

Taking Jesus Seriously

An Anabaptist Mennonite Network study course

Introduction

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'Taking Jesus Seriously' is one of a number of short courses that have been developed by the UK Anabaptist Mennonite Network.

In the UK and many other nations Christians are facing the challenges and opportunities of following Jesus in a changing culture, and churches are coming to terms with being on the margins rather than at the centre. Things look different from the margins!

In Europe the church has been at the centre of society for so long that we need help to look at things differently. One source of inspiration and guidance for churches on the margins are earlier marginal Christian groups, such as the Anabaptist movement, which for nearly 500 years has been exploring discipleship, lifestyle, mission and church life from the margins.

Growing numbers of Christians and churches (from many denominations) are drawing on the Anabaptist tradition and looking to the Anabaptist Mennonite Network for resources. As well as running conferences and study groups and publishing *Anabaptism Today*, the network has now developed some short courses.

Other courses now available are:

- After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins
- Becoming a Peace Church

Explaining the notes

The notes for each session contain a mixture of resources – passages from the Bible (in this course mainly taken from the Gospel of Matthew) to read, stories and insights from the Anabaptist tradition, questions to think about and practical exercises.

They can be used on your own, although they are designed for group study. There is quite a lot of information in the notes themselves and some extra reading and resources to go with them. You may decide to work through the whole of this or to use just some parts of the material provided. Some of the sessions can be split into sections and done in two or more sittings.

A number of symbols are used to indicate what is coming next:



This symbol means that there is something to read – either quietly on your own or as part of the group.



This symbol means that there is something to think about on your own or discuss with others.



This symbol means that the Anabaptist movement (or sometimes another radical group) has something to offer on this subject. Sometimes Anabaptist writers will be quoted; in other places Anabaptist ideas will be encountered.

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Session 1: Jesus at the Centre



Read *Hebrews 1:1-2*.

The claim of this unknown author – and the theme of the letter to the Hebrews – is that God has revealed himself to us in many ways but that in Jesus Christ he has provided the ultimate and definitive revelation. Jesus is the focal point, the centre, the one through whom we can most clearly understand God's character and purposes.

This does not mean that what God said previously is no longer relevant, nor that God no longer speaks to us in various ways – but it does mean that everything we think God may be saying to us is tested against the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

This means that followers of Jesus are committed to a *Jesus-centred* approach to life, to work, to church, to moral decisions, to priorities, to worship, to finance, to the Bible, to leadership – to everything.



Doesn't this sound rather obvious?
Aren't all Christians Jesus-centred?
What else might be at the centre?
What factors might push Jesus away from the centre?

1. Pushing Jesus to the margins



The early Anabaptists were not convinced that the churches in 16th century Europe were truly Jesus-centred. They were concerned that in practice other loyalties were sometimes at the centre and that Jesus had been pushed to the margins.

The Anabaptist movement in the five centuries since then has continued to raise awkward questions about whether the teaching of Jesus is really central to the way Christians and churches live. Anabaptists have especially been concerned about:

- The way the Old Testament has been used to justify practices that are inconsistent with what Jesus taught (e.g. warfare, swearing oaths, tithing).
- The way other parts of the New Testament have been used to support behaviour that does not square with the way Jesus lived according to the Gospels (e.g. unquestioning loyalty to the state, restricting the participation of women).
- The way church leaders have been willing to set aside Jesus' teaching in return for political support or social stability.
- The way church traditions, clever interpretations of the Bible and doctrinal statements have hindered Christians from listening to Jesus and taking him seriously.



Think again about what factors might push Jesus away from the centre.

Is the way you think about certain issues more influenced by your culture than by the gospel?

Is the way your church operates more influenced by its traditions than the teaching of Jesus?

Are there subjects on which you are guided by the Old Testament rather than the New Testament?

Do you pay more attention to Paul's teaching than to the teaching of Jesus?



Read *Matthew 15:1-11*.

Here, as in many other places in the Gospels, Jesus challenges his contemporaries to obey God rather than following their human rules and customs. He angers the Pharisees as he claims the right to challenge Old Testament practices (or at least the ways these were being interpreted) and teach new ways of living.

'Jesus at the centre' means that we do not allow his example, lifestyle and teaching to be pushed to one side by our traditions, the way we interpret the Bible, or any other factors.

2. Starting with Jesus

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One of the distinctive things about the Anabaptist movement is that it has chosen to *begin* with Jesus' teaching and example on all kinds of issues and *then* to interpret other Bible passages on these issues in ways that do not conflict with what Jesus said and did. Here are four examples from the early years of the movement:

(1) Leonard Schiemer (former Franciscan, who became an Anabaptist in 1527 and was executed in 1528 in the Tyrol): 'You must know that God spoke to the Jews through Moses and the prophets in a hidden manner. But when Christ himself came, he and his apostles illuminated all things with a much clearer understanding.'

(2) Hans Pfistermeyer (Swiss Anabaptist leader in the late 1520s): 'What Christ has explained and helped us to understand, I will adhere to, since it is the will of his heavenly Father. I accept the Old Testament wherever it points to Christ. However, Christ came with a more exalted and perfect teaching.'

(3) Menno Simons (major Anabaptist leader and writer in the Netherlands from 1536) urged that both Testaments should be 'rightly explained according to the intent of Jesus Christ and His holy apostles.' In his major work, *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, Menno explained that the 'intent of Jesus Christ' meant the 'Spirit, Word, counsel, admonition, and usage of Christ. What these allow we are free to do, but what He forbids we are not free to do. To this all true Christians should conform, and not to doubtful histories and obscure passages from which we can draw nothing certain and which teach the very opposite of what the Lord's apostles publicly taught.'

(4) Dirk Phillips (colleague of Menno in the Netherlands and North Germany until 1568): 'Jesus with his doctrine, life and example is our Teacher, Leader and Guide; him we must hear and follow.'

Many of the disagreements between the Anabaptists and their persecutors resulted from this practice of starting with the teaching of Jesus. On various subjects – from war and wealth to the nature of the church and the kingdom of God – the Anabaptists who started with Jesus reached radically different conclusions from their contemporaries who did not start with Jesus in the same way.



Choose one of the following topics and explore the Bible's teaching on it. Start with the teachings of Jesus and then consider other Bible passages in the light of this.

- Killing
- Sharing resources
- Telling the truth
- Leadership
- Women
- Children

Now choose another topic and start with the teaching of the Old Testament and other parts of the New Testament before considering anything Jesus said on this topic.

Do you notice any differences in the conclusions you reach or the way you interpret the various Bible passages?



Read *John 5:39-40*.

It is well known that you can prove almost anything from the Bible if you misinterpret it carefully! And all kinds of pressures, fears, human customs and prejudices can result in us misinterpreting the Bible or ignoring its teaching. No doubt the life, example and

teaching of Jesus can also be misinterpreted – but this takes more work. Starting with Jesus – and keeping Jesus at the centre – helps us avoid many of the problems and keeps us on track as his followers.

‘Jesus at the centre’ means that Jesus is the centre of the Bible, the one to whom all the Scriptures point, the one through whom all the Scriptures must be interpreted. We do not start elsewhere and then try to fit the teaching of Jesus in (or ignore him if this is too awkward). We start with Jesus and interpret everything else in the light of what he models and teaches.

This approach affects all kinds of issues. It profoundly challenges the way we worship, evangelise, work, treat creation, run our churches, get involved in society, exercise power and every other area of life.

Starting with Jesus, learning from the way he lived, and listening carefully to his teaching – this seems so obviously what it means to follow Jesus.



So why have we not always done this?

Why have we allowed other ideas, teaching and models to take centre-stage and push Jesus to the margins?

When did Old Testament rules and practices become more important to us than the teachings of Jesus?

When did the doctrinal teaching of the Epistles take over from the Gospel stories of Jesus?

3. The church at the centre

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The Anabaptist movement has answered this by pointing to the major changes that took place in the 4th century when the emperor adopted Christianity and brought the church in from the margins to the centre.

Some have seen this as a glorious period when, after 300 years as an illegal fringe movement, the church triumphed over paganism and captured Europe.

Others, including Anabaptists, have concluded that this was achieved through compromise and that the major price that had to be paid for the church to move from the margins to the centre was that Jesus had to move from the centre to the margins.

The teachings of Jesus did not fit very well into this new situation where the church was powerful, wealthy and able to dominate society. The dangerous memory of what Jesus said and did, his dealings with political and religious authorities, his championing of the poor and criticism of injustice: these elements were not helpful in a situation where church leaders were becoming politicians and supporters of the status quo. Somehow, the connection between the radical Jesus and 4th-century Christianity had to be loosened.

If you compare various documents at the beginning of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century you can detect this change of focus. In the hymns the churches sung, in the sermons preached, in the teaching given to new believers, as well as in theological works, Jesus and his disturbing teaching are given less and less attention.

The Jesus-centred approach of the New Testament writers and the early churches is replaced by a theological system in which the life of Jesus seems to be of marginal importance. He is still honoured as the Saviour and the risen Lord, but the human Jesus (his example, lifestyle, teachings and relationships) is quietly ignored. He just did not fit the new arrangement; he was too awkward, too challenging, too threatening.



During the 4th and 5th centuries, the historic creeds were written as attempts were made to summarise what Christians believed about the fundamental matters of faith. These creeds have had tremendous influence on the way in which Christians have thought about God, Jesus, the church and many other matters. It is worth asking, though: How central is Jesus in these?

Consider the Nicene Creed (in the appendix) as an example. This creed says quite a bit about Jesus, but what it does not say is just as important.

