

ON BEING

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RADICAL.



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ON BEING

RADICAL.

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THE NEXT ISSUE:

Topic: *Being a Church of Peace: Being a People that confronts Violence*

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Send contributions to Carl Brook at

carl@crusadeforchrist.org.za

EDITORIAL: RADICAL CHRISTIANITY

~ Andrew Suderman

The Anabaptist movement has historically been described, usually by those who saw themselves in opposition to Anabaptism, as “the Radical Reformation” or “the Radical reformers.” There were several reasons why the Anabaptist movement was described as such.

One of the most foundational reasons Anabaptism was described as “radical” was because Anabaptism and the practices that emerged from this movement challenged some of the most basic ways in which society was structured. This faith expression and movement that emerged in 1525 confronted the very being and meaning of what it meant to be “church”; the way it was organized, its mission and identity, the way it related to the state and governing authorities, and so forth. It was, put simply, a new vision of the body of Christ that sought to put into practice, live out, Kingdom of God values in the world, making it a counter-cultural and an alternative-political witness during the Reformation. The Anabaptist vision was not simply to reform the church but to restore the church.

This vision led those who were a part of the Anabaptist movement to:

- renounce the use of all violence, seeking to resolve conflict nonviolently even if that led to death (which it often did, especially at the beginning of the Anabaptist movement);
- organize the body of Christ—the church—in such a way that everybody, not just “the leaders”, had a voice and role as to its mission, vision, and practice;
- believe that all those who had consciously and voluntarily made a decision to become part of the church would seek to live a life according to the example and teachings of Jesus;
- practice and live out lifestyles based on Jesus and Jesus’ teachings, even if that conflicted with the rulers and governing authorities.

These practices were often (and have often continued to be) deemed as “unrealistic”. During the Reformation Anabaptists challenged some of the most basic social structures, the allegiance to such structures, the established order and the status quo. And for that the Anabaptist movement has been described as “radical”.

Today, however, the term “radical” is often used to describe all sorts of things. “Radical” has become an attractive term to use, describing something that is “cool” or “excellent”. In other words, “being radical” has, seemingly, become in vogue. It has become a title that we want to use which demonstrates how “awesome” or attractive we might be, rather than a term used by others who find our practices and our lives to be out-of-the-ordinary.

This issue of ANiSA’s e-zine seeks to ask what “radical” Christianity looks like and means today? If “radical” was used to describe the counter-cultural practices of the Anabaptist movement in the 16th century which challenged the status quo and the social structures of that time, what would counter-cultural practices today, in South Africa, in the 21st century, look like? Is it helpful to use terms such as “radical”?

Whatever terms we use or is used to describe our practices, we hope this issue may challenge us as to what it means to live a life whose foundation, or root, is Jesus.

BEYOND RADICAL

~ Des Morgan

The title of the article is borrowed from Gene Edwards' book of the same title. Published 1999 by The Seedsowers: Jacksonville, Florida.

A dictionary definition of "Radical" is "basic, thorough, getting to the root of something, fundamental, revolutionary". This definition in itself suggests it has a diverse meaning and needs to be used with careful attention to the context in which and where it is applied.

For some it may well have negative connotations, in that they have found themselves on the wrong side of 'radical' actions taken by others.

Within church circles, the term "radical" or similar is frequently used, often by those who for one or other reason believe that the status quo needs to be challenged. For the most part they will appeal to one or the other Biblical teaching and/or practice which they see to have been neglected or misunderstood, seeking to revive it. They will claim it to be radical in that they are getting back to the root of what the Bible teaches. That in and of itself is a worthwhile endeavour but when it becomes a matter of pride – 'I am being radical whereas you are settling for the status quo, for the sake of convention' – it is in need of being questioned. Its 'radical' nature is compromised since pride is the core ingredient that brought about the Fall of humankind (Genesis 3). It is interesting to note that the only true radical, Jesus, challenged this very aspect in the attitude, teaching and practice of the Pharisees. They were more concerned about appearing to be true to what they understood to be fundamental, than actually understanding the nature of God. It is this which got Jesus into trouble, by not claiming to be radical, but rather living out a lifestyle that challenged the hypocrisy of the Pharisees' belief system.

