to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ in a covenant of discipleship, a covenant which the Anabaptist writers delighted to emphasize. The focus of the Christian life was to be not so much the inward experience of the grace of God, as it was for Luther, but the outward application of that grace to all human conduct and the consequent Christianization of all human relationships.<sup>8</sup>

The Anabaptists emphasised the infusion of God's grace into the world by the real transformation of interpersonal relationships, rather than by the acquisition and deployment of political power or institutional authority. This meant that they sought to embody the teachings of Christ in their daily lives by promoting peace, justice, and reconciliation in their communities. Even if a follower of Christ were promoted to serve in high office, the early Anabaptists regarded this calling not as an opportunity to exert power, but to expand one's capacity to serve and do good. As Balthasar Hubmaier (c.1480–1528)<sup>9</sup> maintained, a Christian in a position of authority

does not rule [...] Rather, he is aware that he is a servant of God, and he is diligent in acting according to the order of God, so that the pious are protected and the evil are punished. The Christian magistrate does not elevate himself above anyone; rather, he very truly takes to heart the words of Christ that the most preeminent should be like a servant.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, their commitment to nonviolence and service was a radical challenge to the prevailing norms of their time. The radical gospel witness of the early Anabaptists was not merely a matter of internal piety, but also a demonstration of how discipleship could lead

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<sup>8</sup> Harold S. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold Bender*, ed. by Guy F. Hershberger (Herald Press, 1957), pp. 29–54 (pp. 42–43).

<sup>9</sup> Hubmaier was a leading figure in the first generation of the Anabaptist movement. He made significant contributions to the development of Anabaptist theology and is best known for his writings on baptism, the church, and the separation of church and state. After being pursued by the authorities on account of his beliefs, he was eventually arrested by the authorities. After he refused to recant his Anabaptist beliefs, he was burned at the stake in Vienna on 10 March 1528.

<sup>10</sup> Hubmaier, cited in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. by Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 203.

to profound changes in society. This approach ultimately aimed at witnessing to Christ's love and justice by summoning the watching world to a deeper understanding of what it means to live in the saving power of Christ. Their legacy reminds us that true transformation occurs not through political domination, but through the humble and faithful witness of a community that reflects Christ's character in its everyday interactions.

This year, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptist witness, the influence of Anabaptist theology on Baptist identity and practice remains as relevant as at any other time since 1525. Anabaptist convictions are especially significant in helping Baptists today to navigate the complexities of contemporary politics. Historically, Baptists have inherited from Anabaptists a commitment to religious liberty, the voluntary nature of faith, and the separation of church and state.<sup>11</sup> As David Gushee points out, Baptists have historically played a crucial role in the development of modern democracy by advocating for the rejection of state Christianity in favour of religious disestablishment and the free exercise of religion within a democratic framework.<sup>12</sup> However, the temptation to align more closely with political power poses significant challenges for Baptists today. The Anabaptist caution against political entanglement and the importance of maintaining critical engagement with the world while rooted in gospel freedom is a prophetic message that Baptists throughout the world today should heed. In order to appreciate the Anabaptist critique of Christian identity politics, we need to consider some of the wider global trends that have led to a rise in nationalism and authoritarianism.

## **The End of the Liberal Consensus and the Emergence of New Forms of Authoritarianism**

After the Second World War and the decisive victory of liberal democracy over fascism, there was a certain consensus concerning the

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<sup>11</sup> For a summary of the historical debate about the extent to which the Anabaptists have shaped Baptist life and thought, see H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (B&H Publishing, 1987), pp. 83–85.