The creed affirms that Jesus is both divine and human but manages to ignore everything important about his human life, moving straight from his birth to his death! Where are his miracles, his relationships, his example, his teachings and his lifestyle? As in so many other 4th-century documents, where is Jesus himself?

The Jesus in whom the churches expressed their faith as they repeated the creeds was an exalted figure, a heavenly counterpart of the Christian emperor, remote and powerful, but no longer challenging or disturbing the status quo. And this has left a lasting legacy in European Christianity.

But the church is no longer at the centre. We are now once more on the margins. Perhaps this gives us an opportunity to discover again what it means for Jesus to be at the centre.

4. Jesus at the centre



Read *Matthew 4:18-20*.

The first disciples responded to a call to follow Jesus, and this meant that he became central to their lives. Anabaptists have consistently taught that the Christian life is all about ‘following’ Jesus and that Jesus is central to a life of discipleship. Many other Christians have realised this too, of course, but all too often Jesus has been pushed to the margins. The Anabaptist movement has helped many to recognise this and rediscover what it means for Jesus to be central.

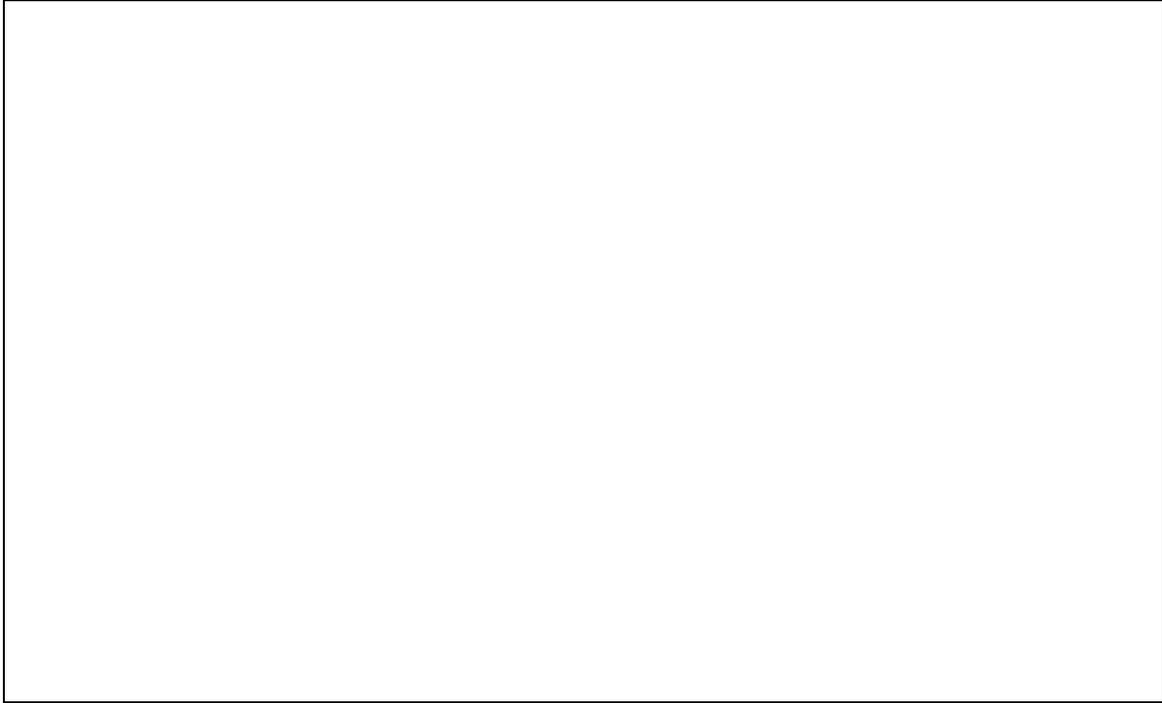
‘Jesus at the centre’ does not mean that we focus on God the Son at the expense of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The Anabaptists spoke often of their experience of the Holy Spirit and acknowledged their need of God’s grace if they were to follow Jesus and serve God faithfully.

But Jesus-centredness means that:

- Jesus is at the centre of Christianity.
- The human life of Jesus is vital and cannot be ignored.
- Jesus is our model, our pioneer, our leader, our teacher, our example – as well as our redeemer.
- Jesus was truly human and his humanity matters.
- Jesus promised the gift of the Spirit to empower us to follow him.
- The awkward teachings of Jesus are relevant and authoritative in every area of life – in politics as much as in family life, in social policy as well as church life, in economics as well as personal morality.
- The Sermon on the Mount is meant to be lived, not just admired.
- Christians are to take Jesus seriously.



Look back at the Nicene Creed. Can you write a new paragraph that expresses what you believe about the human life, example and teaching of Jesus?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their response to the question above.

Session 2: Christians or Mounties?

1. Admiring or obeying?



Read *Matthew 7:24-27*.

At the end of the last session it was suggested that taking Jesus seriously means that the Sermon on the Mount is to be lived, not just admired. That is how the sermon naturally reads: Jesus identifying the values of his upside-down kingdom and encouraging his disciples to think creatively about how to work these out in practice.

- Insisting he has come to fulfil the law and prophets rather than abolishing these (*Matthew 5:17*), he compares his teaching with what they had previously understood to be God's will for human behaviour.
- He commends those who will practise his commands as well as teaching them (*5:19*), and calls for an even more determined obedience than that of the Pharisees (*5:20*).
- His teaching is not a collection of philosophical ideas but down-to-earth examples of how to respond to different situations (*5:21-48*).
- His instructions about how to give, pray and fast assume action rather than endless discussion about what he meant (*6:1-18*).
- He encourages his hearers to judge a tree by its fruit – by what it produces (*7:15-20*).
- He warns those who call him 'Lord' but don't obey him or truly know him (*7:21-23*).
- He tells the story of the houses built on rock or sand to illustrate the folly of hearing this sermon but not putting it into practice (*7:24-27*).

But, in spite of this very practical emphasis, throughout the centuries there have been many who felt that it was simply not do-able and who made various attempts to interpret the sermon in other ways. Many people today, who have no church connections, admire what they know of the Sermon on the Mount. Some of its phrases (e.g. turn the other cheek, go the second mile) have found their way into common usage – even if they are used in ways that seem rather different from what Jesus intended. But living in this way rather than just admiring it is another matter!



Think about books you have read or sermons you have heard on the Sermon on the Mount. You might have studied it together in a small group. Or you may have read through it yourself and tried to understand what Jesus meant.

Have you been encouraged to take it seriously?

Or have you felt some of it at least is unrealistic?

Have you encountered ways of explaining why it does not really mean what it seems to?

Look through the Sermon on the Mount again, jotting down any part of it that you feel may have been explained away or watered down.

2. Ways round the Sermon on the Mount

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Protest or renewal movements over the centuries (such as the Waldensians in France and Lollards in England) often objected to this. They criticised the churches for not taking Jesus seriously and for not encouraging people to practise what he said in this sermon.

The Anabaptist movement took up this concern. They too felt that on all kinds of issues their contemporaries seemed to be guided by common sense, reason, the traditions of the church, Old Testament teaching or other principles – but not by the Sermon on the Mount! In the next session we will explore two of these issues in more detail: handling conflict and dealing with economic resources.

Writing from the Anabaptist tradition, Donald Kraybill in *The Upside-Down Kingdom* identifies several ways of avoiding the challenge of Jesus' teaching in this sermon. This book is well worth buying and reading. Here are his headings:

- 'Jesus is culturally bound' – we cannot apply his teaching to our more complex society
- 'Jesus goofed on the timing' – his teaching was intended only for the short period before he expected the end of the world to arrive
- 'Ponder the spiritual meaning' – Jesus was teaching spiritual truths, not giving guidance for social behaviour
- 'Only change your character' – the sermon encourages inner personal renewal rather than new ways of living in the world

When did the Sermon on the Mount begin to be treated in this way? It is likely that quite soon questions were raised about how to understand its challenging teaching. There were probably some of those who heard Jesus who thought his teaching was unrealistic. There were certainly occasions when his disciples were taken aback by what he said and asked if it was really possible to live in this way.



Read *Matthew 19:8-12, 21-26*.

But it was not until the 4th century that the church began officially to handle the Sermon on the Mount in these ways. The problem was that, after the conversion of Constantine, when the church moved from the margins to the centre, it was suddenly confronted with all kinds of new challenges and opportunities.

- It was no longer a powerless minority with a prophetic voice from the margins but a powerful institution at the centre of society.
- Its ranks had been swelled by thousands of people who had not been taught the ways of Jesus and who wanted to be respectable rather than radical.
- The church was now involved in decisions about the economy, social policy, politics and military strategy.
- The teachings of Jesus seemed to offer little or no guidance on this situation, or at least it was not obvious how they applied.
- In fact, the Sermon on the Mount now seemed unrealistic and idealistic!

Gradually church leaders, struggling to adapt to this new world, chose to draw from other parts of the Bible rather than the teachings of Jesus and to find ways to reinterpret the Sermon on the Mount.

The Old Testament was especially useful. After all, the nation of Israel seemed to have many similarities to the christianised Roman Empire: both had borders to defend, armies to run, economic policies to determine, social institutions to maintain and a cultural heritage to value. Both recognised the ultimate government of God, exercised through his chosen and anointed leaders.

Apparently, Jesus had not envisaged the triumph of Christianity and so had provided no guidelines for running a state religion. Furthermore, some of Jesus' teaching was difficult to apply in this new situation:

- How did a Christian emperor respond to the call to 'love your enemies'?
- How could a Christian politician 'take no thought for tomorrow'?