Being radical is not a theological position. Rather, it is linked to a position which a person and/or community may take in relation to the prevailing culture which will exist at a particular time and/or place. It would probably for the most part be counter-cultural. Jesus came into this world at a particular time and place and his words and actions, without him particularly setting out to do so, ran counter to the culture of his time. He antagonised

the religious authorities, the political powers and - to a marked degree - the social conventions of his time. Jesus came to demonstrate the life-giving principles of the Kingdom of God. This involved a challenge to the said authorities. The nature of the human condition is to

move away from God's original position, which in simple terms, is to continue in fellowship with humankind, by walking with him in "the cool of the evening". It is a position of peace, free of ambition and pride.

The coming of Jesus, after aeons of his created order living affected by the consequences of ambition, was

a radical action. Jesus willingly relinquished his position of honour in the Godhead and humbled himself in an act contrary to the motivation which brought about the fall of Satan himself and, then, that of the created order, viz. the ambition to usurp the position of God.

To be radical, therefore, is to relinquish ambition, one's privileged position and to identify with those most damaged by the ambition of others. We can continue to enjoy the fruit of privilege, or we can choose to be radical, leaving the comfort afforded by that privilege.

The history of the church reveals a story of people who have fallen back into ambitious ways, seeking power and influence and therefore conforming to the whims and wishes of those who hold power, politically, socially and religiously. That same history also records the stories of those who resisted this pressure, often at great cost. Consequences have included losing positions of privilege, comfort and influence and, like Jesus, even losing their lives. Many of those involved in acts of resistance to the status quo have probably not been recognised and yet have been instrumental in "silently" bringing the church (and society as a whole) back to a position of Jesus-centeredness.

When Martin Luther confronted the church of his day with his 95 Theses, he was engaging in radical action. There were those, however, who believed he had not gone far enough. What became known as the 'Radical

To be radical, therefore, is to relinquish ambition, one's privileged position and to identify with those most damaged by the ambition of others.

Reformation' resulted, moving the church further along the road of restoring the church to its Biblical roots. As subsequent church history records, the process did not stop. Church researcher Wolfgang Simson points out that, despite much theological tweaking during the Reformation, the basic structure of church and its power dynamics have largely gone unchallenged.

If we are to be radical, we will not set out to be so but, rather, to be obedient. We will not call ourselves radical but rather seek to be followers of Jesus. We will probably not gain recognition except having a reputation such that others would need to 'deal with caution' with what we do and say. However, being radical will change the atmosphere wherever we venture. It is to go beyond radical.

ON ROUGHING IT UP AND THE RADICAL JESUS

~ Cobus van Wyngaard

There we were, sitting at a nice table looking out at the sea. We had a good bottle of wine on the table and were sinking into the atmosphere of one of the beautiful beachfronts close to Cape Town. We were talking about Jesus: what it meant to follow this Jew from Galilee. One of our participants drew the beautiful expression from *The Message* into our discussion: "Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know" (Matt 8:20).

Was the expression meant sincerely? I don't doubt it. But there we were sitting in a nice inn, unpacking our own identities as followers of Jesus - and claiming that this implies that we won't be staying in the nice inns.

I don't understand this tension. The tension between what we say when we invoke the name of the radicals, and what we do in response to our radical stories. I can't even claim that the reflections are coherent. But there is something very wrong between the popularity of radical talk and the popularity of actions which keeps the status quo in place.

Everyone wants to be radical nowadays. We like to sit in Cubana's with Che Guavara overlooking us while we drink expensive cocktails. It's radical. We have Che with us.

And Jesus was radical. Obviously. So we have Jesus being unpacked as a warrior. A fighter. This Jesus is all macho and radical. And the followers of this Jesus are like all in your face, making no excuses for their opinions, because they are radical, and following Jesus.

Even moralism can be radical if you follow Jesus. We are radical. Sitting around a flagpole at school where everyone can stare us down, praying for this heathen place. We even like to describe ourselves as

'persecuted.' Because we are radical followers of Jesus. You know, people are really making life difficult for those who are part of the church.

And then we have the stories which we like to repeat: Mother Theresa, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu holding on to the person who is about to be necklaced, Jesus. We hold them up as examples, examples of being radical.

I always wonder what would happen if my kid came to me after a fiery sermon, where I invoked the example of any of these characters in the previous paragraph, and announced that he believed that God has called him to quit school, not go to university, and go and live among those who suffer. What would we do if the kids in the



Sunday school became convinced that God is calling them to sell all they have and give the money to the poor?

