An Anabaptist View of the Church[1]

by Peter H. Davids

Dr. Davids, who is currently teaching at Regent College, Vancouver, has already established his reputation as a distinguished biblical commentator with his recent volume on The Epistle of James in the New International Greek Testament Commentary. We welcome this study in an important area of Reformation history and theology from his pen.

Properly speaking the Anabaptist movement was a diverse segment of the radical reformation in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and the Low Countries during the sixteenth century. Its significance for the present however, cannot be denied. First, there still exist groups and individuals whose theological roots are in that movement (or perceived to be there). One immediately thinks of the whole Mennonite family, including the Amish and the Hutterites, the more modern Hutterian Society of Brothers in the Northeast of the United States and in England, and several modern Christian publications.[2] Second, many of today's free church groups, *e.g.* Baptists, Brethren, and the Evangelical Free Church, claim spiritual descent from the Anabaptists. Thus the Anabaptists and the earlier Hussite and Waldensian movements form an important link in a type of apostolic succession of doctrine and purity of church ideal (vs. apostolic succession of ordination or church structure found in many mainline reformation churches), which both legitimates the modern free church and helps it show that the general apostasy of the professing church of Christendom was never universal: God always preserved a remnant.[3] For both of these groups who call upon the Anabaptists for inspiration there is a need to understand the movement upon which they call, a need which is being fulfilled especially in the

[1] The title is 'an Anabaptist view' rather than 'the' for two reasons. First, the Anabaptists were a movement which was so diverse that on several points there was a variety of opinion. While this paper tries to indicate such areas, it is short and condensed enough that it cannot be complete. Thus it is a photograph out of several possible ones with somewhat differing perspectives. Second, in that the author brings Anabaptist views into the present, he is necessarily interpreting them according to his viewpoint and theological commitments. This adds a subjective element which must be recognized by avoiding the hubris of 'the'. This paper was read at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at Liberty Baptist Seminary, Lynchburg, VA, on March 26-27, 1982.

[2] Besides the traditional Mennonite family represented by such publications as *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the output of Herald Press in Scottdale, PA, and the Hutterian Society of Brothers (founded in Germany in the 1920s and now united with the original Hutterites) with their Plough Publishing Company in Rifton, NY, such publications as *The Other Side* and *Sojourners* draw heavily on Anabaptist concepts as part of their spiritual heritage.

[3] One good example is E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (London, 1931), but other works carry the same theme either as a historical reality or, as in the case of D. F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (London, 1968), as a spiritual reality.

Mennonite tradition by a virtual renaissance of Anabaptist studies and the editing and translation of the source documents. This present paper, however, is limited, in that only the doctrine of the church comes within its purview, and even that must be treated somewhat briefly. Yet even with those limitations one hopes that it will stimulate further reflection upon not only history, but also modern conceptions of church order and relationship to the state.

I. The Church as the Kingdom of God

The first point which one must understand about the Anabaptists is that they saw a radical dualism in the universe: good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, the kingdom of God. vs. the world. This dualism, which the Anabaptists discovered in the writings of John and Peter, and especially in the teaching of Jesus, means that the church is an expression of one pole of the dualism over against the other. The church is the present realization of the kingdom of God within the darkness of the world system.[4] It is the community of faith (*Gemeinde*) over against the
82 darkness and unfaith which surrounds it. Therefore the church must be on its guard against the inroads of the world, which seeks to corrupt it and reduce it to a religious mirror-image of itself, as has indeed happened in the state churches (*Kirche*).

That the Roman Catholic church was corrupt was an axiom of the whole Reformation, but the Anabaptists carried the idea one step farther: the state church was *ipso facto* a fallen church.[5] By this one does not simply mean that the historical church of Rome had fallen, but that the very attempt of any church to be allied with the state is a fall, an act of apostasy. To be joined to the state means to be allied with the world, and in practice this leads to an acceptance of the ways of the world: force, social ranking, and the sword. Furthermore, alliance with the state means taking a broadly inclusive position on church membership so that

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[4] As R. Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA, 1973), 43, points out, the term kingdom of God is not frequently used in the older literature of Anabaptism, but their use of the sayings of Jesus and the whole structure of their theology show even this literature to be 'an attempt to translate the kingdom idea into practical forms of everyday living.' Modern authors are far less reticent, *e.g.* J. R. Burkholder and C. Redekop, eds., *Kingdom, Cross and Community* (Scottdale, PA, 1976), or E. Arnold, *Inner Land* (Rifton, NY, 1976), who both use the term frequently.