The Sermon on the Mount presented major problems: how was it now to be understood and applied? Over the years several approaches became popular:

- 'Jesus said these things to show us how far short our lives fall of perfection, not to challenge us to live this way, but so that we recognise how much we need God's grace and forgiveness and come to God for this.'
- 'This teaching is designed only for special people— monks and saints might live this way, but it is unrealistic for most Christians.'
- 'What Jesus is describing here is not life on earth but life in heaven, when the kingdom of God has fully come.'
- 'Christians live in two worlds: in our private lives we are to love our enemies and take no thought for tomorrow, but in the public sphere (politics, business, social involvement) we cannot follow such principles.'



In a changing culture, where the church was at the centre and felt responsible for making sure history turned out the way it should, these strategies are understandable. It was easier for marginal groups, like the Anabaptists, without access to power to call for obedience to the Sermon on the Mount. Rather like the radical policies proposed by minority parties fighting elections they have no hope of winning!

But, though these approaches may be understandable, are they right?
Is this what Jesus meant?
Or do they hinder us from taking him seriously?

3. Taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously



Read *Matthew 5:33-37; 6:19-24*.

A

The Anabaptists – and other radical movements – challenged the official line on how the Sermon on the Mount should be interpreted. Amazed at the ways Jesus’ teaching seemed to be ignored or explained away, they talked and prayed together about what he had said and wrestled with how to live this out. Here are two examples:

In 1527, several Swiss Anabaptist leaders met at Schleithem to discuss a number of crucial issues and to offer guidance on these to the emerging Anabaptist movement. One of these issues was whether it was permitted for Christians to swear oaths.

Oaths were used not only to encourage truth telling in the courts but also to bind citizens to be loyal to their cities or countries and to fight in their defence if war broke out. Oaths were very important in 16th-century Europe. Refusing to swear an oath struck at the heart of society and carried severe penalties.

The leaders knew the official church position was that swearing oaths was legitimate, but they rejected this on the grounds that Jesus taught otherwise in the Sermon on the Mount. The *Schleithem Confession* (a famous Anabaptist document) records their argument:

‘We have been united as follows concerning the oath. The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarrelling or making promises. In the law it is commanded that it should be done only in the name of God, truthfully and not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the law, forbids his followers all swearing, whether true or false; neither by heaven nor by earth, neither by Jerusalem nor by our head; and that for the reason which he goes on to give: “For you cannot make one hair white or black.” You see, thereby all swearing is forbidden. We cannot perform what is promised in swearing, for we are unable to change the smallest part of ourselves ... He says, your speech or your word shall be yes and no, so that no one might understand that he had permitted it. Christ is simply yes and no, and all who seek him simply will understand his word.’

The earlier Waldensian movement began when a French businessman read the Gospels for himself and realised that Jesus was calling him to take discipleship seriously in the area of economics. The account of the conversion of Valdès in the *Chronicle of Laon* reads as follows:

‘At about this time, in 1173, there was a citizen of Lyons named Valdès, who had made a great deal of money by the evil means of usury. One Sunday he lingered by a crowd that had gathered round a *jongleur* [minstrel], and was much struck by his words. He took him home with him, and listened carefully to his story of how St Alexis had died a holy death in his father’s house. Next morning Valdès hastened to the schools of theology to seek advice about his soul. When he had been told of the many ways of coming to God he asked the master whether any of them was more sure and reliable than the rest. The master quoted to him the words of the Lord, “If thou wilt be perfect go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.”

‘Valdès returned to his wife and gave her the choice between having all his movable wealth or his property in land and water, woods, meadows, fields, houses, rents, vineyards, mills and ovens. She was very upset at having to do this and chose the property. From his movable wealth he returned what he had acquired wrongly, conferred a large portion on his two daughters, whom he placed in the order of Fontevrault without his wife’s knowledge, and gave a still larger amount to the poor. At this time a terrible famine was raging through Gaul and Germany. For three days a week, from Whitsun to St Peter-in-chains Valdès generously distributed bread, soup and meat to anyone who came to him. On the Assumption of the Virgin he scattered money among the poor in the streets saying, “You cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon.” The people around thought that he had gone out of his senses. Then he stood up on a high piece of ground and said, “Friends and fellow-citizens, I am not mad as you think. I have avenged myself on the enemies who enslaved me when I cared more for money than for God, and served the creature more faithfully than the creator. I know that many of you disapprove of my having acted so publicly. I have done so both for my own sake and for yours: for my sake, because anybody who sees me with money in future will be able to say that I am mad; for your sake, so that you may learn to place your hopes in God and not in wealth.”’

Quoting from the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 6:24*), Valdès committed himself to a life of voluntary poverty, service to the poor and itinerant preaching. His followers were called the ‘Poor in Spirit’, another phrase from the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5:3*).



How do you react to these examples from the 12th and 16th centuries?
Do you agree with these responses to the Sermon on the Mount?
What relevance might Jesus' teaching on swearing oaths and not serving Mammon have in the 21st century?

4. Christians or Mounties?

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The Waldensian and Anabaptist movements were pioneers, searching for new ways of living as disciples and forming communities who took Jesus seriously. Sometimes they too seem to have wandered off-track. For example:

- Sometimes they tried to apply things literally without recognising the cultural elements – 12th- or 16th-century Europe was different from 1st-century Palestine
- Sometimes they treated the Sermon on the Mount as a list of rules rather than an invitation to imaginative discipleship
- Sometimes they bought into the separation between public and private worlds and were interested only in personal behaviour rather than social issues

But they do offer an alternative to the official approach. They invite us to look again at the Sermon on the Mount and to ask what Jesus really meant. They challenge us to take him seriously, to think carefully and imaginatively about how this teaching might offer an attractive alternative to normal ways of behaving in our culture.



The term 'Christian' has become problematic in our culture. What does it really mean?

It has been suggested (probably not too seriously) that followers of Jesus should instead be known as 'Mounties'. Not the famous Canadian police service, but 'Sermon-on-the-Mounties' – those who take seriously what Jesus taught and live distinctively.

Do you think this might catch on?

Or can you suggest an alternative?

Session 3: Is there another option?

The idea that as followers of Jesus we should be taking him seriously, listening to his teaching, living rather than admiring the Sermon on the Mount, sounds rather obvious when you think about it. But is this realistic? In this session we will look at two examples of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, using these as test cases. Can we take seriously what Jesus said about responding to oppression and dealing with our finances? We live in a world that is plagued by violent retaliation and economic injustice. Does Jesus' teaching offer creative alternatives? If so, what would our churches look like, and what might they offer to others, if we took him seriously?

1. Responding to oppression



Read *Matthew 5:38-41*

As so often in his teaching, Jesus here does not lay down rules of conduct but invites his disciples to imagine alternative ways of responding in situations. Jesus gives them three scenarios where they might encounter oppression and asks them:

- Someone strikes you on the right cheek – how do you respond?
- Someone sues you for your clothing – how do you respond?
- Someone forces you to go a mile – how do you respond?

During the centuries when the church was at the centre of society and the radical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount was often watered down, these questions were answered in ways that supported the status quo and did little or nothing to protect the powerless from abuse. Two phrases – ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘go the second mile’ – have entered the language of our culture and both mean ‘don’t object’, ‘be passive’, ‘submit’.

Conventional responses to conflict, violence or oppressive treatment are to fight back or suffer passively – ‘fight or flight’. Conventional wisdom suggests that there are no other options and that the Sermon on the Mount is either unrealistic (because doing nothing will let oppressors win) or applicable only in private conflicts (producing some kind of doormat Christianity that is unappealing and uncreative).



But can Jesus really have meant this?

Is this interpretation consistent with how he himself responded to injustice?

How does it fit with the way he threw the traders out of the temple (*John 2:14-16*)?

Why would anyone bother crucifying someone who taught such passive behaviour?

What other ways of interpreting these scenarios make better sense?

A

From early in their history, Anabaptists became convinced that responding violently to oppression was not legitimate for followers of Jesus. They pondered this passage from the Sermon on the Mount and concluded that it applied equally to personal and social contexts, and that the ‘fight’ option was not acceptable.

Rejecting conventional wisdom about self-defence and participation in warfare, they were persecuted not only as heretics but also as traitors, who would allow their homelands to be invaded and overrun. Their commitment to non-violence was seen as unrealistic and undermining.

For many centuries official church policy has been that warfare is justified under certain conditions (the ‘Just War’ theory). Although the criteria, if applied strictly, are very demanding and should have prevented much warring, in practice they are not taken seriously and national interest dominates the discussion. The ‘fight’ option is adopted as the normal response, and the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted as applying only to private disputes. Church leaders have generally supported state decisions to go to war, Christians have enlisted in the armies, and wars have been fought on the grounds that there is ‘no alternative’ except passivity and allowing oppressors to triumph.

The Anabaptist movement has offered an alternative perspective on conflict, warfare and responding to oppression. Arguing that peace is at the heart of the gospel and that Jesus calls his followers to non-violent discipleship, Anabaptists (like the Quakers later) have taught pacifism and have attempted to develop a Peace Church tradition.

Whatever Jesus may have meant in Matthew 5, they argued, he certainly outlawed the ‘fight’ option and this applies to public and well as private conflicts.

Here are some explanations of this passage in Matthew 5 from early Anabaptist writers:

(1) Schleitheim Confession 1527 (Article 4): ‘Therefore there will also unquestionably fall from us the unchristian, devilish weapons of force – such as sword, armour, and the like, and all their use [either] for friends or against one’s enemies – by virtue of the word of Christ [Matt. 5:39]: Resist not [him that is] evil.’