The truth is that we like to think that we are roughing it up. We like to provide examples of people who broke the mould, but we don't really think these should be followed. On the contrary, for the sake of the church they need to remain as symbols. We might even need these symbols in order to refrain from following them.

The Mother Therasas seem to be symbols which we can identify with, and then they become radical on my behalf, or rather, on behalf of the group with which I identify myself. Naming Theresa, Ghandi or, God forbid, Jesus, in a sermon carries the danger of pacifying me, of setting up that which I never need to become. You know, like not staying in the nice inns (I write this while staying over at a very nice inn). We know we need to say it, but we all know that this does not imply that we will actually be doing it.

It's a strange logic associated with this idea that we are radicals. Radicals seem to be - by definition - the exception to the rule. The people we like to talk about. We might even call them in to form our identity. But the moment someone becomes a radical then it is assumed that their behaviour is by definition exceptional. That's perhaps why we have all the talk about following the radical Jesus being discussed over an overpriced latté in Sandton City.

But I'm not sure if following Jesus should be seen as exceptional. It's rather the better way of life. True, for some it's uncomfortable (like the rich young man, I

guess) mainly due to the odd position they are starting from (in this case a position of owning vastly more than those around them). But it's a way which was followed by the local fishermen and tax collectors. It's the way of the disciples. The way of people in many communities.

It's like adopting the orphaned child. This is not radical. It should be the ordinary road for humanity. (And you will find adopted orphans everywhere.) Or inviting the stranger into your house for a meal, something which our middle-class suburban environment finds strange, but which others might consider merely good manners.

So, let's just be honest. If you are anything like me, you are not roughing it up. You are living a fairly comfortable, modern life. But if you are a Christian, then you cannot consider the following of Jesus to be the exception. So let's just start with the common things. Live in a neighbourhood which is closer to the norm in society than you might have afforded (if you are, like me, part of the upper middle-class), and invest your life into this neighbourhood. Take some time to share a meal with someone which your peers might not think of inviting. Educate yourself to be able to raise your voice for an economic policy which would actually serve the poor of the world. Join the voices of millions who seek to eradicate labour laws which keep people in poverty, and economic policies which create the super-rich.

This is not radical. It's not something which you can leave to the Ghandis or the Jesuses. It's what we should actually be changing in our lives today.

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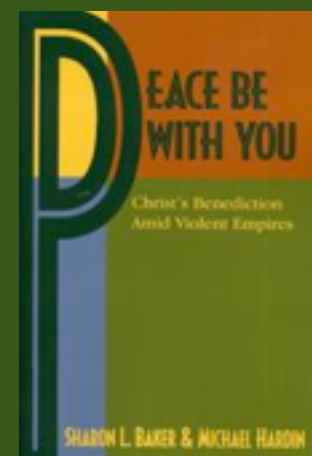
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HOW RADICAL AM I?

~ Ian Farr

I must confess that I am always a little cynical when people talk about being radical. For a start, what do they mean by it? Secondly, is that radicalism simply theoretical or is it lived out, and - if so - how?

Literally, being radical means getting to the root of things. It has come to be used of those who are completely sold out to some ideal or teaching. Thus in modern parlance, radical is not a million miles away from “extreme” or “fundamentalist”. Commonly, it tends to get used of those who the speaker considers a lot further to the “left” (or right, but usually left) than him/ herself.

If I consider myself a “radical Christian,” do the people around me recognise that, and if so, how?

My wife and I came out from UK to South Africa in 2004, and for the next six years we lived in the little rural town of Idutywa in the former Transkei. We then moved down to East London where we have been based since. Previous to this we had lived at various times for over nine years in India. During our time out there we have often lived in some pretty basic situations and known the threat of persecution or even death simply because we were Christians. Does that mean that we are radical?

Certainly, the experience of followers of Jesus in a land where they are a tiny percentage of the population, and where opposition and persecution often have to be faced, can teach us a lot. Whereas many in South Africa have experienced persecution for being the wrong colour, so far few have experienced it because they seek to be true disciples of Jesus.

I would like to share three stories from my own India experience that help me to consider the question of being radical, and then raise a few questions of my own at the end.

1. Ravi (not his real name), a friend from India, was a doctor who was doing amazing work in very difficult conditions, and with limited resources, in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. I had known him for a few years, and on two occasions had the privilege of visiting him at the hospital of which he was the director.