[5] F. H. Littell, *Das Selbstverständnis der Täufer* (Kassel, 1966), 80-121 (Der 'Sundenfall' der Kirche). This work is a translation of *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston, 1958), which is at present out of print and difficult to obtain. Certain modern baptists share this analysis, *cf.* J. Warns, *Baptism* (Minneapolis, 1957, 1980), 73-101, 239-269 ('Baptism Essentially a Church Question').

the nominal Christian is welcomed in the congregation. This inclusivism is normally expressed in the baptism of young children —many Anabaptists rejected the baptism of anyone younger than the age of consent for marriage[6]—and lax discipline (for how can the church exclude a person who is an acceptable citizen of the state?).[7]

Because this link to the world is so disastrous, some of the strongest Anabaptist words are reserved for the Reformation churches, for they (especially Luther) had seen the truth of total allegiance to Christ and then slipped back into state church structures. Michael Sattler speaks of the reformers as 'the scribes' who 'make of Christ after his humanity, what the pope has made out of the saints, namely a golden calf.' They deny Christ while confessing him and are thus a parable: 'one sees here so clearly how the beast, with seven heads and ten horns, recuperates from its mortal wound.' While it is true that the Catholics and the Reformed fight, it is at best a fight between the beast and the whore of Babylon.[8]

Therefore the church needs more than simply reform; it needs restoration as a voluntary, disciplined, obedient society which truly represents the inbreaking of God's kingdom into this world. The way to restoration leads through a return to Christian conversion, not a conversion taking place in church following an earlier baptism and consisting of social conformity and the agreement to a creed, as the reformers believed, but a conversion which entails a real break with the world and a commitment to obey Jesus as Lord. The Schleitheim Confession has as its first article, 'Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and amendment of life and who believe truly that their sins are taken away through Christ, and to all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . .'[9] Thus teaching, hearing, and faith must *precede* baptism. The teaching concerns a radical break with the world, and the faith is a commitment to live out the same in Christ. This, then, leads to water (baptism), the Spirit (without which resurrection life is impossible), and works, the lived-out resurrection life itself.[10]

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6 So J. Warns, *Baptism,* 314, 324, and elsewhere. This is also the demand of many modern groups. For example, the Hutterian Society of Brothers often delay baptism until the late teens or early twenties, and the German baptists normally baptize no earlier than age 14 and often much later.

7 F. H. Littell, *Selbstverständnis,* 103.

8 M. Sattler, 'On the Satisfaction of Christ', in J. H. Yoder, ed., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA, 1973), 116-118.

9 J. H. Yoder, trans., *The Schleitheim Confession* (Scottdale, PA, 1973) 10. This same document is also found in J. H. Yoder, *Legacy.*

10 M. Sattler, 'How Scripture Should be Discerningly Exposited', in J. H. Yoder, *Legacy,* 151.

Baptism, then, is far more than a confession of faith. It is a door to a whole new life. It is a break with the world and a pledge to live a life of discipleship. It is furthermore the door to the church, which is the fellowship of those thus pledged. No wonder the Anabaptists saw it as such a deeply serious step; no child could ever be expected to undertake it, for a child could not know what it entailed. Nor must anyone be coerced or persuaded to be baptised. Freedom and seriousness must be preserved, for baptism must be protected as the central sacrament. Indeed, by it the church is formed: 'where there is no proper baptism, there is no church,' Hubmaier said.[11]

This truth of baptism means that *within the church* people are pledged to a lifestyle of obedience to Christ. Hans Denck wrote,

> Faith is the obedience to God and the confidence in his promise through Jesus Christ. Where this obedience is absent there all confidence is false and a deception. This obedience must be genuine, that is, that heart, mouth, and deed coincide together. For there can be no true heart where neither mouth nor deed is visible.[12]

The visible mouth and deed are primarily conditioned by the gospels. Anabaptists were followers of Jesus Christ, so they took his teachings as the centre of their life. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of the new community empowered by the Spirit. Any lesser demand would be an abandonment of Jesus' lordship and a denial of the Spirit's power. This concrete literal following of Jesus' teaching is what it means to be Christo-centric, to be truly his disciple.