<sup>12</sup> David P. Gushee, *Defending Democracy from its Christian Enemies* (Eerdmans, 2023), p. 155.

universal desirability of liberal democracy — at least in the western world. Having defeated fascism in 1945, liberalism's triumph was consolidated in 1989 with the disintegration of Soviet communism and the seemingly inexorable expansion of liberal democracy throughout the world.<sup>13</sup> The triumphant liberal vision brought with it a set of normative assumptions, such as the inevitability and desirability of progress, the inherent dignity of human life, the subordination of the power of the state to the freedom of individuals, the need for a universal toleration of religious and political opinions, the promotion of the rule of law, the need to respect professional expertise, the desirability of reason and rational thought to resolve political disputes, and a general preference for peaceful relations between the nations through the diplomatic resolution of conflicts.

However, there are clear signs that this liberal democratic consensus is fracturing in today's world. The signs of the times indicate that we may be entering a new age of tribalism and nativist hostility, which feeds off popular resentment towards established social and political structures. Ethno-nationalist populism prioritises identity and allegiance to specific national groups over shared values and universal human rights.<sup>14</sup> The stone tablets upon which were inscribed the liberal codes of universal equality, tolerance, and human rights are being eroded, if not completely smashed by powerful new political forces in today's world. Scepticism toward this liberal consensus is taking root not only in traditionally authoritarian countries such as Russia and China, but also in countries that were once seen as bastions of liberal democracy, such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, as well as many European Union countries. Throughout the democratic West, we are witnessing the criminalisation of dissent, the demonisation of traditional media, and the displacement of rationality in favour of emotions as the means for settling political disputes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Maureen A. Eger and Sarah Valdez, 'The Rise of Neo-nationalism', in *Europe at the Crossroads: Confronting Populist, Nationalist, and Global Challenges*, ed. by Pieter Bevelander and Ruth Wodak (Nordic Academic Press, 2019), pp. 113–134.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), pp. 81, 191; Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Knopf Doubleday, 2020).

The general mood of epistemological scepticism that characterises the postmodern condition has created a dangerous climate of relativism in which authoritarian politicians can lie and even commit crimes with apparent impunity.<sup>16</sup> Political leaders, especially authoritarian ‘strongmen’, have artfully exploited the postmodern propensity to regard truth not as an objective reality or a social virtue, but as a mere expression of the will to power. This new climate of epistemological scepticism has resulted in a resurgence of diverse political movements advocating for alternative authoritarian models. One such movement that has emerged with renewed vehemence is Christian Nationalism, which has conscripted Christianity into the cause of authoritarian politics.

Christian Nationalism is a belief system that regards the state as an instrument of God’s will. Its adherents seek to create a national identity based on supposedly biblical or Christian principles. Christian Nationalist thinking is usually defined by its promotion of ‘white culture’, ‘Christian civilization’, and a ‘traditional way of life’.<sup>17</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry observe that Christian Nationalism is not solely a religious belief: ‘The “Christianity” of Christian Nationalism represents something more than religion [...] it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.’<sup>18</sup> Explaining the link between authoritarianism and Christian Nationalism, David Gushee remarks that ‘democracy is sacrificed [...] in part because Western liberal democracy is now understood to be a Trojan horse for godless left-liberalism, and in part because a Christian holy war to defeat the enemies of God is far more important’.<sup>19</sup> Christian Nationalism, in its zeal to enact God’s

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (Ebury Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, cited in Gushee, *Defending Democracy*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Gushee, *Defending Democracy*, p. 102.



righteousness on a godless society through the imposition of legislation, wages an evangelical crusade against minorities who do not conform to its specific religious standards.

Anabaptism serves as one of the most effective antidotes to Christian Nationalism today because it emphasises loyalty to Christ above national identity and advocates for a faith that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries. By focusing on the teachings of Jesus and the call of the gospel to love and serve all people, Anabaptists challenge the divisive tendencies of Christian Nationalism, which seeks to create a national identity rooted in narratives of exclusion and racial and ethnic superiority. For Anabaptists, Christian faith signifies much more than an ethnic boundary marker, a repository of cultural practices, or a system of doctrines and professed beliefs. Instead, for Anabaptists, being a Christian entails a disciplined life of obedience to the actual teachings of Christ. This commitment involves responding to Christ's call by embodying Christ-like behaviour, which results in life that exhibits the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this call is universal in scope, rather than confined to any specific group that uses Christian beliefs to bolster ideologies of national or even racial superiority.

