

ANABAPTIST DOCTRINE**PACIFISM**

The followers of Jesus must live in the world, but how should they relate to the evil that is in the world? The Anabaptist had to go through a painful process of learning and discernment until they arrived at consensus on this question.

Roots

From the start many Anabaptists were sure that following Christ clearly meant that disciples suffer with Christ, they do not inflict suffering on others through violence. Brothers and sisters were convinced that “taking the sword” was never allowed to Christians.

“The gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor are they thus to protect themselves.” Conrad Grebel, d. 1526

Apocalyptic Challenge

There were many Anabaptists that believed they were living in the End Times, and that Jesus’ return was coming in a matter of days or months. These Anabaptists believed that “the elect” should take the sword and “in these last days,” prepare for the coming of New Jerusalem. These prophecies turned out to be false, but not before these believers had killed or were killed by the sword, thinking they were doing God’s will in preparing the way for Jesus.

This tragedy finally settled the question of violence for the Anabaptists. After this they came to an agreement that the words and actions of Jesus were final, and could not be set aside until Jesus himself returned and set them aside. The infallible guideline for discerning God’s will is Jesus.

“Even though Elijah himself were to come, he would not have anything to teach contrary to the foundation and doctrine of Christ and the apostles.” Menno Simons, d. 1561

Once this Christocentric principle of discernment was accepted, it was clear to the Anabaptists that disciples of Christ must put away the sword unconditionally.

1. The example of Christ himself, who prayed “not my will, but yours be done,” and who allowed himself to be crucified. Disciples of Jesus, if faced with a similar choice of resisting Caesar, will do as Christ did, not resist, and accept death instead.
2. There was a clear scriptural command of the Lord that forbade violence and even hatred of enemies, and instead commanded love.
3. Participating in violence contradicted the principle of spiritual integrity, that believers who live by the Spirit of Christ will show forth the love of God in their daily lives. Christians wield spiritual weapons, not weapons of iron and steel.

“They who are baptized inwardly with Spirit and fire, and externally with water, according to the Word of the Lord, have no weapons except patience, hope, silence, and God’s Word.” Menno Simons, d. 1561

a) Of the three reasons for pacifism listed above, which do you find the most persuasive? Explain.

b) In what ways does our society’s beliefs about violence differ from the Anabaptists?

c) How do your views about violence differ from that of our society?