But the disciplined community is by its very stance under attack by the world. The false will creep into the church and some will abandon the narrow way of Christ. The church must be protected from such or else it will sink back to the level of the world. Furthermore such people must be 'made ashamed unto reformation' or else they will continue to walk in their worldly ways down the broad road to hell. Thus excommunication or the ban is necessary not only to protect the church, but also to discipline lovingly the erring brother or sister.[13] It is also, of course, the command of Christ in Matthew chapter 18.

It should be clear, then, that the ban and baptism assist in keeping the church on the path following Christ. Baptism guards the entrance, while

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[11] P, M. Lederach, *A Third Way* (Scottdale, PA, 1980), 80-83.

[12] W. Fellman, ed., *Hans Denck: Schriften II* (Gütersloh, 1956), 107. *Cf.* W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1973), 20.

[13] M. Simons, 'On the Ban: Questions and Answers', in G. H. Williams and A. M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia, 1957), 265. *Cf.* M. Jeschke, *Disciplining the Brother* (Scottdale, PA, 1972), the best existing discussion of the interpretation of Mt. 18:15-18.

the ban guards the walls and removes the traitors. The kingdom exists in a foreign land, and it must keep up its vigilance or else it will be overwhelmed. If either proper baptism or the proper use of the ban are lacking, the church begins the slide towards apostasy, towards merging its lifestyle with that of the world. It is absolutely imperative that the church follow Christ.

The Christ who is followed, however, is the suffering Christ, not the glorified Christ. It is true that the time of glorification is coming, either after death or after the return of Christ, but now one walks in the footsteps of the poor, meek Christ of the gospels, who suffered and yet blessed, and who died a martyr's death. This is what is meant by 'the baptism of blood' (as opposed to those of water and of the Spirit) or 'the bitter Christ'.[14] A proper church is not a panacea for the ills of humanity nor a ticket to glory. Quite the contrary, to follow Christ is to suffer:

> If a man is to come to the knowledge of the living Son of God he must await the work of God through the cross of Christ which we must carry and follow in the footsteps of Christ . . . All who desire to grow in the body of Christ in which the Son of God is known and through which we become God's children and joint heirs with Christ . . . must also suffer with him and grow into the image of the Son of God through the justification of the Father. And whoever will not follow the footsteps and ways of Christ and will not carry the cross of Christ he does not have or know the Son.[15]

The church is therefore a suffering community. It was the reformers who sought the easy way of accommodation with the world and who could be accused of triumphalism. For the Anabaptists it was clear that the gospel road led to a crown of thorns.

II. The Church as a Foreign Nation

If the church and the world are diametrically opposed categories, if the church is an expression of the inbreaking kingdom of Christ, and if the state belongs to the world and is under the domination of the principalities and powers,[16] then there is certainly a tension between church and state. The state belongs to the old order, the kingdom of this world, while the church belongs to the new order, the kingdom of God. A person baptised into the church has transferred from the old to the new;

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[14] P. M. Lederach, *Third Way*, 84-88; R. Friedmann, *Theology*, 55-56.

[15] H. Hut, 'A Christian Instruction', in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottdale, PA, 1981), 89. *Cf.* J. H. Yoder, *Täufertum und Reformation im Gespräch* (Zürich, 1968), 195-200.

[16] For modern exegetical studies see H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, PA, 1953) or J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972).

he or she cannot be a citizen of both, however much the old order may refuse to recognize this fact.[17]

Yet whatever the spiritual truth, governmental authorities do exist, and they do have a limited useful function within the plan of God for unregenerate people, so a type of subordination to them is allowable even on the part of the citizens of the kingdom of God, much as an ambassador to a land generally obeys the laws of the host country. But this submission is far from total and can in fact be quite limited, for the government is part of the fallen world, 'outside of the perfection of Christ': 'the government is a picture, sign and reminder of man's departure from God'.[18] Yet due to its good effects in God's purpose, 'one should be obedient and subject to rulers as ordained by God for the purpose of protection, in so far as they do not attack the conscience or command what is against God.'[19] Thus the Christian must always be conscious of a higher loyalty than the state.