As we chatted, Ravi suddenly surprised me by saying, “You know, Ian, when I first came to UK, I did not think there were any Christians here.” Knowing that during his visit he had stayed with a number of leaders of churches and mission organisations, his comment was something of a shock. “Why do you say that, Ravi?” I asked. “Because nobody seemed to live any differently than anyone else,” was his reply.

Our conversation then continued around the area of consumerism and materialism. “Why,” wondered Ravi, “did every British Christian seem to want to live in a nice house in a pleasant suburb, drive a comfortable car, and put their children in a ‘nice’ school with as few immigrants as possible?” On behalf of my fellow British Christians, I would have to hold my hands up and say, “Guilty as charged.” And that would include many of my friends who theologically would see themselves as radical.

2. Just over 30 years ago, Verghese (again, not his real name) following what he believed to be the call of God, with a very heavily pregnant wife and two young children, moved from his home village to a very different area of India. In the new place, there were a lot of fanatical Hindus, and virtually no other Christians. The family had nowhere to live and no means of financial income or support. Verghese and his family suffered, were physically

persecuted, their lives repeatedly threatened. They held on, believing God was with them, and today in that area they have a thriving church of over 200 believers, and the atmosphere of that place has changed incredibly.

The stories Verghese tells are thrilling and challenging. I have visited them in that location many times over the years. I saw the situation. I shared some of their hardships. I witnessed, in a very real way, faith and discipleship in action.

But, for some years now, money - mainly from the USA - has flowed into Verghese and his work. He has a nice house, and a huge "church" facility. His children have grown up and are all in comfortable houses. They all have cars, as well as other vehicles "for the ministry".

Yet whenever Verghese travels to the USA or to Europe, the stories he tells are still from those early days of suffering, persecution and hardship. It is what western audiences want to hear. Yet today I would say that Verghese is "better off" in material terms than many of the church leaders I know in UK. Was his early experience "radical Christianity", which has slowly been eroded into a more comfortable mediocrity? Well, I am in no position to point any fingers.

3. I was standing by a lake in eastern India. A number of new converts were being baptised by various church leaders. As one young lady, I would think about 17 year of age, went down into the water, a pastor standing beside me began to weep deeply. I put my arm around his shoulder and asked what was troubling him. "That girl has just signed her death warrant," he replied, "her father has told her that if she is baptised as a Christian, he will kill her – I know him, I know he will do it."

Was that young lady, who I suspect knew little "theology", a radical Christian?

So after telling those stories, my questions are:

1. If I consider myself a "radical Christian," do the people around me recognise that, and if so, how?
2. Are some of us in danger of feeling that we are part of a movement or a denomination that had very radical beginnings when people were willing to give their lives for what they believed, and therefore we assume we are still radical? Are we basking in past glory not our own?
3. Have we become so accustomed to "not taking unnecessary risks" that we easily compromise with the way of the world without even knowing that we are doing it?
4. In considering ourselves to be radical, are we in danger of feeling superior to other brothers and sisters in Christ?

ON A RADICAL JOURNEY

~ Kristin Petersheim

My name is Kristin Petersheim, and I am not a pastor or theologian. South Africa has been my home for the past six months, during which I have been a participant in the Radical Journey program with Mennonite Mission Network. In these six months, my theological perceptions have shifted drastically from a North-American standpoint valuing independence and self-reliance, to what I hope becomes a more universal Christian world-view of true servitude, and everyday radicalness.

A New Community

Five months ago, leaving my friends and family was very difficult. Now I'm beginning to understand that it will be just as challenging to leave the growing South African family I love. I feel very blessed to be where I am today. Each day brings new challenges, questions, joys and lessons learned. My host family is incredible, and full of distinct personalities. My host father, Vusi Dube, is a pastor at a small church held in our home every week. My mother, Ella, is an amazing woman whose home is always open for visitors needing prayer and a listening ear. I have three siblings: Nhlaganipo, age 22; Romano, age 16; and Nonhlanhla, age 13. I share a room with my host sister, and we have become very close.



I am currently working at two different job locations. At the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), I work as a librarian in the 20,000 volume theological library. I am currently working to facilitate the transfer of their entire collection into a new cataloguing system. When I am not at ESSA, I spend my time working at the University of KwaZulu Natal assisting with an archiving project for the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Action (PACSA). PACSA began during apartheid as an organization striving to draw white Christians into the Struggle. Both of these organizations do incredible work, and I feel fortunate to work for them.