(2) Menno Simons (major Anabaptist leader and writer in the Netherlands from 1536): ‘Peter was commanded to sheathe his sword. All Christians are commanded to love their enemies; to do good unto those who abuse and persecute them; to give the mantle when the cloak is taken, the other cheek when one is struck. Tell me, how can a Christian defend scripturally retaliation, rebellion, war, striking, slaying, torturing, stealing, robbing and plundering and burning cities, and conquering countries?’

(3) Pilgram Marpeck (important Anabaptist leader/writer in Strasburg and Augsburg until 1556): ‘Throughout the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, there is a joyful witness to, and fulfilment of, the power of the Spirit in the heart which freely gives love in Christ; we behave toward others in love and patience, and are ready to surrender our own rights in favour of the neighbour and to suffer injustice. If anyone wants to sue us for our cloak, we are to give him the coat as well. All sin is done outside of the love of God and the neighbour. Love is the New Testament command of Christ. All law, in both the Old and New Testaments, consists in love from a pure heart.’

(4) Peter Riedeman (important Hutterite leader in Moravia until 1556): ‘Now, therefore, Christ desires that we should act even as he did, so he commands us, saying, “It hath been said to the men of old, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn and offer to him the other also.” Here it is clearly to be seen that one ought neither to avenge oneself nor to go to war, but rather offer his back to the strikers and his cheeks to them that pluck off the hair – that is, suffer with patience and wait upon God, who is righteous, and who will repay it.’



But isn’t this the ‘flight’ option – passive submission to oppression?

Isn’t pacifism the same as passivism?

Is there no other option?

What was Jesus really teaching here?

The Anabaptist tradition has sometimes fallen into passivity, but a commitment to peace need not – and should not – be passive.

Contemporary Anabaptists have pioneered various non-violent responses to conflict, injustice and oppression. These include:

- Serving on peace missions that intervene non-violently in situations of conflict
- Developing reconciliation programmes to bring victims and offenders together
- Modelling constructive ways of working through congregational conflict
- Advocating creative alternatives in penal theory and the criminal justice system

Information about these initiatives is included in the appendix.



Read again *Matthew 5:38-41*

So what does this passage mean? If it doesn't endorse the conventional options of 'fight' or 'flight', how are we to understand it?

A

Walter Wink, an American commentator who has thought deeply about this passage and whose interpretation has won widespread support, may not be a historic Anabaptist, but his writings draw on Anabaptist authors. He argues that Jesus is encouraging his disciples to consider alternative responses to oppression and to think creatively about non-violent reactions. He sets out his case at length in his book *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress Press, 1992). He has also summarised his interpretation in an article reflecting on the responses to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. Part of this article is included in the appendix. In the aftermath of that attack, the conventional 'fight or flight' argument was used frequently. Perhaps Jesus invites his disciples today too to consider creative alternatives.



Read the article by Walter Wink. If you can get hold of it, you could also read *Engaging the Powers* (especially pages 175-193). Contemporary Anabaptist interpreters agree with their forebears that the 'fight' option is wrong, but some, like Wink, have offered other options for understanding this passage:

(1) Donald Kraybill (*The Upside-Down Kingdom*): 'It's fair play to retaliate if someone has deliberately hurt us. In fact, we can go beyond an eye for an eye. If people poke out one of our eyes, we may poke out both of theirs. This negative reciprocity undergirds the spectrum of human behaviour from sibling pinches to international war. In brief, if persons take advantage of me, I may take advantage of them ... In upside-down fashion, Jesus overturns the negative rule of reciprocity. His words and actions are forthright. There can be no question. Jesus suspends the negative as well as the positive side of the norm. (Matt. 5:38-44 in text) Love our enemies? They're the one category of people that the norm of reciprocity *allows* us to hate. To love our enemies is the ultimate flip-flop, for it demolishes the norm of reciprocity ... Matthew (5:39) tells us to turn the other cheek if someone strikes us. A blow on the right cheek had special significance in Jewish culture. It symbolized ultimate contempt. Its punishment was a fine equivalent to a year's wages. In other words, Jesus forbids his disciples to retaliate even in the face of the most abusive insult. In calling for enemy love, Jesus clashes with the Essenes, the rebels, and the Pharisees. The patriotic rebels, as we've seen, didn't hesitate to kill enemies. The Essenes, living in isolated Dead Sea communities, thought it was their righteous duty to hate sinners. Jewish law, taught by the Pharisees, said it wasn't necessary to love an enemy. Jesus reverses these typical situations to evil. Revenge and retaliation are obsolete in the new kingdom.'

(2) Ronald Sider (*Christ and Violence*): 'I am not convinced ... that Jesus was advocating a passive, resigned attitude toward oppressors. Certainly nothing in the text suggests that Jesus approved the unfair, insulting slap on the cheek or the demand for forced labor. But Jesus' response was to call on the oppressed to take command of their situation in a way that transcended the old age's normal categories of friends and enemies ... If Matthew 5:39 means that all forms of resistance to evil are forbidden, then Jesus contradicted His own teaching. Jesus certainly did not kill the money changers. Indeed, I doubt that He even used His whip on them. But He certainly resisted their evil in a dramatic act of civil disobedience ... What then does Matthew 5:39 mean? It means two very radical things: (1) that one should not resist evil persons by exacting equal damages for injury suffered (i.e., an eye for an eye); and (2) that one should not respond to an evil person by placing him in the category of enemy. Indeed, one should love one's enemies, even at great personal cost. The good of the other person, not one's own needs or rights, are decisive.'

(3) John Howard Yoder (*The Original Revolution*): 'Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also' (Mt. 5:39, RSV). This is the origin of the label "nonresistance." The term is stronger and more precise than "nonviolence"; for one can hate or despise, conquer and crush another without the use of outward violence. But the term is confusing as well. It has been interpreted – by those who reject the idea – to mean a weak acceptance of the intentions of the evil one, resignation to his evil goals. This the text does not call for. The services to be rendered to the one who coerces us – carrying his burden a second mile, giving beyond the coat and cloak – are to his person, not to his purposes. The "resistance" which we renounce is a response in kind, returning evil for evil. But the alternative is not complicity in his designs. The alternative is creative concern for the person who is bent on evil, coupled with the refusal of his goals.'



How do you respond to this interpretation?

Does it ring true?

What alternatives to the bombing of Afghanistan might have been considered?

Are there situations you know where a 'third way' might be imagined?

The non-violent responses Jesus describes are not safe alternatives – they might result in further suffering. But they inspire our imagination. How might we as his disciples today act in such ways? Here is a true story of how one young Christian, who encountered this interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, put it into practice the following day:

Tony was tremendously encouraged by this teaching as he faced a situation at work, which was extremely difficult. His boss was tremendously aggressive to all the members of his staff. His aggression and bullying were such that each morning he worked his way around each member of the staff, facing them up, shaking them aggressively by the hand and staring them out. This pattern of behaviour had been going on for quite a period of time and Tony was particularly upset by it. He had tried various methods to avoid his boss in the morning but none of them had succeeded.

On the day after he heard this teaching he waited for his boss to arrive. His boss began the ritual of working his way around the staff and, as he did, Tony kept saying to himself 'There is another way, there is another way, there is another way' – while at the same time wondering what on earth the other way was. Eventually his boss arrived at his side. Tony stood there with his hands at his side, endeavouring to avoid the handshake. Then suddenly it happened. Tony lent forward, taking his boss by the collar, pulled him to him and kissed him on the lips. There was total silence in the office for what seemed to Tony to be 30 seconds and then the whole place erupted in laughter and cheers. The whole situation had been broken and his boss changed his morning routine.

This was a risky response – non-violent but certainly not passive. Are there situations you face in which Jesus invites you to respond creatively? Are there situations of oppression, injustice and conflict in the world where new and imaginative responses might produce a desperately needed breakthrough?



Read *Matthew 5:43-48*

Reading on into the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus calls his followers to practise enemy-love, it would be good to reflect (quietly or with others) on what this passage means. Who are our enemies? How widely does this apply? What might loving them mean in practice? Does this call for a cowardly and passive response or a creative and courageous initiative?

A

The story of Anabaptist martyr Dirk Willems has been told over and over again within the Anabaptist movement. Dirk was a member of a Christian community that read the Sermon on the Mount and pondered what enemy loving meant. One day Dirk had an opportunity to find out.

Dirk was a young man who lived in the Netherlands, in the town of Asperen. As a teenager he met some Anabaptists. Their vision of Christian discipleship gripped his imagination, and he was baptised in the neighbouring city of Rotterdam. Returning to Asperen, he (according to legal documents) ‘in his house harboured and admitted secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines’. That is, Dirk took part in an illegal house church where he and others taught a way of being Christian that was unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church.

Dirk was arrested and imprisoned. But he managed to escape from the prison. He climbed out of a window and clambered down a rope made of knotted cloths; he ran for safety. It was early spring. He ran across a still-frozen pond pursued closely by a prison guard. Dirk had been living on a prison diet and he made it across the cracking ice, but the guard broke through. The guard cried out in terror, ‘Save me!’ Hearing the desperate plea, Dirk turned back. He reached across the ice and rescued his pursuer. The guard, dripping wet and freezing cold, promptly re-arrested Dirk at the insistence of the magistrate and saw to his confinement in a more secure prison – the tower of the Asperen parish church.