This appeal to a higher loyalty led to four principal areas of conflict with the state (beyond the refusal to attend the state church or to give up believer's baptism): oaths, the sword, the magistracy, and war taxes
86 (including hangman's dues). We shall discuss these in order.

The issue of oaths was clear for many of the Anabaptists. First of all, is not the use of oaths prohibited by Mt. 5:37 and Jas. 5:12? If so, to swear any oath at all is disloyalty to God?[20] Second, the use of oaths neither ensures veracity nor prevents perjury. In fact the very prevalence of oaths cheapens speech in general and gives a wider arena for sinning.[21] Third, even if many of the oaths of general commerce might be acceptable to some Anabaptists, oaths were frequently used as an expression of loyalty to the state (*e.g.* the *Schwörtag* of Strassburg, the day when the yearly oath of loyalty was administered to all citizens of the city). This was objectionable both because participation in it would be inconsistent with unreserved loyalty to God and because it pledged the Anabaptist to the use of violent means (i.e. the sword) to which they could not assent. Thus every pledge of allegiance was to the Anabaptist both disobedience to a clear command of Christ and high treason against the king of God's

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17 W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism*, 49-50. This view is similar to that of Luther *except* that Luther saw the person as a true citizen of *both* orders with their two different sets of norms, the Anabaptists of *only one*.

18 P. Ridemann, *Confession of Faith* (Rifton, NY, 1970), 104. The original German version was written in 1545.

19 *Ibid.*, 102.

20 J. H. Yoder, *Schleitheim Confession*, 16.

21 H. Denck, 'Recantation', in W. Klaassen, *Outline*, 284-285.

kingdom. Submission to the authorities is allowed, for Christ commanded it, but loyalty and allegiance is another thing altogether.[22]

When it comes to the sword (meaning both war and capital punishment) three issues come to the fore in the Anabaptist point of view. First, if allegiance to the secular state is not allowed, it would be rather surprising for a person to fight for that state. An ambassador may submit to the state in which he resides, but he is hardly likely to enlist in its army—he has already enlisted in the service of the sovereign which he represents. More importantly, the Anabaptists recognize that the kingdom of Christ differs from the kingdoms of this world, which are 'outside the perfection of Christ', in that Christ's kingdom's strongest weapon is the ban. To follow Christ is to follow the way of peace and not to participate in worldly disputes. Thus the true Christian takes no part in either war or capital punishment.[23] 'The scriptures teach that there are two opposing princes . . .: the one is the Prince of peace; the other the prince of strife . . . The Prince of peace is Christ Jesus; His kingdom is the kingdom of peace, which is His church. . . . Everything that is seen, heard and done [in relation to this king and kingdom] is peace . . . Tell me, how can a Christian defend scripturally retaliation, rebellion, war, striking, slaying, torturing, stealing, robbing and plundering and burning cities, and conquering countries?'[24] The answer to Menno's question is quite clear: there is no such defence. The Anabaptists knew of the appeal of the reformers to the Old Testament, but they sadly pointed out that such a desperate expedient ignores the fact that Christ has come and set up his true kingdom on quite different principles. The witness to this true kingdom is viciously violated by any use of violence. The spirit of Christ must prevail.

Finally, one must always remember that the rule of peace of Christ's kingdom to which the Anabaptists appealed is not a 'Pollyanna' peace which expects the rest of society to drop the sword and suddenly live in love, but rather a resolve to follow the meek Christ in loving their enemies, not resisting evil (Mt. 5:38-48), and dying instead of killing. One must remember that baptism, which is an identification with this Christ, is threefold as Christ's was: it is baptism of the Spirit (the interior aspect), of water (the outward aspect), and of blood or fire (suffering or martyrdom). As Christ suffered to redeem those who followed him, so they will also suffer. As Hans Hut wrote, 'Baptism always means

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22 W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism*, 53-54.

23 J. H. Yoder, *Schleitheim Confession*, 14-15. The one exception was B. Hubmaier, who did have a place for the sword in his theology.

24 M. Simons, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA, 1956), 554-555.

suffering.'[25] The choice is often suffering or the sword; in such cases one sides with Christ and accepts the cross of suffering. To war is to abandon this Christ.