## **Resisting the Theocratic Temptation**

Despite this vehement criticism of Christian Nationalism, it is important to recognise the legitimate aspirations of many who sympathise with Christian Nationalist ideologies.<sup>20</sup> Some people sincerely believe that by campaigning for legislation informed by Christian faith they will help to create a more moral and just society. There have also been rapid material changes to people's lives as a result of globalisation and secularisation that have left many Christians feeling isolated and insecure.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore understandable why many people would be attracted to an ideology such as Christian Nationalism that offers a focus for them to

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<sup>20</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism Why People Are Drawn in and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Fortress, 2022), pp. 9–38.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew R. Lewis, 'Is Public Support for Religious Freedom Nationalistic?', in *Trump, White Evangelical Christians, and American Politics: Change and Continuity*, ed. by Anand Edward Sokhey and Paul A. Djupe (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), pp. 227–254.

affirm the alleged superiority of their values and beliefs in cultural concepts that are familiar to them.<sup>22</sup> In order to offer a sustainable critique of Christian Nationalism, it is necessary to acknowledge its subtle appeal and seductive power, especially to people who feel alienated from the political establishment.

Notwithstanding the sincere motivations of many people who sympathise with Christian Nationalism and its obvious appeal to those who profess Christian faith, I maintain that it is a seduction that must be resisted and vehemently opposed by all people who profess allegiance to the gospel of Christ. The underlying theocratic assumptions of Christian Nationalism are not only harmful to political life, but also toxic to the unity of the church and the integrity and credibility of its gospel witness to the world. Moreover, even as we acknowledge the progress made by some faith-informed governments in enacting humane laws, Anabaptists remind us that advancing the kingdom of God can never be achieved by enacting legislation that favours the religious majority and discriminates against minorities. Any attempt to subsume Christian faith into an ideological project must be exposed and rejected as an unjustified encroachment on the dignity and freedom of the gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Anabaptists also remind us that historically, all forms of theocracy have ended in failure — often bloody failure. The conflation of religious authority with political power results not in the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth, but in the perpetuation of unjust systems that prioritise earthly power and in the neglect of the radical vision of communal justice and compassion that Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> As Whitehead and Perry put it, Christian Nationalism provides an ideological basis for many self-serving assumptions: ‘Christianity is truer than other religions; America is a nation chosen over others; European civilization is more advanced than others; White people are superior to Black and Brown people; and men are naturally dominant over women.’ See Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. x.

<sup>23</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Pandora Press, 2004), pp. 277–281. No reference to J. H. Yoder can go without comment in the light of his extensive sexual abuse of women as documented in Rachel Waltner Goossen, ‘Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 89 (2015), pp. 7–80. Nevertheless, his works currently remain in the scholarly domain and are cited here in full recognition of the problematic nature of such citations.

proclaimed and embodied.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Baptists themselves, despite their deep Christian faith, have frequently faced oppression from Christian lawmakers who equated dissent with blasphemy and nonconformity with treason. Efforts by governments and state-endorsed churches to ‘Christianise’ the populace through top-down legal restrictions have not only undermined individual dignity and freedom but have also proven ineffective and counterproductive, leading to division, persecution, and violence.

Anabaptists also remind us that vehement lobbying on contentious issues like abortion, immigration control, or uncritical support for the State of Israel is no substitute for costly gospel witness. Moreover, such political campaigning often leads to Christianity being subsumed into nefarious political agendas. Ideological forms of Christianity result in oppressive and unjust forms of control. Anabaptists insist that the gospel must be proclaimed and received in a spirit of freedom in a way that respects the dignity of every individual, recognising their inherent worth as created in the image of God. Any gospel message that is devoid of freedom and dignity loses its saving power.