This time there was no escape. Dirk was tried for heresy and condemned to be burned to death. As he was being burned, the wind blew the fire away from his upper body, so he died slowly. People in the neighbouring town heard him cry out as he died, 70 times: ‘O Lord, my God.’ Dirk’s execution was to be a deterrent, to serve as ‘an example to others.’



An engraving of the decisive moment in Dirk's story has appeared in more than 130 publications. Dirk's executioners meant his death to be a deterrent example. But in a way unimagined by his enemies, Dirk's life and his death have truly served as an example to others. His story poses the questions of costly enemy-love. Why did Dirk turn back? Was it right for him to do so? Would I have done the same?

2. Dealing with finance



Read *Matthew 6:19-34*

Jesus spoke frequently about economic issues – wealth and poverty, paying taxes, giving support to those in need, unjust business practices, hoarding resources and much else. In his encounters with Zacchaeus and the unnamed rich young ruler he challenged these men to change the way they dealt with their finances – one responded enthusiastically, the other negatively. In his encounters with the religious leaders he challenged their economic practices and oppression of the poor.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites his followers to a way of living that involves a basic choice between serving God and serving Mammon (the power of money). For many years the churches that sprang up on the margins of the Roman Empire, as they explored life together in Christian communities, pondered his teaching and found creative and radical ways to challenge the influence of Mammon in their lives and to demonstrate a new way of living that depended on the provision of God.

The early chapters of Acts describe a community where resources were shared freely and generously, and where the needs of the poor were met. This example inspired generations of Christians to find similar and fresh ways of putting into practice Jesus' teaching on the handling of their finances. Rather than adopting a rule-based approach like tithing, these early Christians responded imaginatively and sacrificially to the needs around them.



What does this passage in the Sermon on the Mount teach about our attitude to finance?
What practices does it question or challenge?
How has this teaching been diluted or misinterpreted?
What relevance does it have in a materialistic and consumerist culture?

Resisting the powerful tug of Mammon, and continuing to live in counter-cultural ways was a struggle for the churches as time went by. The story of the first church in Jerusalem was still used to remind and challenge later generations. By the 3rd century, however, new attitudes to wealth and new approaches to giving and sharing were gaining ground in the churches. Radical generosity and a deep commitment to sharing resources within and beyond the Christian community were still evident, but the church was also struggling to come to terms with the influx of rich converts who were reticent about adopting such community practices.

In the early years the trickle of wealthy converts were urged to take seriously Jesus' teaching and to give away most of their possessions. The author of the *Shepherd of Hermas (Third Vision 6.5–71)* was clear that rich people could only be fitted into the church once they had stripped themselves of their wealth and given it to poorer brothers and sisters: 'When wealth, which today is their gladness, is trimmed from them, then will they become apt for God. For, just as a round stone cannot become square without being trimmed, so neither can the rich of this world become suitable for God unless their wealth be trimmed from them.'

But as the flow of rich converts into the churches increased in the 3rd century, such expectations were relaxed and church leaders began to teach that rich people need not give away their wealth. When Constantine professed conversion, the influx of rich and powerful converts became a flood. Ideas that had been voiced before in the churches now came into their own as church leaders struggled to come to terms with the end of persecution and the union of church and state. Theologians raided the Old Testament and various secular philosophies to develop a new system that would be acceptable in a much broader church. Among the main components of this system were:

- It was no longer a person's actual wealth that mattered but their attitude towards it: wealth could be retained provided one did not feel bound by it;
- Giving was no longer motivated primarily by concern for the poor but by a concern about one's own soul: the spiritual rewards available to givers were emphasised over the material needs of recipients;
- Giving to others was presented as a good investment: what had previously meant living more simply was now seen as likely to result in God increasing one's wealth;
- The concept of *koinonia* (communal sharing) was replaced by almsgiving, and care for the poor was now regarded as an expression of charity rather than justice;
- The maintenance of church buildings and providing appropriate financial support for church leaders took precedence: anything left over could still be given to the poor;

- Some church leaders began to advocate tithing rather than taking seriously the teaching of Jesus on economics.



Are these ways of thinking about finance familiar to you?
 Do you know churches that teach these things?
 Do they challenge the power of Mammon or injustice in our society?
 What would it mean to take Jesus seriously on this subject?

A

The Anabaptist approach to economic issues was almost as threatening to the authorities as their refusal to participate in war. Although the various Anabaptist groups operated in different ways in relation to finance, they all challenged prevailing values and practices and were seen as idealists and troublemakers.

- Some Anabaptists had previously been involved in anti-tithe protests
- Some questioned the validity of private property
- Many criticized the wealth of the state churches and the corrupting influence of wealth on spirituality
- Some groups operated with a common purse and practised community of goods (see the extract from Peter Walpot in the appendix as an example of an argument for this)
- Most retained personal ownership, but all taught that their possessions were not their own but were available to those in need

The *Congregational Order* of 1527 urged a return to the example of the church in Acts: ‘Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation, none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need, and as in the apostles’ time permit no brother to be in need.’

Even though there were rarely any Anabaptists in England, this radical stance on finance so worried the Church of England that one of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* that established the principles on which the church operated explicitly rejected Anabaptist economic practice and asserted the principle of almsgiving instead. Article 38 reads: ‘The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast; notwithstanding every man ought of such things as he possesseth liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.’



Read *Acts 2–4*.



To what extent does the way the church in Jerusalem handled their finances follow the teaching of Jesus?

Were some Anabaptists right in believing these chapters teach common purse living?
What relevance has this model for Christians today?



Read again *Matthew 6:19-34*

In what ways is this teaching relevant to contemporary society? Are there ways in which Christians, by taking Jesus seriously, can model and advocate an attractive alternative to the values of Mammon in our culture?

In this session we have looked at just two of the many subjects Jesus explores in the Sermon on the Mount. But these subjects relate to basic human concerns for protection and provision. The Anabaptist tradition has wrestled with these concerns and attempted to take seriously what Jesus taught. It has helped many Christians to look anew at this teaching, to question conventional interpretations and to imagine fresh ways of living that are good news for their churches and offer resources for a culture that is struggling with these issues. Hopefully your imagination has also been sparked. Maybe there are further options than the ones we are familiar with?

Session 4: The Good News of Jesus

Let's pause a moment as we start the final session and recall the journey so far. We have reached the crucial point of all sermons, studies and discussions: so what? How is this relevant to life today? What are the implications?

What have been the main signposts on the route to this point?

- Jesus as the centre of our Christian faith is not as obvious as it sounds.
- Many attitudes and practices are justified as biblical that are not Christian.
- Starting with Jesus makes a difference to how we read the Bible.
- When the church came to the centre, Jesus was pushed to the margins.
- The Sermon on the Mount has often been admired rather than lived.
- Protest movements have kept alive a more radical vision of following Jesus.
- The term 'Christian' has been debased – perhaps we need a new term.
- Taking Jesus seriously is a call to creativity and courage.
- Responding to oppression and handling finance are useful test cases.

In this session we will think about some of the ways in which taking Jesus seriously can help us live as his followers, build Christian communities and share our faith with others.

1. The church in exile



Read *Jeremiah 29:1-14*.

This chapter contains a letter from the prophet Jeremiah to a group of Jewish exiles far away in Babylon. They were longing to return to Jerusalem and had been stirred up by prophets assuring them that they would soon go home. Jeremiah warns them that they have been listening to false prophets, that there is no quick fix, and that they need to settle down and learn how to find God's presence and peace in exile.

Many people are describing the situation of the church in Britain (and throughout the West) in terms of exile. The church is no longer in the centre as it was for so many centuries. The 'Christian culture' of those years may have been deeply compromised and sometimes no more than a veneer, but churches felt at home in a society where the story the Bible tells was the shared framework for life for most people. But now the church is on the margins, the story is no longer believed or even known by growing numbers in our society, and exile seems a fair enough description.

What parallels do you detect between this passage in Jeremiah and the situation of the church today? Are there false prophets around? What is God calling us to be and do? Note down anything you find here:

Living in exile and belonging to a church on the margins may not seem encouraging images at first – until we remember that the God of the Bible so often works in surprising times and places, and especially from the margins.



Brainstorm for a few minutes. What biblical examples can you find of God working from the margins rather than from the centre?

A

The conviction of the early Anabaptists was that God was at work on the margins and with very ordinary people, most of whom were poor, powerless and persecuted. Like other protest movements before them, they were pushed to the margins of their society and learned how different things looked from that angle. Maybe that is why this tradition has so much to say to us today as we learn to live on the margins. Here are examples of what early Anabaptists wrote about God’s concern for those on the margins:

(1) Ulrich Stadler (Hutterite leader/tract writer in Moravia until 1540): ‘There is one communion of all the faithful in Christ and one community of the holy children called of God. They have one Father in heaven, one Lord Christ; all are baptised and sealed in their hearts with one Spirit. They have one mind, opinion, heart, and soul as having all drunk from the same Fountain, and alike await one and the same struggle, cross, trial, and, at length, one and the same hope in glory. But it, that is, such a community must move about in this world, poor, miserable, small, and rejected of the world, of whom, however, the world is not worthy. Whoever strives for the lofty things [of this world] does not belong.’

(2) Hans Hut (a bookseller and effective evangelist in South Germany, who died in prison in 1527): ‘Nobody can inherit the kingdom of God unless he is poor with Christ, for a Christian has nothing of his own, no place where he can lay his head.’