It follows from the above, then, that participation in the magistracy was likewise frequently prohibited. It was not only the rejection of capital punishment (which was why the early church refused to accept magistrates as candidates for baptism),[26] but a far deeper analysis which activated this rule. To be a magistrate is to claim worldly citizenship, which ill befits a follower of Christ. More importantly, magistrates use worldly laws in their courts, and thus a Christian in such a position would end up judging 'according to the flesh' and therefore doing injustice from the perspective of Christ. Finally, the example of Christ is that of one who refused to pass judgment in worldly disputes (Jn. 8:11; Lk. 12:13). The Christian is not better than his master.[27]

When it came to taxes the example of Christ again came into play. Normally, because of Christ (and Paul in Rom. 13) Anabaptists faithfully paid their tax, even unfair ones. But in the case of the special taxes levied to wage war (such as a war against the Turks) and hangman's dues, they frequently refused. This, they felt, was beyond the due of the state and was in fact a participation in war. That they could not do in the name of Christ.[28]

Along with the government, the Christian must also deal with the world in the form of the economic system. The church is the new kingdom and in this kingdom a new economic system must prevail. Two words can sum up this system: simplicity and sharing.

The idea of simplicity is part of separation from the world. This concept covers a multitude of areas in economic life: the avoidance of anything other than functional and modest dress (prominent in Menno Simons), the avoidance of worldly gatherings and entertainments as carnal and unprofitable, the avoidance of gluttony and thus the promotion of eating simple food, the refusal to take interest or be involved in securing loans or other investments (for this was forbidden in both Old and New Testaments), the refusal to be involved in trade guilds

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25 R. Friedmann, *Theology*, 136-137.

26 Canons of Hippolytus XVI. In all of their arguments against war and the magistracy the Anabaptists, consciously or unconsciously, repeated the arguments of the early Fathers (pre-Constantine). See J.-M. Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight* (Scottdale, PA, 1980), a detailed study of early Christian attitudes.

27 J. H. Yoder, *Schleitheim Confession*, 15-16.

28 P. Ridemann, *Confession*, 110. For the variety of opinions see G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962), 225, 231, 420, 748, 797. See also C. Felbinger, 'Confession of Faith', in A. Ehrenpreis and C. Felbinger, *Brotherly Community the Highest Command of Love* (Rifton, NY, 1978), 98.

because of both their conduct and their worldly goals (maximizing profit) and members. Furthermore,

> Anabaptists also condemned any participation in commerce for profit. Commerce was permissible as a way of making a living. But the making of profit and the charging of interest was seen by them as a way of defrauding and especially of exploiting the poor . . .[29]

All of this had a profound effect on economic life, and all of this was based on a literal obedience to the words of Jesus. Thus for the Anabaptists (as for Francis of Assisi before them) gospel obedience meant following the Christ of Matthew chapter 6 and Luke chapters 6, 12 and 16, not just the Christ of Jn. 3:16. They remembered that Lk. 19:10 follows a radical renunciation of the world and its hoarding and profit motive. They saw no reason to serve the world and to advance economically, and every reason to forsake it.[30]

Simplicity, however, is the negative side of economics and thus is not the focus of Anabaptist economic belief. It is true that one must come out of the world and avoid its sinful practices, for so the gospel commanded, but the goal is the positive one of building God's church, and that community is built by sharing. If one calls all in the church brothers and sisters and if one shares with all the table of the Lord, how can he refuse to share worldly goods as well? The example of Acts 2:42ff. and 4:32ff. are not the sole basis for this action (despite Anabaptist concern to live as the primitive church did), nor is Paul's call for economic equality in 2 Cor. 8:13-15, although such commands would be sufficient. Rather, Anabaptist reflection is deeper in that it considers both the meaning of community and communion (*koinonia*) and the power of possessions.[31]

On the one hand, community or oneness in Christ cannot stop short of possessions. One cannot build a church of unity if one member is well-off and others struggle. This was true from the earliest period of the church (1 Jn. 3:16-18; Jas. 2:14-17), and the Anabaptist movement was not slow to pick up on the idea. The kingdom of God cannot be built upon economic injustice and social division or stratification, but upon equality and sharing.