Reality Check

Although I have two defined work placements with specific tasks I have to accomplish, the most shaping part of this journey comes from what I experience daily outside of my workplace. Every day, I bear witness to the fact that South Africa is scarred by years of discrimination and dehumanization, and people are still healing from these experiences. Before my time in South Africa, I had never personally experienced the lack of trust between racial populations. So when a pastor in Soweto informed me that many non-white people I meet will assume that I'm "racist until proven otherwise," his assumption seemed unfair. I was troubled by the concept of being the enemy. After learning more about South Africa's history and how it has shaped modern South Africa, I understand the reasons behind these assumptions. More recently, however, I realized I was making excuses for myself instead of focusing my time and energy on serving others. Making excuses perpetuates the status quo for not solving problems, which isn't exactly the most radical practice. In fact, diffusing and dismissing problems is one of the biggest obstructions for solidarity in my home culture, and one which I had hoped to overcome during my time in South Africa.

I am because we are

One of my favourite African concepts that was completely revolutionary in my mind is Ubuntu. After apartheid ended, the word Ubuntu was often used by political and religious figures like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This Zulu/Xhosa word represents an African humanist philosophy valuing the interconnectedness of humanity. One simple definition of Ubuntu is "I am because we are," meaning we are shaped by the

community of people that surrounds us. Ubuntu works both ways, and requires one to accept hospitality and gestures of community just as freely as they give. I have experienced several occasions when I was hesitant to accept the hospitality extended to me. Often the person offering food or a treat was in a more difficult economic situation than I, and I couldn't imagine taking the little they had. Ubuntu is a wonderful concept in theory, but the challenge is that it requires everyone to share what they have in order to better the community. However, this model is far from being put perfectly into practice, and more often we first focus on bettering ourselves, telling ourselves that we can help others from an enlightened and enriched standpoint.

In North America, there is a tendency to dissolve values of community and interconnectedness. A craving for independence and the ability to provide for ourselves without help from others can overpower our desire for community. This type of society cannot easily become a Christian society. As Christians, we must challenge these images of desirable "power" through independence by loving and helping one another first. Sometimes the strong desire of comfort and self-development can inhibit our work as true servants. After all, Jesus said that "It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). This verse can be challenging to accept in light of the appeal of monetary success, which we reason is necessary in order to provide for ourselves and our family. Perhaps the answer is to expand our meaning of the word "family" to include everyone. This is a pretty radical concept, especially by North American standards.

Lessons in True Servitude

During orientation week in Chicago, Radical Journey participants entered a discussion regarding the difference between self-righteous service and true service. While self-righteous servants love to serve for recognition or a "feel-good" result, true servants do what is needed without expecting acknowledgement or gratitude. True servants go forth with humility and live in solidarity with people every day, rather than designating special time for service. The True Service model is meant to actuate a Christ-like attitude, and promote the second greatest commandment, to "love thy neighbour as thyself."

When I first began this journey, I think I leaned towards the self-righteous servant side of the spectrum. Not because I thought highly of myself for making the decision, but because I felt confident that I could go out and make someone's life better, and because I knew the resulting feeling of appreciation would feel great. Looking back, this was a pretty arrogant mind-set.

When I applied for Radical Journey, I knew a precise beginning and end date. Now the "end date" is not so clear. This has been by far the most formative and shaping year of my life. I hope to return home and continue to challenge North American values of independence, self-reliance, and even freedom. For the rest of my life, I will ask questions about how I can actively participate in true servitude and living in solidarity with others. Thank you, South Africa, for presenting me with this lifelong challenge, and for granting me new lenses for viewing the world. I know that the next few months are going to pass very quickly, and before I know it I will be back home, in a once comfortable environment that will be newly challenging.



DISRUPTIVE SHEEP

~ David Harrison

Empty promises. If Christ were to sit in a community meeting in Delft or Nyanga, might *he* be accused of the same thing? In John 10, Jesus sets himself up as the Good Shepherd, the leader who protects, guides, nurtures his flock. He contrasts himself to the thief, who comes to steal, kill and destroy. The promise is quite unequivocal: “I come that they may have life, and have it in abundance”. The ‘life’ Christ refers to is unqualified. In the Greek, it’s not just ‘bios’ – being alive, eating, breathing, sleeping. It’s the Greek word ‘zoe’ – the absolute fullness of life - both the physical essence and a spirit of vitality and connection to God. The Greek word that’s used for abundance also doesn’t leave much wiggle room for interpretation: *perissón* means superabundant, superfluous, overflowing – so much than one would have anticipated.

