

DISCIPLESHIP AS MARTYRDOM & SUFFERING

Jerry Truex; February 20, 2011

A. Introduction

Today we continue our series on Anabaptist themes. Today we will focus on martyrdom and suffering as elements of discipleship.

First, I will talk about the early Anabaptist understanding of discipleship. This understanding of discipleship included a theology of martyrdom and suffering, which I will address in that order. As we will see, the Anabaptists learned that suffering and the cross were expected for those who followed Jesus.

B. Discipleship

One of the major themes of Anabaptist spirituality was *a life of discipleship*.

1. Requires imitation

Discipleship requires imitating Christ, living as he lived, following him in life. Discipleship means exhibiting the love of Christ in all our actions, the highest meaning of human existence.

For sixteenth century Anabaptists, the question was not how can I be saved, but how can I live the Christian life? How can I live in obedient, submission to Christ day-in and day-out?¹

2. Awakens conviction

Discipleship arouses resistance to anything not of Christ. This was certainly the case for sixteenth century Anabaptists. For example,

- The Anabaptists refused to defend the political state with violence, because Christ deplored violence.
- They refused to take loyalty oaths, because Christ commanded them not to.
- They criticized the Protestant Reformers because their reforms were "external" only and didn't bring the "internal" spiritual renewal with noticeable moral and behavioral changes.
- Moreover, the Anabaptists rejected some of the Protestant's doctrines, such as the bondage of the will and original sin.
- They rejected some of the Catholic doctrines that special persons, places, and objects bring one closer to God; they thought that every person was capable of having an immediate and direct relationship with God without the need for a priest or sacramental system to mediate.

¹ Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

For these reasons, and many more, the Anabaptists, because of their radical commitment to Christ came into profound conflict with the religious and political authorities of sixteenth century Europe.

3. Ignites political blowback

Discipleship ignites political blowback. The Anabaptists' commitments and public witness evoked a strong and violent reaction. In many instances, the authorities tried to exterminate the Anabaptists. For example, in 1535, Charles V, King of Spain and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, promulgated an edict against the Anabaptists.

Charles V required all of his officials—including priests and bishops, civil and military leaders—to announce this decree:

Within every place and border... found polluted by the accursed sect of the Anabaptist ... shall incur the loss of life and property, and be brought to the most extreme punishment, without delay; namely, those who remain obstinate and continue in their evil belief and purpose... shall be punished with fire. All other persons who have rebaptized, or who secretly and with premeditation have harbored any of the aforesaid Anabaptists, and who renounce their evil purpose and belief, and are truly sorry and penitent for it, shall be executed with the sword, and the women shall be buried in a pit."²

Anabaptists who didn't recant were burned alive. Anabaptists who renounced their commitments to Christ were beheaded with the sword and women were buried alive.

This is the edict of a so-called "Christian emperor" attempting to eradicate other Christians, the Anabaptists, because they disagreed with the authority of Roman Catholic Church and his political realm that was fused with it—no separation of church and state at that time.

A certain bishop, named Johannes Fabri, was a staunch opponent of the Anabaptists, who personally witnessed their executions and wrote about it. What is surprising is what he describes:

They danced and jump in the fire, view the glistening sword with fearless hearts, speak and preach to the people with smiles on their faces; they sing psalms and other songs until their souls have departed, they die with joy, as if they were in happy company.... They remained so obstinate in their resolve that they also defy all pain and torment.³

² Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, 2nd English ed., 23rd printing (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001) 442.

³ C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (New York: Orbis, 2004) 159

The vast majority of Anabaptists didn't have to face martyrdom, but at least 5,000 were executed within the first generation.⁴ In the 16th century, there were excessive killings of Christians by other Christians; Catholics killed Protestants; Protestants killed Catholics; both killed Anabaptists.

C. Martyrdom

Discipleship is inextricably linked to martyrdom, either inwardly or outwardly. Jesus was martyred on the cross and those who imitate him must embrace the cross in an inner martyrdom of the flesh or, in extreme cases, an outer physical martyrdom.

1. Physical martyrdom

Let's look at physical martyrdom. The earliest Anabaptists tried to imitate Jesus and follow his instructions. When they witnessed about Jesus and his Kingdom agenda, the result was conflict with the world and death. And that is to be expected based on Jesus' life. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you" (Jn. 5:18). What happened to Jesus (death on the cross), happens to his disciples.

Just as Jesus had conflict with the political and religious authorities in ancient Palestine, and was martyred, so also the earliest Anabaptists had conflict with the world and were killed.

Jesus is the "the faithful witness or martyr" according to Rev. 1:6 (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός). The word "martyr" (Gk. *marturia*) literally means "a witness" or "a testimony," but came to refer to a person who was tortured and executed for their faith.

For sixteenth century Anabaptists, discipleship and martyrdom were intimately and significantly interconnected. So central was martyrdom for sixteenth century Anabaptists, that in the following century, a massive 1290 book was published entitled, "Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians." The first 450 pages contained stories of Christian martyrs from the time of Christ to 1500 and the second 840 pages covered stories of Anabaptist martyrs, 803 were explicitly named.

In 1933, Ethelbert Stauffer argued that what distinguished Anabaptism from other sixteenth century Christianities was a "theology of martyrdom." However, Stauffer's proposal was rejected, because martyrdom is not a theology *per se*, but a public and political event/act.

2. *Gelassenheit*: Yielding inwardly and outwardly

Discipleship included *Gelassenheit*, yielding inwardly and outwardly to God. *Gelassenheit* is self-surrender, resignation in God's will, self-abandonment, the passive opening to God's will, including a readiness to suffer for God's sake.⁵

⁴ Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (1994) 11 and Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1973) 28. However, Snyder, *Following* (2004) 160, has lower numbers; 5,000 combined Catholic, Protestant and Anabaptist martyrs, but between 40 and 50 percent (2,000 to 2,500) were Anabaptists.