On the other hand, money and goods not shared turn into a deadly spiritual poison. Jesus warned of mammon and commanded the sharing of goods (Mt. 6:19-34 par.) and Paul was hardly more sanguine about the power of money (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Thus modern Hutterites frequently speak of 'the Mammon Spirit' which grips professed Christians so that

[29] W. Klaassen, *Outline,* 232.

[30] *Cf.* K. R. Davies, *Anabaptism and Asceticism* (Scottdale, PA, 1974), 114, who sets this teaching in a wider theological perspective.

[31] *E.g.* G. H. Williams, *Radical Reformation,* 124, 173-174.

they store goods and refuse to share freely.[32] This is precisely the point of the early Anabaptist writers: the very urge to grasp and store is unjust and unbrotherly.[33] Instead, one should free oneself from the world and its grip and follow the commands of scripture and the example of the apostles.[34]

The form of this sharing varied. Jakob Hutter, Peter Ridemann, and the Hutterian tradition believed that sharing logically means full community of goods, i.e. the common purse and communal living of the Hutterians until this day. 'The majority of Anabaptists [notably the Swiss Brethren and Menno Simons] believed that property could be held privately, but that it could never be absolutely private. . . . Property should always be available to sisters and brothers in need.'[35] The demand, then, is for voluntary economic sharing. Thus both streams of Anabaptism agree that freedom from the world and the unity of Christ's body means one must share one's goods, but they disagree over how to best ensure freedom from the power of mammon and to administer the sharing.[36]

The church, then, is truly a foreign nation. It is subject to its own
90 sovereign, and it refuses to take part in some of the chief activities of the world: war, rulership, and administration of justice. It runs an alternative economic system, which indeed exchanges goods and services with that of this world, but which runs on quite different principles than the one controlled by mammon. The church is an alternative society, a witness to the inbreaking kingdom.

III. The Church as a Suffering Community

This alternative society named the church must have its own community activities and structure. Three of these activities are most important for this discussion: (1). how they read scripture, (2). how they celebrated the Supper, and (3). how they viewed their leadership. We shall discuss them in order.

First, it is clear that Anabaptists prize scripture highly. Their writings

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[32] E. Arnold, *Inner Land,* is a good example of multiple references to the Mammon Spirit.

[33] P. Ridemann, *Confession,* 88-89.

[34] P. Walpot, *True Surrender and Christian Community of Goods* (Bromdon, England, 1957). This excerpt from the *Great Article Book* of 1577 is a 45 page 148 paragraph catena of scripture and comment (the majority being scripture). One major point is made: greed (*Geitz*) keeps one from true discipleship on both the level of brotherliness (*Gemeinschaft*) and the level of self-surrender to God (*Gelassenheit*).

[35] W. Klaassen, *Outline,* 232.

[36] Menno Simons (*Complete Writings,* 558-560) is quite eloquent in his argument for sharing. *Cf.* F. H. Littell, *Selbstverständnis,* 142-146.

are often catenae of scripture, their accusations against both Catholics and reformers (apostates and scribes or beast and false prophet respectively) are that they ignore the plain truth of scripture, and their pleas at their trials are to convince them of error from scripture (in which case they would gladly recant).[37] Yet in all of their treasuring scripture the phrase *sola scriptura* would make many of them uncomfortable as would the unqualified phrase 'word of God' applied to scripture, for they are well convinced that many learned Lutheran and Reformed teachers need more than the scripture (which does indeed fill their heads), for their behaviour shows that they have never heard a real word from God. This observation combined with their Christocentrism leads to a doctrine of the inner word.

The inner word is not to be thought of as detached from scripture, but rather as attached to Christ. There is one Word of God, and he is Jesus. He is the living Word who in his Spirit lives in the Christians who are not followers of a dead letter, but of a living Lord. Without this living Word or Lord, scripture is but a dead letter, mere paper and ink, and those who study it are at best scribes. However, with the living Word, scripture is the voice of the Lord. Hans Denck wrote,

> I esteem the Scriptures above all human treasures; yet I do not esteem them as highly as the Word of God, which is living, strong, and eternal, which is free from all elements of our world, whereas the Scriptures are not. What is of God himself is Spirit and no letter.

Again he wrote,

> Whoever will not wait for a revelation from God within his breast . . . will quite certainly make the mystery of God contained in the Scriptures into a horror and abomination in the sight of God.

