

Sermon - Jesus is the centre of our faith

Colossians 1:15-23, Titles / Names of Jesus

Read the apostle's creed. #712 HWB

Notice—Jesus' life & teaching is not mentioned.

Jesus began his ministry by gathering together a group of disciples. These disciples lived, ate and worked together with Jesus. They observed how he cared for the poor, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, forgave sinners, and taught the multitudes. During these three years, and also in the days after his resurrection, Jesus became central to their faith and life. Jesus taught he was “the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Those disciples came to *believe* in him as their Teacher, Savior, Lord and Son of God.

To be a Christian meant more to these early disciples than being a believer or worshiper or a follower. It meant being a Spirit filled person who was obeying and copying Jesus in daily life. Because of their commitment to Jesus and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, people noticed that they were being transformed to become Christ-like in their attitudes, actions and lifestyles. Those first disciples preached and lived, with enthusiasm, “*Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!*”

For 250 years, the first Christians continued to experience the Spirit of Jesus in their midst. But then over the next centuries, so many changes were introduced to the Christian faith that it nearly became another religion. Two men, in particular, have become symbols for this shift. One was a politician and military leader. The other was a theologian.

Constantine, the politician, was the emperor of the Roman Empire. He has also been named Saint Constantine. As a result of having a spiritual experience in which he saw a vision of the cross, he stopped persecuting Christians and allowed Christianity to become a recognized religion of the Roman Empire. But, during his reign and afterward, people came to be judged

more by the Christian doctrine they proclaimed, rather than by their way of life.

Augustine, the theologian, came to importance some time later. He had a profound conversion experience. Some would call him the greatest theologian of the Western church. But over time, different trends and perspectives emerged that were in contrast to the first disciples. Instead of focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, the church shifted toward giving primary attention to the death of Christ. The Apostles' Creed, which came to prominence during this time, makes no mention of the teaching and ministry of Jesus. Instead of saying “*Jesus is the center of our faith,*” Christians began to say, “*Christ's death is the center of our faith.*”

Significant changes in the church took place. The first Christians were a persecuted minority worshiping in secret, to meeting in ornate public buildings. Converts in the first centuries had to take significant training, received adult baptism, and joined an alternative community. But then infants were baptized and all citizens except Jews belonged to a church aligned with the government.

The early church emphasized following Jesus, but then the focus became correct doctrine, elaborate ritual, and defending themselves against enemies. Members of the early church shared their faith daily with their neighbors, but then evangelism meant primarily extending the boundaries of the “Christian” empire – usually violently. While the majority of early Jesus followers had rejected military service, by the time of Augustine's death, only Christians were permitted in the Roman Army.

This theology and practice solidified but then between the years 1200 and 1500 CE, a variety of concerned persons and groups began to realize that there were serious inadequacies with the widely accepted understandings of salvation and the church. **Martin Luther**, a German monk, who was thoroughly schooled in Augustinian theology, was one of these reformers. **Ulrich Zwingli**, a Swiss pastor,

and **John Calvin**, a reformed theologian, were others. They began to speak out against the church as they experienced it, and introduced significant changes. So the church experienced more major changes and some correctives.

Luther was especially offended by the practices of priests and popes who offered forgiveness and deliverance from purgatory on the basis of works and by selling indulgences. On Oct. 31, 1517, in an attempt to call for public debate, he nailed a list of 95 theses, or arguments, to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This act launched the Protestant Reformation.

Luther and Zwingli affirmed the Scriptures as the sole authority for faith and practice, and insisted that salvation is by grace through faith alone. However, this salvation was mostly understood to mean receiving eternal life. Some would call it soul salvation instead of whole salvation. While Christians were expected to respond in faithful service to God & neighbor, the church's teaching on following Jesus in daily life and of belonging to each other in community was not strongly emphasized.

I don't think it's an accident that the printing press was invented during these years. And the Bible was translated into local languages – so people could read and study the Bible with out depending on the religious leaders.

Several students of Ulrich Zwingli, including Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and George Blaurock, gathered regularly for Bible study in Zürich, Switzerland. Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marpeck and Jakob Hutter were on a similar pilgrimage in South Germany and Moravia. Some time later, **Menno Simons**, a former Catholic priest, taught and coordinated groups that were emerging in the Netherlands.

These students of the Bible continued their studies of Jesus and the first disciples. Hebrews 12:2, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith," became central for many. 1 Corinthians 3:11, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid,

which is Jesus Christ," became the motto for Menno Simons. Over time, the Sermon on the Mount, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, became the measure for living as a Christian.

While these first Anabaptist Christians affirmed the Apostles' Creed and much of what Luther and Zwingli were preaching, they wanted to go further. They preferred to talk about being "born again" rather than about being "justified by faith." While salvation was indeed by the grace of God, they called for a more radical response of obedience on the part of believers.

They insisted that salvation, made possible by Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, should lead to the transformation of a person's moral, social & economic life. Adult baptism became a sign that this salvation and transformation had taken place. If you had asked those first Anabaptist Christians, I believe they would have joined with the very first disciples in saying "*Jesus Christ is the center of our faith!*"

This is a very quick broad overview of church history. But in preparing for the next 500 years of church life & following Jesus, it's important to remind ourselves of the fundamentals of the Christian faith. It's important to know what the first Christians believed and how they lived. It's a good time as society has changed so much from the church era to – who knows what - to jog our memories of the basics of faith. So what does this mean for us with the name Mennonite today? Jesus followers of an Anabaptist perspective seek to apply their understanding of Jesus in three important ways:

1. Jesus is to be followed in daily life. Being a Christian means more than having a spiritual experience, affirming a creed, or being justified before God. To be a Christian means to follow Jesus in daily life. Christians with an Anabaptist perspective say, "Christianity is discipleship!" In German it is *Nachfolge Christi* or "following after Christ." Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist, stated it clearly when he said, "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow

after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him.”

