

Early Anabaptist and Quaker Texts – Theology and Witness

1. Essential Theological Orientation

A. New Covenant in Christ

Both Anabaptists and Quakers placed Christ at the centre of their faith. He had fulfilled in himself the outward figures of the old covenant and made it possible for all people to experience an intimate relationship with God in Spirit. The apostasy of Christianity involved a return to the ways of the old covenant (physical law, temple, priesthood etc). This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 1-3.

Christ Jesus is the spirit and the truth of all the figures that have passed away, the end and fulfilment of the law of figures, but the beginning of the true substance and completeness eternally. In Christ Jesus, says the apostle, is genuine substance. In him are hid all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God...and all the shadows and figures are fulfilled in him.

Dirk Philips – *Spiritual Restitution* (1560)¹

Is not Christ the ordinance and the end of all ordinances, who is the way, the truth, and the life? Is there any ordinances without him in the gospel? Is not he the sabbath, circumcision, baptism, the supper etc, are not all these in him? And doth not he minister all these in spirit to everyone that comes to him? and so the shadow is come into the substance, the end of all shadows, which is life indeed...

James Nayler – *Salutation to the Seed of God* (1655)²

B. New Life in Christ

Anabaptists and Quakers did not believe that salvation was received through the sacraments of the church or the righteousness of Christ imputed to people, but rather by a real participation in the way, truth, and life of Christ. This involved dying to the fallen way of Adam and being born into the perfect way of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence, an essential marker of this new birth was that people would visibly reveal the way of Christ in their lives. Hence, they retained the Catholic emphasis on holiness but believed that this was the fruits of spiritual transformation received directly by faith. Unlike the mainstream Protestants, they were unwilling to separate justification from sanctification. This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 1-3.

¹ Walter Klaassen, ed. *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Waterloo ONT: Herald press, 1981), 158.

² James Nayler and Licia Kuenning, ed. *Works of James Nayler*, Volume 2 (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2004), 207-208.

Since we are born of God in the spiritual way of Christ and not in the human way of Adam, we must carefully consider how the birth of Christ took place. It occurred, as already noted, in faith and through the working of the Holy Spirit. Whoever wishes to have Christ's nature and character must also be born of God. That person must, with Christ, be God's child. This is what Peter says with the words, "You have been born anew, not of mortal but of immortal seed, and this seed is the word of truth."

Peter Riedemann - *Hutterite Confession of Faith* (1565)³

Now all people try yourselves, whether you be in the first birth or you be born again: there is a first Adam and there is a second Adam; and they who are in the first bear his image; and they who are in the second bear his image; and as is the earthly, such are they that are earthly; and as is the heavenly, such are they that are heavenly. And these are contrary one to the other: the one being from above, the other being from below; the one the seed of God, the other the seed of the serpent...

James Nayler – *A Discovery of the First Wisdom* (1653)⁴

C. Taught by God

Anabaptists and Quakers both gave significant emphasis to the new covenant principle that God teaches people directly by the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:34/Heb. 8:11) and as this Spirit illuminates the Scriptures. This meant that people were no longer dependent on human teachers, particularly the clergy. An early Quaker proclamation was, "Christ is come to teach his people himself." This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 1-3.

The anointing which you have received from God remains with you and therefore you have no need to have anyone teach you. Rather, what the anointing teaches you is the truth and no lie. Remain in what she has taught you.

Leonhard Schiemer – *A Letter to the Church at Rattenberg* (1527)⁵

Come to Christ the first born...here is your true teacher, whereby all shall be taught of God, as saith the Scripture; and minding this light, it will show you a cross to be daily taken up, whereby all the unruly nature must be crucified.

James Nayler – *A Discovery of the First Wisdom* (1653)⁶

³ Peter Riedemann and John J. Friesen. *Confession of Our Religion, Teaching, and Faith, by the Brothers* (Waterloo ONT: Herald Press, 1999), 110.

⁴ James Nayler and Licia Kuenning, ed. *Works of James Nayler*, Volume 1 (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2003), 46.

⁵ Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 75.

⁶ Nayler, *Works* Vol. 1 (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2003), 43.

D. The Spirit and the Letter

Anabaptists and Quakers regarded the Bible as an essential religious authority, but only when illuminated by the Holy Spirit or Living Word. They both accepted that since the Bible was inspired by this Spirit/Word and pointed to it, ultimately, it had to be a secondary authority. In practice, Anabaptists gave greater authority to the Bible, while Quakers emphasised the direct teaching of the Spirit/Word. This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 1-3.

I value the Holy Scriptures above all human treasures but not as high as the Word of God, which is living, powerful and eternal, and which is free and unencumbered by all of the elements of this world.

Hans Denck – *Recantation* (1527)⁷

I had no slight esteem of the holy scriptures, but they were very precious to me, for I was in that spirit that gave them forth, and what the Lord opened in me I later found was agreeable to them.