(3) Hendrik Terwoort & Jan Pieterss (Anabaptist prisoners in London in 1575, whose stories are told in the *Martyrs’ Mirror*): ‘We have not so easy a faith, that they flock to us in crowds; only here and there may be a household, which are very solitary and few as a sparrow alone upon the housetop, like the pelican of the wilderness, and the owl of the desert, a lily among thorns, and the apple tree among the trees of the wood, which brings forth good fruit ... Christ says that there are few that walk in His way, in the way which leads unto life, and that find it. It is hid from the scribes and wise of this world. Base things, and things which are most despised, hath God chosen, and things which are not, to them it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Thus Christ and His apostles declare that there are few who have the true faith, and know the way.’

(4) Dirk Philips (important Anabaptist leader in the Netherlands and North Germany until 1568): ‘Thus must the true Christians here be persecuted for the sake of truth and righteousness, but the Christians persecute no one on account of his faith. For Christ sends his disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16); but the sheep does not devour the wolf, but the wolf the sheep.’



Read *Matthew 19:16-26*.

This passage has suffered badly from the way it was interpreted when the church was at the centre. Of course, it is a very awkward story for rich Christians and wealthy churches. As with the Sermon on the Mount, it has tended to be watered down so that it cannot possibly mean what it appears to! The disciples who were with Jesus were astonished at what he said – when were you last shocked by this story?

One of the problems we have had is that most of us tend to identify with the rich young ruler in the story and wonder what Jesus requires of us if we are to follow him. This is a legitimate question, but only churches at the centre of society instinctively identify with this character in the story. Churches on the margins tend instead to identify with another character – a character that is there but is often hidden to our eyes, ignored in sermons, not regarded as significant. Can you see this person now? Look again at verse 21!

Living in exile was for the Jews an opportunity to grow in their understanding of God and mature in their faith. It was a time of refining and creativity. Perhaps as Christians today we have a similar opportunity. And perhaps the greatest challenge we face is to resist the temptations to nostalgia or despondency and to welcome with enthusiasm our new place on the margins and discover here what it means to take Jesus seriously.

2. The surprising Jesus



Read *Matthew 8:23-34; 9:10-14; 12:1-8; 13:10-13; 13:53-56*.

The disciples in Matthew 19 were astonished by what they heard Jesus say. Surprise is one of the hallmarks of the ministry of Jesus – perhaps it is also one of the signs of God’s upside-down kingdom. Sometimes the things that Jesus said and did confused people or angered them or made them afraid – check out the varied reactions in these passages from Matthew’s Gospel. Note the question ‘why?’ that recurs. The disciples too seem to have spent much of their time with him scratching their heads and trying to understand Jesus.

One of the great tragedies of the centuries when the church was at the centre of society is that it became predictable and lost this surprise element. Worse still, it achieved what was almost impossible – it managed to make Christianity boring. The complaint that is often heard, that church is boring, is one of the terrible legacies of that period.

Somehow, in spite of its connection with the unconventional, provocative, winsome and surprising Jesus, it lost the plot and Christianity became conventional, dull, conformist, unimaginative and uninteresting.



Is it possible today, now that we are no longer able to control history and run everything, now that we no longer need to maintain the status quo, now that we are on the margins, that we have an opportunity to rediscover the surprising Jesus?

What might happen if we were to take his most outrageous teaching seriously? Perhaps this would mean taking ourselves less seriously. It might also mean that others started taking Jesus (and even us) more seriously.

It would be risky, of course, but might it be worth considering?

A

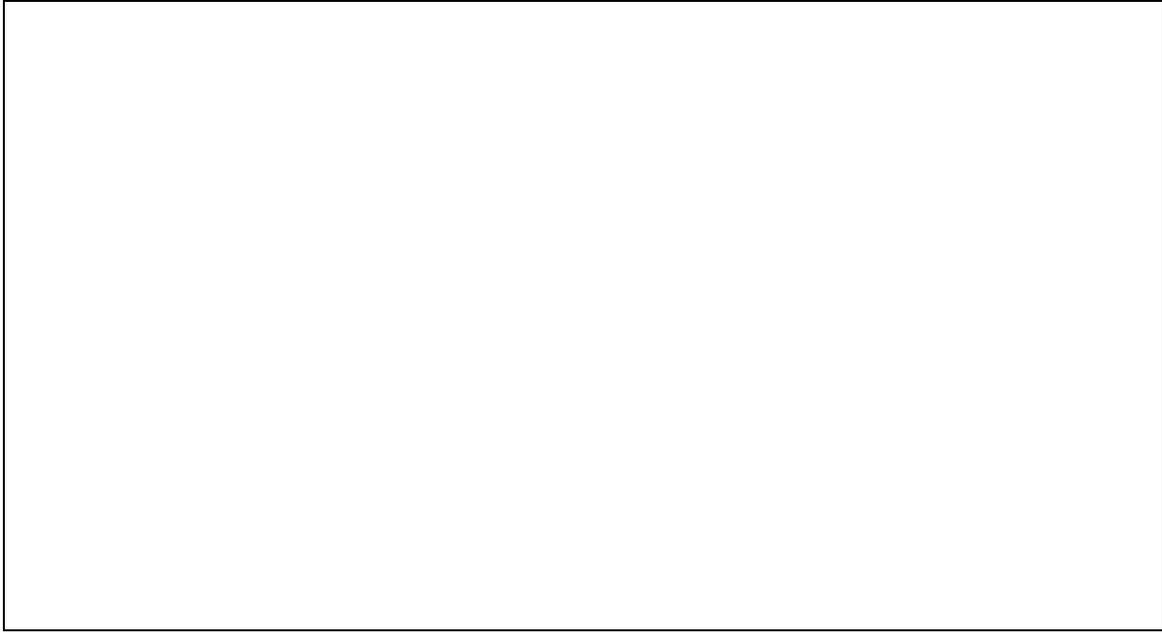
The early Anabaptists surprised their contemporaries. Sometimes they outraged and shocked them to the point where they responded with persecution. Refusing to swear oaths, holding property in common, refusing to carry arms or defend their homeland, delaying baptism until personal commitment could be expressed, allowing many voices in worship, claiming that Europe needed evangelising – no wonder such ridiculous ideas and behaviour got them into trouble!

What might it mean today for followers of Jesus to take him seriously and behave in ways that surprise our sceptical and weary culture? Perhaps we could start by exploring ways of putting into practice what he taught about responding to oppression and handling finance? These issues that we examined in Session 3 are issues our society struggles with. New ways of thinking and responding are desperately needed. Might marginal churches dare to explore fresh ways of living so that, in time, we can commend working models to our contemporaries?

Our society is tired of conventional Christianity. It does not want to hear churches telling it what it 'ought' to do or how it 'ought' to act. But what if we took Jesus seriously? What if we followed his lead and acted in surprising ways? This does not mean trying to be trendy or looking for gimmicks! It simply means listening to Jesus and asking how to live out in our very different context the values he taught and demonstrated in his.



Can you think of any places to start?



3. The attractive Jesus



Read *Matthew 8:1; 8:18; 9:10; 9:35-36; 13:1-2*.

Our society may be tired of conventional Christianity but many people are still attracted to Jesus. Somehow, in spite of being pushed to the margins for many centuries, Jesus has continued to attract attention. Matthew's Gospel shows us crowds of people pushing in to see and hear Jesus, including the most disreputable people. Not all wanted to follow him whole-heartedly or to take his teaching too seriously, but there was something about him that was deeply attractive. And this attraction to Jesus has persisted through the centuries – sometimes in spite of the church as much as because of its witness.

A

It was this attraction to Jesus that was at the heart of the Anabaptist movement and the medieval movements that predated it. Jan Lochman refers to these earlier groups as the 'first reformation' and contrasts them with the 'second' Protestant Reformation. He tells us: 'It is the Gospels, primarily the Sermon on the Mount, which receive the greatest amount of attention. Without desiring to set up false alternatives, the somewhat

simplifying statement could be made: where the second reformation concentrates its theology upon the Pauline message of justification, the first reformation concentrates upon the “evangelical commandment” of Jesus.’

Anabaptists in the 16th century were captivated by Jesus. They accepted the doctrinal statements that the creeds made about Jesus, but it was the story of Jesus they read in the Gospels that fascinated them. For Anabaptists Jesus was not only central for their salvation, but for their lives as saved people. He was the norm against which their words and deeds would be judged, the example they were to follow, the Master they were to obey, the Captain who would fight with them in the battles they faced. They studied his life and ministry to discover how to live, and they found his example and teaching deeply attractive. ‘The Lord’s ministry of preaching and service, His sweeping rejection of social and political structures, His mobility and freedom from cultural attachments, His eschatological outlook, and His love and non-resistance are accepted as normative for all believers’, wrote Anabaptist historian J Lawrence Burkholder in 1957.



Is it possible that the story of Jesus might still attract people today?

If so, how can we tell this story faithfully and creatively?

Could the Sermon on the Mount become an evangelistic message?