Salvation, in the Anabaptist tradition, means being transformed from an old way of life to a life that exemplifies the spirit and actions of Jesus. Salvation is not merely a change of God’s attitude toward us. It is a change in our attitudes and actions toward God, toward people, and toward the world. This change is made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who empowers disciples to follow Jesus in daily life.

Many Christians, even after salvation, continue to see themselves as hopeless sinners, who are unable to live a victorious transformed life. Some say, “I’m not different. I am only forgiven.” Christians from an Anabaptist perspective disagree. They believe the teachings and Spirit of Jesus make it possible for committed followers to be transformed and to overcome the powers of evil. They encourage themselves & others to radically follow Jesus in daily life.

Second, The Bible is interpreted from a Christ-centered point of view. Many believers have what might be called a “flat” Bible, which assumes that the words of God as understood by Moses in the Old Testament hold the same authority as the words of Jesus in the New Testament. When political or social issues such as war, capital punishment, or treatment of deviant people are encountered, those with a “flat” Bible often claim Old Testament texts as the basis for their belief and action, even when these texts differ from the teachings of Jesus.

Other Christians interpret the Scriptures from a dispensational point of view. To know God’s will, they must first know for which period of time or dispensation a passage was revealed. In this approach, obedience to the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount is generally postponed until the kingdom age of Christ’s return. During the present time, Jesus receives worship, but not daily obedience.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective seek to interpret all Scripture from an ethical Christ-centered point of view. Jesus is seen as the fullest revelation of God and God’s will, which means that sometimes the teachings of Jesus transcend previous teachings. Jesus himself said, “You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43).

Also, the writer of Hebrews (1:1-3) declares, “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son who is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” The Bible is to introduce us to Jesus.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective affirm that all Scripture is inspired, but they are not strict literalists. We seek to hold the written word and the Spirit of Jesus in creative tension. All Scripture needs to be interpreted in the Spirit of Jesus. Followers of Jesus get into trouble when they either elevate *the written word* over the Spirit, or raise *the Spirit* above the word. Word and Spirit need to be held together. And it’s a tension that does not go away as we see from the various ways parts of the Bible is interpreted, as well as downplayed.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective see the Scriptures as the ultimate source of information, they see Jesus as the final authority for faith and life. He is Lord of Scripture and is the standard for both personal and social ethics. No text is an authority other than in the way it is honestly related to the teaching and Spirit of Jesus. So when Anabaptist-minded Christians face an ethical question, they go first to Jesus for their primary guidance. Then they go to other Scriptures for further background and understanding. If two passages of Scripture seem to disagree, they let Jesus be the referee!

Third, Jesus followers of an Anabaptist perspective seek to apply their understanding of Jesus in that **Jesus is accepted as both Savior and Lord.** Many Christians affirm Jesus as their personal Savior from sin, but place less

emphasis on following him as Lord in daily life. They look to Jesus as Savior from personal bad habits, but when they face larger social or political problems, they give their obedience to an employer, civic leader, military general or president. As a result, many Christians today are more obedient to the commands of earthly leaders than they are to those given by Jesus.

Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that government needs to be obeyed to the extent that Christian discipleship will allow. Government's purpose is to preserve life and create order in a secular world. Obedience to laws does not mean that we give blind or casual obedience to whatever government commands. Since our highest loyalty always belongs to Jesus and the kingdom of God, we may on occasion need to disobey a government order because it is contrary to the teaching and spirit of Jesus.

An example of this is, we discourage government attempts to support war. With the recent proposal to increase military spending, we have to ask, are special needs programs receiving the same consideration? What about those First Nations reservations that don't have adequate water supplies? And we could go on and on?

Also, since our Canadian Mennonite magazine receives a government subsidy, we are tied to how much the magazine can criticize the government. At what point as followers of Jesus, do we decide that it's more important to follow Jesus than to not print negative views and information about what the government is doing or not doing?

Simply, when there is a conflict between the ways of Jesus and the ways of Caesar, we say with the early disciples, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29).

This review of the fundamentals of being an Anabaptist, Mennonite Christian, is important as we discern the future of our church. It doesn't decide what music to sing, or what kind of organization to have, and so on. But it's

important to know our history and our historical distinctives from other Christians. On a recent Sunday we talked about our Christian witness for the next 500 years being better than the last 500 years. We also looked at the importance of being sure of and practicing our fundamentals.

So this sermon, from the booklet, *What Is An Anabaptist Christian?*, by Palmer Becker, is one way to review who we are as well as discern – is this a way of being followers of Jesus that is for us?

In summary, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe Jesus is the centre of our faith. We are a *believing* people who seek to:

1. Follow Jesus in daily life.
2. Interpret the Scriptures in the Spirit of Jesus.
3. Promise their highest loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Taken from: What is an Anabaptist Christian, by Palmer Becker.
Missio Dei pamphlet Number 18

<https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/publications/Missio%20Dei/What%20is%20an%20Anabaptist%20Christian>

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