Tell that to the young woman in Crossroads who attends church religiously, prays fervently, trusts God entirely and can’t feed her children. Christ, it would seem, has painted himself into a corner and made promises that he can’t deliver on.

The easy way out is to spiritualise the meaning of ‘abundant life’. In earlier centuries, when life for most was “nasty, brutish and short” - to quote the philosopher Thomas Hobbes - this text seemed to make little sense unless it was referring to life in another dimension, life after death. In recent times, capitalism has created the prospect for commoners accumulating massive wealth, which has provided an avenue for another interpretation: “Christ”, say the prosperity churches, “offers immense reward to those who really believe and are truly faithful”. There will always be gullible and desperate people who fall for those empty promises!

But if we don’t accept that Christ was only promising the good life after death, nor do we accept that Christ’s promise is material gratification for the *seriously* spiritual, how can the Good Shepherd make good his promise?

The answer I think does rest as much with the sheep as with the shepherd – but not just each sheep’s relationship to the shepherd, but how the sheep relate to *one another*. It may sound like something out of a Gary Larson cartoon, but imagine if there was a gang of renegade sheep that hung out in the corner of the field pulling the wool over the eyes of their gullible cousins, and smoking grass.

If the shepherd were to call, and that call was challenged by the sheep-gangsta’s who told them to “stay cool” and “hang tight”,

who would all the other sheep follow? If you have watched a sheep on the road dither in

front of your car, you will know how scatty their decision-making is: “I’ll go this way; no wait a minute, I’ve changed my mind, I’ll go that way.” The metaphor that Christ uses only works because there are no renegade sheep! You could say they’ve all got the mind of the shepherd. They act together to go the way of the shepherd.

John 14:6 quotes Christ as saying: “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me”. This verse is a staple of the Evangelical diet. It’s often read as “I am the way, the truth and the life”, which conjures up the idea of a gatekeeper guarding a narrow aperture through which we must squeeze into the presence of God. This idea is reinforced by a metaphor that Jesus uses in the book of Matthew as well: “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.” But surely the point being made is not that our world needs to



shrink to enter into God's presence, but that finding *life* is a process of active seeking and exploration. It requires both deliberate choice and a thirst for new discovery. If you're like me, the small and dusty roads into the mountains hold far more exciting prospects than the broad, tarred freeways!

A slight change in emphasis can open up new perspectives. John 14:6 could also be read as "I am the **way**, the **truth** and the **life**". And the *way* that Jesus depicted in his ministry, the *truths* that he taught and the *life* that he lived were anything but narrow and constricting. He celebrated life; he made connections with people that others avoided; he preached a revolutionary vision of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Later on in the Gospel of John, as Christ prepared his disciples for his crucifixion, he told them to get out there - to "go and bear fruit that will last". The *way* that they would bear fruit, Christ said, was to "love one another as I have loved you". Matthew's Gospel expands further on the 'way of Christ' - characterised by love for God and love for your neighbour as you love yourself. Christ leads the way. He is the ultimate example, but the Kingdom of God is brought about by the actions of both the leader and the followers, both the shepherd and the sheep. For a few, solitary communion with God may give complete satisfaction, but for most of us, it is in community that people truly come to life - because that community gives us a sense of purpose, identity and belonging. When we're in community, we feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. When we love, we feel loved. Then, when we open ourselves up to, and live in the spirit of God, it's literally mind-blowing. We're then not only part of a community which grows outwards, but we are active participants in the cosmos of life that was there before we were born and will continue after our physical deaths. Now *that's* abundant life - that which allows us to use our body, mind and spirit to the full, to feel complete in who we are, to use our intellects without fear of heresy, to be open to God's spirit, to love others as Christ loved us, to be involved in the unfolding story of God's creation. This is the 'way' to which we are called. Our spiritual path is not intended to be confining and claustrophobic, but expansive and exploring and creating. We are co-creators of the Kingdom of God!