All types of theocracy contradict this core principle of gospel freedom, even when the theocratic authorities claim to act under the guise of upholding ‘Christian values’. History has shown that the merging of politics and religion does not bring about spiritual renewal; instead, it deepens societal divisions into opposing factions, such as ‘liberal/conservative’, ‘pro-choice/pro-life’, ‘pro-Israel/pro-Palestine’, and so on. These polarising conditions create confusion and disorientation among Christians, leading many to side with authoritarian political groups in the so-called ‘culture wars’. Baptists, learning from their Anabaptist cousins about the dangers of political entanglements, should avoid taking sides in these polarising debates and instead provide a counter-narrative to the binary thinking prevalent in the public discourse.

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<sup>24</sup> A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology Law, Order, and Civil Society* (Cascade, 2014), p. 13.

One of the most important lessons that Baptists can learn from Anabaptists is the conviction that faith cannot be coerced.<sup>25</sup> According to the Anabaptist understanding of faith, people become Christians not through the accidents of geography or by state-imposed edicts, but by the free and conscious response of obedience to the way of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Anabaptist theology maintains that whenever faith is enforced by a church or government, Christian faith loses its salvific character. This conviction served as the foundation for the early Anabaptist commitment to the separation of church and state, deemed essential for genuine religious freedom.<sup>27</sup> Baptists have strongly asserted the belief that it is impossible to force Christian doctrines into the hearts and minds of individuals through coercion. Since the time of Thomas Helwys, Baptists have contended that the ‘rule of man’ (*regum hominis*) cannot be transformed by political decrees into the city of God (*civitas Dei*).<sup>28</sup> The principles of freedom and dignity inherent in Christianity fundamentally clash with the principles of coercion and domination present in political systems, even when those in power identify themselves as ‘Christian’.

To preserve the freedom of the gospel, it is necessary to maintain a distinct separation between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God. Christ instructed his disciples to proclaim the gospel in word and deed and to establish the kingdom through radical acts of love and service, rather than through force and oppression. In Christ, God reveals himself to the world not through power and authority but through freedom and sacrificial love. The gospel invites individuals to respond freely to the initiatives of divine grace. Jesus forms disciples not through top-down, state-enforced mandates, but by ‘the allure of gentleness’, which encourages a voluntary obedience to the way of Jesus. The gospel becomes a saving message not when it is invoked within a political framework to support a dominant ideology, but when it is

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas A. Brady Jr., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 330.

<sup>26</sup> Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> Bender, ‘The Anabaptist Vision’, pp. 29–30.

<sup>28</sup> W. R. Estep, ‘Anabaptists, Baptists, and The Free Church Movement’, *Criswell Theological Review*, 6 (1993), pp. 303–307 (p. 306); Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. by Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 1998).

proclaimed as a revolutionary call to love, repentance, and reconciliation. The gospel message summons people to respond freely to God's love by entering into a transformative relationship with Christ that transcends all cultural, social, and political boundaries.<sup>29</sup>

### **How Does the Church Witness to the Rule of God without Itself Ruling?**

It is sometimes assumed that the Anabaptist emphasis on separation between the church and the world necessarily results in a sectarian posture of complete withdrawal from the world. The Schleithem Confession (1527) expressed the Anabaptist position in seemingly uncompromising terms: 'It does not befit a Christian to be a magistrate: The rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the spirit.'<sup>30</sup> There are instances in which Anabaptist communities have sought to withdraw from the world, but such a withdrawal is by no means the only way that the Anabaptist vision finds political expression. Although Anabaptists historically have disavowed the use of force, they have generally recognised the legitimacy of secular authorities that exercise lawful authority in order to maintain order and restrain evil doers. Hubmaier maintained that 'the sword has been given to the authorities so that they can maintain the common peace of the land with it'.<sup>31</sup> Even the Schleithem Confession acknowledged the legitimacy of the 'sword' (an Anabaptist metaphor for political power) as something 'ordained of God' for the 'punishment of the wicked'. Crucially, Schleithem asserted that political authority wielded by secular rulers inherently resides 'outside the perfection of