Similar ideas were expressed by Ulrich Stadler, Peter Ridemann, and Sebastian Franck.[38] The point they wish to make is not that of error in scripture, but of insufficiency: words on paper are *ipso facto* objects (and thus controllable) and not alive; without the inner Word which is alive, they may even deceive one into thinking that he is right with God because of commitment to orthodox doctrine. The Anabaptists stress that *obedience* to the word and *life* in the Spirit are critical elements in understanding.

This doctrine, of course, leaves open the danger of subjectivism and

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[37] *E.g.* J. H. Yoder, *Legacy*, 73, 116-118.

[38] All citations in E. Arnold, *Inner Land*, 473, 467, 479 respectively. The whole chapter 'The Living Word', 441-25, forms a fascinating exposition of these ideas for the modern age.

individualism, which have plagued Protestantism. The Anabaptist corrective for this is the church, for in the gathered church the Spirit is present. The Spirit is one; the Spirit is a uniting force. Therefore where complete unity and harmony is present the Spirit has spoken. This is a principle for Anabaptists in their inner and outer activities. Outwardly, they habitually brought a group to doctrinal disputations with the reformers, and they refused to accept the judgments of a panel of experts, but expected discussion to continue until a unity resulted among all present. This made them appear obstinate within the reformers' more rationalistic and political framework. Inwardly, they believe that the place to understand scripture is *in the church*. Unity of all present is a sign that the inner word has been heard. This is true for the larger church as well as the local congregation. The Schleitheim Confession repeatedly uses the phrase 'we are united' as a preface to each article. The Confession is the will of God because not a majority, but a total unity shows the presence of the Spirit.

The Lord's Supper is likewise based on unity. The Supper is a serious and (in the beginning) frequent event for the Anabaptist. Where the
92 reformers were hindered by politics from a weekly celebration, the Anabaptists at first celebrated at each gathering, three to four times weekly.[39] As one would expect this seriousness included no idea of the presence of Christ in the bread or wine: if the Word is not contained in the paper and ink of scripture he is hardly in the gluten of the bread! But Christ is very much present in the unity of his people, in the body of believers. Thus unity is a pre-condition for celebrating the Supper (cf. Paul in 1 Cor. 11:18-20), and without unity one does not celebrate the Supper, but only some type of pagan blasphemy.[40] Menno Simons wrote, 'In brief, without love it is all in vain that we . . . celebrate the Lord's Supper.'[41] That is, one must live the unity the Supper symbolizes (as in 1 Cor. 10:16-17; cf. Didache chapter 9) or the symbol is hypocritical. This understanding eventually led to a less frequent celebration with a stress on the seriousness of the event.

Since the unity of the community is important in both expositional and liturgical activities, it also defines the role of the Servant of the Word. The Servant is precisely what his name implies, a servant who serves the Word. He is a shepherd who expresses the inner Word heard through scripture in the community. He is not so much a learned teacher as a living witness; his life is far more important than his learning (as it was for Paul as well; cf. 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1). Thus he serves as an expression of

39 'Congregational Order', in J. H. Yoder, *Legacy*, 45.
40 W. Klaassen, *Outline*, 190.
41 M. Simons, *Complete Writings*, 149.

what the community stands for, but if he is removed ('driven away or led to the Lord by the cross') another Servant can be installed immediately, for life and expression of the truth may be present in several in the community and need not be taught by schooling.[42] One notes that this view of the shepherd or shepherds (a community might have more than one) arises out of the Anabaptist understanding of the church as community and is thus quite different from the Reformed model of a trained, learned leader and ruler.

The Anabaptists, then, see the church as a new community, a true community of sharing and unity where the Spirit is fully present. This teaching is based on a radical evaluation of the world in all its forms as under the power of Satan, a view of themselves as the kingdom of God expressed in miniature, and especially a demand for absolute obedience to Christ. In all of this they remain a challenge to the modern church, whether lineal descendant, free church, or not. They remain, indeed, 'Neither Catholic nor Protestant', 'A Third Way'.[43]

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[42] J. H. Yoder, *Schleitheim Confession,* 13-14.

[43] These phrases are from the titles and themes of W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism,* and P. M. Lederach, *Third Way.*