Fox – *The Journal* (for 1648)⁸

2. Witness – Truthfulness, Nonviolence, Integrity and Economic Justice

The lived witness of Anabaptist and Quakers has been the outward fruits of inward spiritual guidance and transformation, linked closely to the teachings of the Bible. In practice, this has meant the way of Jesus revealed visibly in the lives of his people. The practices of truthfulness, nonviolence, integrity, generosity, and economic justice have been important examples of this.

A. Truthfulness: Oaths

Anabaptists and Quakers rejected the practice of swearing oaths as a double standard of truth and as an aspect of the old covenant that no longer applied in the new covenant. In the New testament, both Jesus and James taught that God's people should be truthful in all things and so should not swear (Matthew 5:34 and James 5:12). Those living in the new birth, share in the truthfulness of Christ. This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 1 and 3. Here we see Menno Simons and George Fox explain their refusal to swear oaths.

The oath serves no other purpose than to make men testify truly. Can the truth not be told without oaths? Do all testify to the

They gave me the book to swear on, and the book saith, Swear not at all: But I told them, if they could prove that after Christ

⁷ Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 142.

⁸ George Fox and John L. Nickalls, ed. *The Journal of George Fox* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1975), 34.

truth even when under the oath? To the first question you must say yes, and to the last no. Is the oath the truth itself to which one testifies, or does the truth depend upon the man who takes the oath? Why does not the magistracy then accept the testimony confirmed by yea and nay as commanded of God instead of that confirmed by that which is forbidden?

Jesus and his apostles had forbidden men to swear, they had allowed it, I would swear. Thus I said, and my allegiance lies in truth and faithfulness, not in swearing, and so should all your allegiance lie, if you did well. I do not deny swearing upon some account, and own it upon others, but I deny it, because Christ and the apostle have said, I should not swear at all.

Menno Simons – Epistle to Micron (1556)⁹ George Fox – Journal (for 1665)¹⁰

B. Nonviolence: Only Spiritual Weapons

Both Anabaptists and Quakers have regarded nonviolence as an essential feature of the way of Jesus which shapes life of God's people within the new covenant. The only acceptable war within the new covenant is an inward and spiritual struggle over what rules within people and motivates their actions, the spirit of the devil or the Spirit of Christ. This conflict cannot be won using physical violence or coercive means. It employs inward spiritual weapons which defeat evil and bring people into the peaceable kingdom of Christ. This is reflected in the AMN Core conviction 7 and the following passages from the writings of Menno Simons and James Nayler.

Our weapons are not weapons with which cities and countries may be destroyed, walls and gates broken down, and human blood shed in torrents like water. But they are weapons with which the spiritual kingdom of the devil is destroyed and the wicked principle in man's soul is broken down, flinty hearts broken, hearts that have never been sprinkled with the heavenly dew of the Holy Word. We have and know no other weapons besides this...

And as they war not against men's persons, so their weapons are not carnal, nor hurtful to any of the creation; for the Lamb comes not to destroy men's lives, nor the work of God, and therefore at his appearance in his subjects, he puts spiritual weapons into their hearts and hands: their armour is the light, their sword the Spirit of the Father and the Son; their shield is faith and patience: their paths are prepared with the gospel of peace and good will towards all the creation of God.

Menno Simons – *Foundations* (1539)¹¹

James Nayler – *The Lamb's War* (1657)¹²

⁹ Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 288.

¹⁰ George Fox and John L. Nickalls, ed. *The Journal of George Fox* (London: London Yearly Meeting, 1975), 485.

¹¹ Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 276.

¹² James Nayler and Licia Kuenning, ed. *Works of James Nayler, Volume 4* (Glenside PA: 2009), 3.

C. Integrity and generosity: Economic Justice

Anabaptists and Quakers have taken seriously Jesus's warnings about the dangers of wealth and the pursuit of money. They have been critical of the hard heartedness that leads the rich to cheat and exploit the poor and have tried to live in a different way. Individuals within both groups have become wealthy and this has sometimes hampered this commitment. However, they have practiced economic sharing, seeking to put their wealth to good use within society to meet the needs of others. This is reflected in the AMN Core Convictions 4 and 6. In the following passages, Menno Simons and James Nayer offer prophetic words of warning about unethical business practices and the economic injustice it creates.

The wicked merchants and retailers, together with all who are out to make money and to make their living that way, are so bent on accursed profit that they exclude God wholly from their hearts... They lie and swear; they use many vain words, falsify their wares to cheat people, and strip them of possessions; they sell, lend, and secure the needy at large profit and usury, never seriously reflecting or taking to heart that it is written, let no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter. 1 Thess. 4:6.

Menno Simons – *The True Christian Faith* (1541)¹³

God is against you, you covetous cruel oppressors who grind the faces of the poor and needy, taking your advantage of the necessities of the poor, falsifying the measures and using deceitful weights, speaking that by your commodities which is not true and so deceiving the simple, and hereby getting great estates in the world, laying house to house and land to land till there be no place for the poor; and when they are become poor through your deceits then you despise them and exalt yourselves above them...

James Nayler – *A Discovery of the First Wisdom* (1653)¹⁴

Stuart K. Masters (2025)

¹³ Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 242.

¹⁴ Nayler, *Works*, Vol. 1, 66-67.