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<sup>29</sup> Joshua T. Searle, 'Baptist Perspectives on Freedom and the Kingdom of God', in *Baptists and the Kingdom of God: World Perspectives Through Four Interpretive Lenses*, ed. by T. Laine Scales and João B. Chaves (Baylor University Press, 2023), pp. 271–290.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Robin W. Lovin, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues* (Abingdon, 2011), p. 136. The Schleithem Confession is one of the earliest and most significant documents of the Anabaptist movement, which emerged during the Protestant Reformation. The confession outlines the core beliefs and practices of Anabaptists and remains influential to the present day.

<sup>31</sup> Hubmaier, cited in Michael I. Bochenski, *Transforming Faith Communities* (Lutterworth Press, 2017), p. 50.

Christ'.<sup>32</sup> This core belief protected Anabaptist communities from the naïve notion that the kingdom of God could be realised through legislation or enforced by military might, while also safeguarding them from the idolisation of secular authorities.<sup>33</sup>

The early Anabaptists were also not afraid of admonishing and criticising secular rulers who they deemed to have transgressed the proper restraints of maintaining peace and order and upholding basic justice. The early Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons, often wrote to secular magistrates, admonishing them to act justly and with regard to the oppressed. 'Your task,' he wrote, 'is to do justice between a man and his neighbour, to deliver the oppressed out of the hand of the oppressor.' He further maintained that the secular magistrates were called by God to 'enlarge, help and protect the kingdom of God' by ruling wisely and justly.<sup>34</sup>

The example of Menno Simons and other Anabaptist leaders who boldly spoke truth to power illustrates a vital way of witnessing to God's reign without exercising dominion. Their prophetic critique of power structures that perpetuate injustice, promote war, and inhibit genuine freedom serves as a model for how to challenge and transform society. One of the most urgent tasks of Baptist theology today, I believe, is to deconstruct religious ideologies that confer legitimacy on authoritarian and oppressive governments. In this regard, the Anabaptists provide a wealth of wisdom and insights that can help Baptists to reclaim the core tenets of their faith: principles of peace, dignity, freedom, justice, and community, rooted in the teachings of Jesus. By returning to Anabaptist convictions on discipleship, nonviolence, and the separation of church and state, Baptists can develop a robust theological framework that resists complicity with

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<sup>32</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution* (Baker, 2009), p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> Ted Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century* (Wipf and Stock, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> Simons, cited in Lydia Harder, 'Power and Authority in Mennonite Theological Development', in *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. by Calvin Redekop and Benjamin Redekop (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 73–94 (pp. 80–81).

power structures and witnesses to the coming reign of God.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, dissent against unjust political structures and dehumanising ideologies is not simply a negative act of rebellion, but a positive expression of the church's identity and vocation in the world.

Baptist churches that are true to their own nonconformist tradition — as well as to the teachings of Christ — should be guided by the gospel of freedom. This means that they should not build a separate relationship with the state or be lured by promises of patronage and preferential treatment in return for their loyalty and collaboration. Jesus calls his church not to establish a theocracy, but to become 'a community of *voluntary* commitment, willing for the sake of its calling to take upon itself the hostility of the given society'.<sup>36</sup> From their earliest origins, Baptists have recognised the danger of trying to apply the label 'Christian' to any state. Baptists have inherited from their early European Anabaptist forbearers a deep suspicion of the concepts of both a 'state church' and 'a Christian nation'.<sup>37</sup> Baptists have tended to regard these concepts *not* as sacred archetypes, but as profane illusions. A fundamental conviction of the early Anabaptists was that when the church and state operated in harmony in ways that violated human dignity, the church ceased to be the church.<sup>38</sup>