⁵ *Gelassenheit*; www.gameo.org.

On the one hand, *Gelassenheit* involves “yielding inwardly” to the Spirit— trust completely in submitting to God, allowing the flesh to die, a martyrdom of the old self, and a self-surrender to being regenerated by the Spirit.

On the other hand, *Gelassenheit* involves “yielding outwardly” in two ways:

- *To yield outwardly to the community* in matters of visible behavior and morality, and
- *To yield outwardly to a hostile world* in public and political ways that might lead to physical martyrdom.

For the early Anabaptists, discipleship was a balance between the “inner” and “outer” life. Here is an example of that balance.

In 1572, Jan Wouterass managed to write to his brother-in-law and sister that he had been imprisoned and tortured for his convictions and public preaching. They tortured him to get the names of his fellow believers and preachers who met in secret houses with him. In his letter,

Jan describes how, in the bitter cold of winter, he was taken to an unheated torture loft, stripped to the waist, with his hands tied behind his back and his feet tied to the floor. A rope was then attached to his wrists and he was hoisted aloft by that rope, arms behind his back, beaten with rods on his abdomen for good measure. Here reported that “the Lord be praised, they obtained nothing from me, though I had drank that bitter cup... I prayed within myself, that the Lord should not suffer me to be tempted above that I was able.”⁶

Anabaptist prisoners had pledged not to reveal the names of other members of Christ’s body even under torture. So, after being tortured, Jan wrote: “Afterwards I received a great, peaceful joy and gladness of the Holy Ghost, so great that I cannot adequately describe it; because the Lord has so faithfully kept my lips.” Jan learned the quiet acceptance of suffering.

Anabaptists were known for their inner calm and sensing God’s presence in prison while they awaited execution—their letters tell us this—but their spirituality was never only an inner subjective experience. They also expressed their spirituality in visible outer ways in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, community discipline, and martyrdom.

D. Suffering

Although martyrdom involves suffering, I think early Anabaptists viewed suffering as a broader and more inclusive theme. The theme of the righteous suffering on their way to

⁶ Snyder, *Following* (2004) 174.

God's kingdom pervades both the OT and the NT, "culminating in Christ's own suffering on the cross."⁷

1. Collections of scripture

Anabaptists often cited Scripture focused on the reality and value of suffering. "The following collection of scripture verses is a familiar one to anyone who has read Anabaptist testimonies."⁸

Does not the right and necessary way to the kingdom lead through distress? Does not Scripture say "many are the tribulations of the righteous" (Ps 33/34:20/19) and we must "go through many trials to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22)?

And again: "All who want to live piously in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

"So if they persecuted Christ, will they not also persecute you" (John 15:20).

"The disciple is not superior to his master" (Matt. 10:24).

"Was it not necessary for Christ to suffer and thus to enter into his glory" (Lk 24:26)

"Is it not necessary for us Christians, for who Christ suffered, also to suffer and continuously to bear about in these our mortal bodies the mortification of Christ, so that the life of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies?" (2 Cor 4:10)

"Christ suffered for us leaving us an example, that we might follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21).

This collection of Scripture was collected by a devout Roman Catholic brother, Geert Grote, in 1375. He collected these scriptures "to strengthen the resolve of those who had dedicated themselves to a life of meditation and devotion."⁹

A century later, Anabaptists apparently learned a great deal from their medieval brothers and sisters, and used such collections to help them endure the physical suffering of prison, torture, and death by fire.

2. Meaning of suffering

For the Anabaptists, suffering meant four things:

⁷ Snyder, *Following* (2004) 166.

⁸ Snyder, *Following* (2004) 166.

⁹ Snyder, *Following* (2004) 167.

a. Participation in Christ

Suffering meant intimate participation in Christ. Being in Christ. Being engraved into Christ. Suffering denoted following Christ. The suffering of Christ's body on the cross is inseparable from the suffering of Christ's body in the world.

b. Redemption

Suffering was viewed as redemptive. That is, complete identification with Christ and his suffering meant complete identification with Christ in his resurrection. Some Anabaptists thought that their suffering would hasten the return of Christ and thus their own redemption.

c. Disciplinary

Suffering was view as disciplinary. Suffering trained and strengthened a person. Suffering created opportunities to take on the character of Christ, to be conformed to Christ's image, to cultivate the fruit of the spirit. It prepared a person for the rack and to refute the inquisitor, if and when the time came.

d. Inevitable

Anabaptist believed that suffering was inevitable. The Martyrs Mirror states, "It has been so from the beginning, that the righteous must suffer, and that the unrighteous always prevail."¹⁰ The believer is in constant conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The true Christian must suffer in their world, but in so doing he/she is preparing for the kingdom of God. The true church is the suffering church.

e. Vindication

Ultimately, God will vindicate the suffering righteous and set the world right; justice and peace will prevail. Anabaptists that awaited execution often expected some specific avenging act of God and left the matter of vengeance entirely to the Lord.

E. Conclusion

I have argued the early Anabaptists understood discipleship in a way rarely seen in Christian history, because they tried to entirely devote themselves to following Christ. They resisted what they believed was "not of Christ" in the political and religious structures of their time. Their tenacity in witnessing to Christ ignited harsh political blowback, which led to the execution of some 5,000 Anabaptists. For the Anabaptists, following Jesus was inseparable suffering and martyrdom.

¹⁰ Quoted from "Suffering"; www.gameo.org.