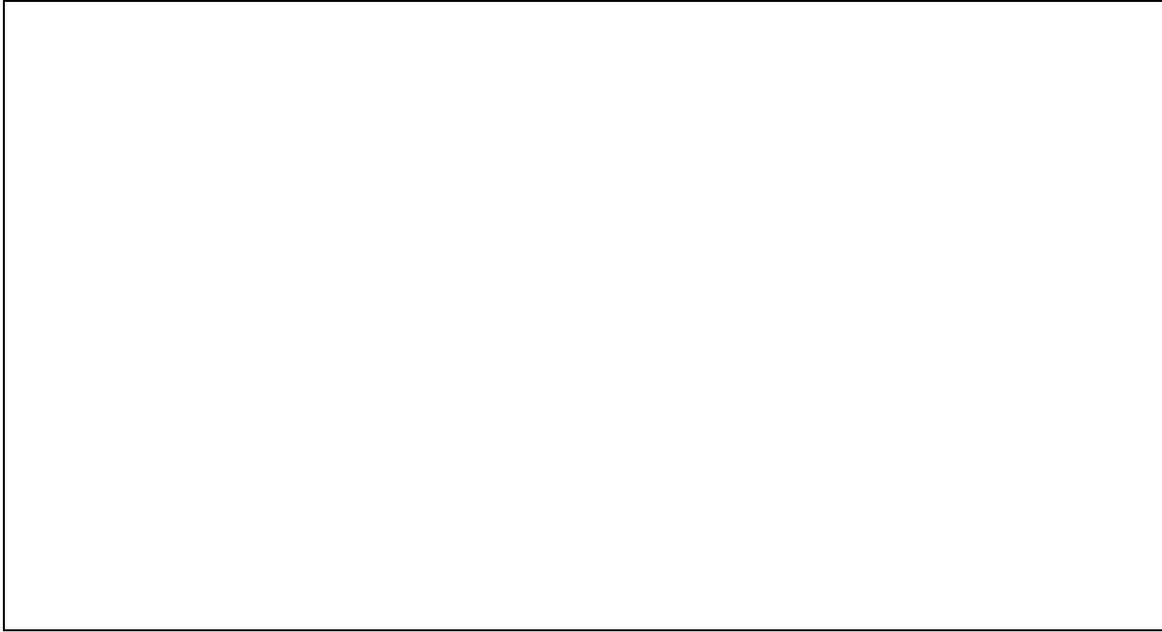
Perhaps taking Jesus seriously is important not just within our churches but as the most important gift we can offer to others?

4. What now?

This course has drawn gratefully on insights from the Anabaptist tradition, a tradition that does not have all the answers to following Jesus today but that does offer us an unusual angle of vision as we read the Bible and ponder what Jesus said, and a tradition that from the margins has tried to take seriously the surprising and attractive Jesus. If you have found this helpful, there are other courses you can take that delve further into these ideas.

But it might be good – before you consider more courses – to take some time (alone or in conversation with others) to reflect on how you can follow through on things that have challenged and inspired you in this course. You might also want to spend some time in prayer, perhaps taking time out of your normal schedule.

If it helps, you can write down here what seems most important to you and any decisions you might make in order to take Jesus seriously.



If you have questions about anything you have studied on this course, if you have ideas to share or suggestions to make, please do contact the Anabaptist Network. You can also find further resources by visiting www.amnetwork.org.uk

Appendix

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds: God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary; and was made man.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered; and was buried. And the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven; and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets.

And I believe in one catholic and apostolic church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Anabaptist Non-violent Initiatives

1. Serving on peace missions that intervene non-violently in situations of conflict

Christian Peacemaker Teams

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) is an organisation committed to reducing violence by 'Getting in the Way' – challenging systems of domination and exploitation as Jesus Christ did in the 1st century. A project of the Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, Church of the Brethren, Friends United Meeting and other Christians, CPT has worked in Haiti, the Middle East, Bosnia, Chechnya, Colombia, Mexico, Canada, and the USA. CPT offers an organised, non-violent alternative to war and other forms of lethal inter-group conflict.

CPT was conceived in the mid-1980s when peace church people were seeking new ways to express their faith. Grassroots wars had broken out in many places, including Central America, and in North America the US government was repeatedly identified with the elite groups of outmoded oppressive systems. Emerging in that period was a consciousness that, by using the creative energy of non-violence together with organised groups, ordinary people could stand in front of the guns and encourage less violent ways for change to happen. People were learning that courageous faith could overcome cynicism.

By 1992 CPT had put together a series of delegations to Haiti, Iraq and the West Bank of Israel. By 1998, with the achievement of a 12-person Christian Peacemaker Corps, CPT was able to sustain two full-time projects and other less work-intensive projects. Among those projects were Haiti and Washington, DC; and by 1995 the project in Hebron, Palestine began.

The work in Hebron grew out of the experiences of a series of delegations in which CPT workers gained a base of relationships with Palestinians and Israelis concerned about the occupation of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). Early in 1995, Wendy Lehman and Kathleen Kern, both experienced Peacemaker Corps members, spent several months exploring the possibility of a long-term project and were advised to consider the largely Muslim city of Hebron, where there was little peacemaking or human rights presence. A very explosive situation existed in downtown Hebron, where radical Jewish settlers had taken up residence. Discussions in Hebron culminated in a formal letter of invitation from Hebron's Mayor and the beginning of a team of violence reduction workers in June 1995.

The CPT experience has demonstrated that teams of four to six people trained in the skills of documentation, observation, non-violent intervention, and various ministries of presence – including patience – can make a striking difference in explosive situations. Full-time teams in places like Hebron are needed, where the contending parties simply cannot be convinced to make changes in the distribution of power so that road to peace becomes clear. Hebron typifies a condition in which one party has most of the power and

the other has little. Until both parties have hope for a fair relationship that begins at the negotiating table, the conflict appears irresolvable. CPT workers try to emphasise or encourage non-violent methods for redress and get in the way of violence when they can.

The original call for Christian Peacemaker Teams was informed by the scriptural encouragement for creative public ministry and enemy loving in the spirit of Jesus. The Peace Churches have brought an important gift to the table; namely, the absolute refusal to kill in situations of conflict. As Christians lay aside the weapons of destruction usually controlled by the culture of the mighty, the surprising power for transformation becomes a miracle available to redeem all of humankind and the earth itself.

Christian Peacemaker Teams is just beginning to establish a support base and plans for work in the United Kingdom.

2. Developing reconciliation programmes to bring victims and offenders together

Restorative Justice Project, Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies, Fresno Pacific University

The Restorative Justice Project (RJP) of Fresno Pacific University works at developing and implementing Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs (VORP). The mission of the program is divided into three different aspects:

- (1) Criminal justice: working toward victim offender reconciliation as the norm for dealing with the issues surrounding crime and victimisation. Working toward a VORP in every community, RJP assists communities in establishing new programs and promotes development of the victim offender field through conferences, classes and resources.
- (2) Community-wide implementation of restorative justice principles. Most broken relationships don't involve crime, but rather feelings of injustice. RJP has developed and is working to implement a method of infusing restorative justice principles in both public and private organisations. All organisations can benefit from this process.
- (3) National, international, and society-wide reconciliation: restorative justice principles provide the best handle for working with relationships at the macro level among peoples, tribes and nations.

The Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies (PACS) has been established at Fresno Pacific University to promote greater understanding of the dynamics of conflict, to train persons in the theology, science and art of constructive conflict management, and to promote and assist in the development of co-operative dispute resolution and justice programs within the institutions of the church and society.

PACS is rooted in the Hebrew/Christian vision of Shalom (peace and justice) for the church and world. Fresno Pacific University, sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren

Churches of the Pacific region of the US, stands in a long, historic peace church tradition which has taken this vision of Shalom seriously. PACS is a concrete effort of the University to further realise this vision of Shalom.

3. Modelling constructive ways of working through congregational conflict

Bridge Builders

Bridge Builders serves in the ministry of peacemaking and reconciliation, seeking to transform conflict within the church. A programme of the London Mennonite Centre (LMC), Bridge Builders provides training, mediation, consultancy and related services for all Christian churches and denominations in Britain. The vision for Bridge Builders grows out of the historical Mennonite commitment to the way of peace and non-retaliation against enemies as central elements of the Christian gospel.

Bridge Builders offers training workshops and courses in handling and transforming conflict within the church. These range from short one-off training sessions to week-long events and extended training programmes, and are run at LMC and around the UK. The focus of the training is on equipping all Christians – both leaders and congregations – to better understand conflict and to function more effectively in the midst of it. The training also explores how to design church structures to work constructively with differences, harness creativity and minimise destructive conflict.

Bridge Builders offers mediation and intervention services to individuals, church leadership teams and congregations, among others. The purpose of Bridge Builders' mediation and intervention services is to develop a channel for healing and reconciliation. The processes aim to assist Christians to build their own agreements for the future, where they have been struggling to work co-operatively together, or are divided over specific issues.

Working within the LMC mission, Bridge Builders aims to centre its work in the life and teaching of Jesus, and to cultivate the work of peacemaking and the process of reconciliation as intrinsic aspects of following Jesus faithfully. Within these broad aims and in collaboration with others, Bridge Builders seeks to transform conflict within the church, and to equip and empower Christians, congregations and denominations to deal more effectively and constructively with the conflict they experience.

4. Advocating creative alternatives in penal theory and the criminal justice system

Mennonite Central Committee

Mennonite Central Committee, the relief, service and development agency of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches of North America, is committed to the

biblical vision of peacemaking. MCC is motivated by God's reconciling love and grace, human need and a concern for justice.

Mennonite Central Committee believes that since much of human suffering is due to unjust social systems and human exploitation, issues of justice are frequently intertwined with issues of hunger, disease and illiteracy. MCC volunteers work to relieve human suffering and achieve social justice because they believe God cares for all persons. They follow Christ's example by striving for justice, identifying with the weak and oppressed and reconciling the oppressor and the oppressed.

MCC Office on Crime and Justice

- Provides information and resources on ministry to victims and offenders, victim offender reconciliation/conferencing, restorative justice, the death penalty and other related issues.
- Co-ordinates presentations, workshops and written material on principles and application of restorative justice.
- Provides consultation and information to individuals and groups involved in victim offender reconciliation/conferencing programs (VORPs).
- Develops educational and training materials on various crime and justice issues.