Coming Soon from ANISA Publishing:



Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church

by *Gerald Mast
and J. Denny
Weaver*

Entering a field of controversy, this book dares to offer a fresh model - defenseless Christianity - for understanding Anabaptism, past and present. Although some first-generation Anabaptists were not pacifist, the authors contend that an Anabaptism defined as defenseless Christianity should be seen as a nonviolent Christian movement with a world-reconciling theology. They describe an Anabaptism applicable to Christians of any denomination hungry for their practices to be shaped within the story and life of Jesus Christ.

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GELASSENHEIT: RADICAL SELF-SURRENDER

~ Andrew Suderman

As Anabaptism emerged in 1525, opponents of this new movement described those who became a part of this movement as “radicals.” They even described it as “the Radical Reformation.” Why did they describe this

movement as “radical”?

Indeed, it is self-surrender to God that enables us to confront greed, violence, and the politics of dominion and oppression with the upside-down logic of God’s power found within and through servant-hood, weakness, the foolishness of the cross, and even the fruit of death.

In one way it seems fitting. The early Anabaptists did not seek to reform the church but to restore it to the way of Jesus—the way in which the community of Jesus was gathered and was taught. This way meant taking the teachings and life of Jesus seriously; to live according to his

example. For example, given that Jesus was the Prince of Peace meant that his followers should live by this same peace. When Jesus taught to love one’s enemies, it was a call to not seek ways of killing someone. Jesus, the kingdom that he inaugurated, and his invitation to participate in this kingdom is radical. Therefore to live by his example would be very radical!

There were several particular reasons why the Anabaptists were described as “radicals” in the 16th century. One reason was that to follow in the ways of Jesus required one to live according to his example. Menno Simons wrote in 1539 that “Whosoever boasts that he is a Christian, the same must walk as Christ walked” (Klaassen: 1981, 99). A follower would need to make a voluntary decision to follow the way of Jesus. Second, was the conviction that to follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, meant also being people of peace. This meant practicing nonviolence even if confronted by violence. “Pacifism” is the word used to describe this path of discipleship. They believed that God’s shalom (peace) would not come through violence. Third, the ways of Jesus, his kingdom, and thus the ways of the community—the church—seeking to be faithful to Jesus and the kingdom would lead to practices that would conflict with the principalities and powers. The focus of these principalities and powers was not, and would not be, the pursuit of the kingdom of God. This becomes apparent in that “the powers” normally use a top-down, authoritarian form of ruler-ship and power, whereas the

Anabaptist understanding of church assumes a bottom-up, servant attitude towards the other. Also, the state could not depend on these radicals to participate in the call to war and killing. This was revolutionary. The call of the disciple of Jesus was to follow his will even if that put them into conflict with the will and desire of the state.

Although these attributes of Anabaptism were not thought to be “radical” by those who became a part of this community, the implications of being a community based on such principles proved to be something out of the ordinary in the 16th century. Because they were out of the ordinary as they sought to return to the roots of what following Jesus meant, they were described as “radicals.” Those within the Anabaptist movement sought to live the way of Jesus even if that led to death—an all too common result for being part of this community.

One trait, however, that often goes unnoticed, but which undergirds all of the other practices mentioned above, is that of *gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* is a German word meaning self-surrender and yieldedness to God’s will. “No true discipleship, no true following after Christ, was possible without it” (Dyck: 1993, 74). It was this spirit of *gelassenheit* that shaped the ethos of the community as a non-hierarchical community, based on mutual submission and servant-hood. It was the spirit of *gelassenheit* that shaped the character of the lives lived in service of God’s kingdom here on earth. Ultimately it was this spirit of *gelassenheit* that provided comfort to those confronted by persecution and death due to the way of Jesus. Indeed, it is self-surrender to God that enables us to confront greed, violence, and the politics of dominion and oppression with the upside-down logic of God’s power found within and through servant-hood, weakness, the foolishness of the cross, and even the fruit of death.

A community shaped by the spirit and practice of *gelassenheit* will act and look different. It is a community that seeks to serve others rather than rule over them; it seeks to walk with the least, rather than seeking to be one of the elite; it prioritizes the other instead of the self; it seeks to demonstrate God’s sacrificial love rather than participate in the self-protecting violence and hatred. Ultimately the spirit and practice of *gelassenheit* pursues ways to live in right relationships with others and with God, thus demonstrating God’s shalom (peace) in the world.

The spirit of *gelassenheit*, and the pursuit to practice it was viewed as a radical way to live. Surely, that is still as true today as it was then.