The Anabaptists also remind us about the rule of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar operate on fundamentally different principles. While the kingdom of God embodies freedom, love, and voluntary commitment, the kingdom of Caesar often relies on coercion, domination, and the bureaucratic enforcement of laws. Baptists must remain wary of mingling these two kingdoms. The Anabaptist suspicion of political power could help us to recognise the propensity for state power to distort the essence of the gospel. Anabaptist interpretations of the gospel remind us that to imbibe the gospel message results in a

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<sup>35</sup> Harold S. Bender, 'Anabaptist-Mennonite Attitude Toward the State', in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* ed. by Harold S. Bender, Cornelius Krahn, and C. Henry Smith (Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), pp. 611–619 (p. 612).

<sup>36</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua T. Searle, 'British Baptists and Brexit', *The Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 349 (January 2021), pp. 10–20 (pp. 10–12).

<sup>38</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 194.

revelation of a new order of reality: namely, God's kingdom, which is set in opposition to the world order and which spells the end of the false harmony of Christian piety and political power. There is great truth in the saying that 'all states and economies are, in essence, unchristian and opposed to the Kingdom of God'.<sup>39</sup>

In Christ, God reveals Himself to us not in power, authority, and sovereignty, but in freedom, love, and sacrifice. Moreover, the temptation for Christians to seek political dominance often mirrors the same idolatry that beset ancient Israel when they desired a king to lead them like the surrounding nations (1 Sam 8). The Christian pursuit of national sovereignty undermines the universal claims of the kingdom of God that transcends national boundaries and operates from a fundamentally different paradigm that prioritises self-sacrificing love and service over authority and control.<sup>40</sup> I believe that the lure of political sovereignty was one of the temptations that Christ rejected in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11). I would even speculate that among the kingdoms of the world that Satan presented to Christ during the temptation were all those nations and empires of the world which would later call themselves 'Christian'.<sup>41</sup>

In a world in which authoritarian regimes frequently invoke Christian ideas of morality and civilisation for electoral gain, Baptists are called to view all political expressions of Christianity through a hermeneutic of suspicion. This perspective does not imply outright hostility but instead encourages vigilance against the idea that faith or morality can be imposed by military force or legal statutes.<sup>42</sup> For the early Anabaptists like Balthasar Hubmaier it was a matter of fundamental conviction that genuine faith is the result not of state or ecclesiastical decrees, but of a voluntary (and often costly) decision to live in obedience to the way of Christ.<sup>43</sup> They maintained that when faith

<sup>39</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl Tvorchestva* [The Meaning of Creativity] (Moscow: Astrel, 2011), p. 294.

<sup>40</sup> I developed this point in an earlier article, 'British Baptists and Brexit', see footnote 37 above.

<sup>41</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *Tvorchestvo i Obyektivatsiya* [Creativity and Objectification] (Moscow: T8RUGRAM, 2018), p. 242.

<sup>42</sup> Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Review and Herald Press, 2009), p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, pp. 261–263.



is coerced, it loses its saving power and degrades into mere compliance to worldly authorities. As Hubmaier pointedly remarked, ‘Faith is a work of God and not of the heretics’ tower.’<sup>44</sup> The Anabaptists remind us that true freedom is found in obedience to the teachings of Christ (*Nachfolge*) rather than the pursuit of political dominance. I believe this is an important lesson that is relevant for Baptists and our ecumenical partners today.<sup>45</sup>

Rather than withdrawing from the world, as some sectarian approaches suggest, Baptists are called to prophetic engagement, which has always been an essential element of Anabaptist thought.<sup>46</sup> While sectarian disengagement might have been a necessary strategy for the persecuted communities of the original Anabaptist movement, such a posture is no longer adequate for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Faith should be actively lived out in all spheres of life. Freedom in Christ entails the freedom to witness beyond the church walls.<sup>47</sup> This involves a critical solidarity with the world that allows for meaningful witness without compromising core convictions. The Anabaptist tradition of prophetic witness to the reign of God encourages Baptists to uphold the dignity and freedom of all individuals, in line with the gospel mandate to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Luke 4:18–19). When engaging politically, the goal should not be to impose Christian values via legislation but rather to extend God’s grace and truth through radical acts of faith, hope, and love that reflect the principles of the kingdom of God. This approach aligns with the Anabaptist vision of the church as a counter-cultural community that witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, rather than a mere functionary of the state that exerts its dominance through military might or the imposition of legislation.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hubmaier, cited in Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p. 263.

<sup>45</sup> Searle, ‘Baptist Perspectives on Freedom and the Kingdom of God’, pp. 271–290.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Ian Bochenski, *Transforming Faith Communities: A Comparative Study of Radical Christianity in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism and Late Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Lutterworth, 2017), p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 118–119.

<sup>48</sup> Stefan Paas, ‘The Counter-Cultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Ecclesiology in the Post-Christendom West’, *Ecclesiology*, 15.3 (2019), pp. 283–301.

Baptists should embrace the Anabaptist idea that the mission of the church does not commit the church to support any particular political ideology or regime. It is a common misunderstanding that the Anabaptist tradition is opposed to all forms of political power and secular authority. Anabaptists have long argued that political authorities, in so far as they act within the bounds of lawful authority and in accordance with the dignity and freedom of the people, should be obeyed and respected as necessary for maintaining order.<sup>49</sup> Yet these authorities should never claim unquestioning allegiance or dictate to the church how the church should witness to the reign of God. The Anabaptist tradition echoes the essential mandate of the early church that true authority lies with God and not with any human leader or institution (Acts 5:29).

### **Conclusion: A Call to Radical Discipleship without Borders**

Embracing a more nuanced approach to discipleship, rooted in Anabaptist values, allows for a transformative engagement in the world. An Anabaptist vision of radical discipleship without borders calls believers to recognise the inherent dignity of each individual, regardless of their nationality, race, or religious affiliation. Furthermore, the call to radical discipleship requires an active engagement in society that goes beyond merely opposing secular policies or ideologies. It invites Christians to embody the gospel's message in ways that promote peace, justice, and reconciliation without relying on political power as a vehicle for change. For Baptists today, this means both advocating for the marginalised and voicing dissent against injustice while recognising that our primary allegiance lies with the kingdom of God.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the origins of the Anabaptist movement, this historical moment offers an opportunity to reflect on the enduring significance of Anabaptist principles in contemporary faith communities and to reimagine what it means to live out our convictions in today's changing world. Radical discipleship, as

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<sup>49</sup> For example, Hubmaier maintained that 'the sword has been given to the authorities so that they can maintain the common peace of the land with it' — cited in Bochenksi, *Transforming Faith Communities*, p. 50.

exemplified by the Anabaptists, rejects the notion of a ‘Christian nation’ and instead advocates for a vision of community that transcends cultural and political boundaries. This perspective compels us to actively engage with societal issues, not merely in opposition to secular policies or ideologies, but by embodying the gospel’s saving message through words and deeds of love, peace, justice, and reconciliation. For Baptists today, this means recognising that our primary allegiance lies with the kingdom of God, which transcends any earthly political system.

This call to discipleship invites us to be a prophetic voice in our communities. We fulfil this prophetic mandate not through the imposition of laws or mandates that reflect allegedly ‘Christian’ ideologies, but by witnessing to the saving power of the gospel. As we reflect on the legacy of the Anabaptists, I hope that Baptists will renew their commitment to the gospel values of community, peace, and the transformative power of the gospel in a world that desperately needs hope and healing. The challenge posed by our historic Anabaptist forbearers today is to honour their heroic legacy while reinterpreting their vision of radical discipleship in the context of today’s complex realities. Therefore, my hope is that this 500th anniversary will not only remind us of our rich heritage but also inspire us to engage in a radical gospel witness that remains receptive to the movement of the Spirit both within and beyond our borders.