Can Love Save the World?

Walter Wink

'I don't see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent.'

Michael Kelly thinks he has killed pacifism. In an editorial in the Washington Post of September 26, 2001, he cites George Orwell's 1944 description of pacifism as objectively pro-Fascist. 'If you hamper the war effort on one side you automatically help out that of the other,' Orwell reasoned. Applied to 'America's New War,' Kelly finds the logic irrefutable. 'Organized terrorist groups have attacked America. These groups wish the Americans to not fight. The American pacifists wish the Americans to not fight. If the Americans do not fight, the terrorists will attack America again. And now we know such attacks can kill many thousands of Americans. The American pacifists, therefore, are on the side of future mass murders of Americans. They are objectively pro-terrorist. Hence the pacifist position is "evil."'

Would that life were so logical! For what Mr. Kelly overlooks is a third way, neither passive nor aggressive. For millions of years his error has been endlessly repeated. It is the fight/flight response. But that third way has occasionally been tried, and, wonder of wonders, it has frequently succeeded. Religions pioneered the third way as a nonviolent protest against those two invidious alternatives. Starting with the Hebrew midwives, nonviolence was elaborated by Jainism and Buddhism, given political bite by Jews like the prophets and Jesus, articulated by Christians like St. Francis and Martin Luther King, Jr., and made programmatic and practical by the Hindu Gandhi and the Muslim Badshah Khan.

Nevertheless, I agree with Mr. Kelly that pacifism must go. It is endlessly confused with passivity. In the nations in which Christianity has predominated, Jesus' teaching on nonviolence has been perverted into injunctions to passive nonresistance, which, as we shall see, is the very opposite of active nonviolence. Jesus had said, 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your outer garment, give your undergarment as well; and if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, go two' (Matthew 5:38-41). As it stands, this saying seems to counsel supine surrender. If you are a woman and you are struck by your spouse on one cheek, turn the other; let him pulverize you. If you are sued for a piece of clothing, give all your clothes voluntarily, as an act of pious renunciation. And if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack one mile, be a chump: carry it two. And the crowning blow: don't resist evil at all.

For centuries, readers of this advice have instinctively known something was wrong with this picture. Jesus always resisted evil. Why would he tell us to behave in ways he himself refused? And that's where the trouble starts. The Greek word translated as 'resist' (*antistenai*), is literally 'to stand (*stenai*) against (*anti*).' The term is taken from warfare.

When two armies collide, they were said to 'stand against' each other. The correct translation is given in the new Scholars Bible: 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil.' The meaning is clear: don't react in kind, don't mirror your enemy, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Jesus is not telling us not to resist evil, but only not to resist it violently.

Jesus gives three examples to explain his point. The first is: 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.' Most people picture a blow with the right fist. But that would land on the left cheek, and Jesus specifies the right cheek. A left hook wouldn't fit the bill either, since the left hand was used only for unclean tasks, and even to gesture with it brought shame on the one gesturing. Jesus is speaking about striking the right cheek with the back of the right hand. This was not a blow to injure. It was symbolic. It was intended to humiliate, to put an inferior in his or her place. It was given by a master to a slave, a husband to a wife, a parent to a child, or a Roman to a Jew. The message of the powerful to their subjects was clear: You are a nobody, get back down where you belong.

It is to those accustomed to being struck thus that Jesus speaks ('if anyone strikes you'). By turning the other cheek, the person struck puts the striker in an untenable spot. He cannot repeat the backhand, because the other's nose is now in the way. The left cheek makes a fine target, but only persons who are equals fight with fists, and the last thing the master wants is for the slave to assert equality (see the Mishnah, Baba Kamma 8:6). This is, of course, no way to avoid trouble; the master might have the slave flogged to within an inch of her life. But the point has been irrevocably made: the 'inferior' is saying, in no uncertain terms, 'I won't take such treatment anymore. I am your equal. I am a child of God.' By turning the other cheek, the oppressed person is saying that she refuses to submit to further humiliation. This is not submission, as the churches have insisted. It is defiance. That may sound a bit idealistic, but people all over the globe of late have been taking their courage in their hands this way and resisting, nonviolently, those who have treated them thus.

Jesus' second example deals with indebtedness, the most onerous social problem in first century Palestine. The wealthy of the Empire sought ways to avoid taxes. The best way was to buy land on the fringes of the Empire. But the poor didn't want to sell. So the rich jacked up interest rates – 25 to 250 percent. When the poor couldn't repay, first their moveable property was seized, then their lands, and finally the very clothes on their backs. Scripture allowed the destitute to sleep in their long robes, but they had to surrender them by day (Deuteronomy 24:10-13).

It is to that situation that Jesus speaks. Look, he says, you can't win when they take you to court. But here is something you can do: when they demand your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. That was all they wore. The poor man is stark naked! And in Israel, nakedness brought shame, not on the naked party, but on the one viewing his nakedness. (See the story of Noah, Genesis 9.) Jesus is not asking those already defrauded of their possessions to submit to further indignity. He is enjoining them to guerrilla theater.

Imagine the debtor walking out of the court in his altogether. To the question what happened, he responds, 'That creditor got all my clothes.' People come pouring out of the streets and alleys and join the little procession to his home. It will be a while before creditors in that village take a poor man to court! But, of course, the Powers That Be are shrewd, and within weeks new laws will be in place making nakedness in court punishable by fines or incarceration. So the poor need to keep inventing new forms of resistance. Jesus is advocating a kind of Aikido, where the momentum of the oppressor is used to throw the oppressor and make him the laughing stock of the community. Jesus is not averse to using shame to kindle a moral sense in the creditor.

Jesus' third example refers to the *angaria*, the law that permitted a Roman soldier to force a civilian to carry his 65 to 85 pound pack. But the law stipulated one mile only. At the second marker the soldier was required to retrieve his pack. By carrying the pack more than a mile, the peasant makes the soldier culpable for violation of military law. Again, Jesus is not just 'extending himself' by going the second mile, as the popular platitude puts it. He is putting the soldier in jeopardy of punishment.

So you can see why I agree with Mr. Kelly. The examples Jesus gives are something more than nonresistance. They are gutsy, courageous, and aggressive. So I don't regard myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent. Mr. Kelly and I concur that the 'flight' option is cowardly, irresponsible, and ineffective. But where he is still mired in the 'fight' option, I am prepared to risk active, even militant, nonviolence – a third way. Far from proving impractical, nonviolence has been about the only thing that has been working of late. In 1989-90 alone, fourteen nations involving 1.7 billion people underwent nonviolent revolutions, all but one successfully (China). During the twentieth century, 3.4 billion people were thus involved. Yet the churches have, since the time of St. Augustine, embraced the Roman 'just war theory', convinced that nonviolence won't work, that only violence can save or redeem us. (I call this 'the myth of redemptive violence.')

Extract from Peter Walpot, 'True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods' (1577)

The Lord commanded Israel: Above all, there should be no poor among you (Deuteronomy 15). How much more should this be fulfilled in the full community of goods among the New Testament people ... the Jubilee Year of the Lord ... was to be a model of the time of the New Covenant in Christ. For that was the true Jubilee Year, the acceptable year of the Lord. As the apostle of the Lord himself understood it, they would be freed who all their lives had been held in the slavery and power of the devil. Therefore, out of Christian love, we also should hold all goods which God has bestowed upon us in common enjoyment with our neighbours, brothers and families and not hold them as private. For now is an even more glorious, nuptial feast proclaiming the year of redemption than it was in the Old Testament. Yes! It is the year of Grace!...

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, also taught community. For when he came and was asked by the people, 'What shall we do, then?' he told them that whoever has two coats should give one coat to another person who has none, and whoever has food, do the same (Luke 3). See how clear it is! ...

The Lord called as his disciple Simon Peter and his brother Andrew; also James, son of Zebedee and John his brother. And he said to them, 'Follow me!' (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 5). And they left their nets, their boats and their father and followed him. See then how Christ places demands on one's possessions and how these men left their parents and friends and followed him in the way he led, the path of yieldedness and communit ...

Community is also taught in the Lord's Prayer. Christ taught us not to ask for our own bread. Not 'give me my bread', but 'give us our bread', that is, the communal bread. It is a false supplicator who prays give us our bread, but then treats the bread received as his own! ...

Whoever lives in wealth is false in his confession of faith. For the Christian faith sets up a holy Christian Church and a community of saints. Where there is no community of saints there is no true and worthy Christian Church. Therefore all lie who say that community is unnecessary and has no foundation in doctrine (Acts 2 and 4). For it is indeed an article of the faith and instituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit and his teaching. Therefore, just as it is necessary to hold to the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and Holy Communion, it is also necessary to hold community of goods. Community is no simple oddity, which the apostles tried out for novelty. Rather, it is divinely earnest and just as right and proper now as it was in Jerusalem and elsewhere ...

Christ also taught community by example. He fed first the five thousand and then the four thousand who came to him in the wilderness. He sat them down on the grass and broke bread with them in common and fed them the bread and fishes (Matthew 14 and 15; John 6). That the disciples, who had very little – just five loaves and two fishes and then seven loaves – were very willing to share with others is a lesson to us that when we forsake

house, country and friends to follow the word of God into the wilderness, that even today we should hold all of our temporal goods in common and lay them out for common use out of love for our neighbours ...

‘This is my commandment’, said Christ, ‘that you love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15). He loved us so much that he left behind his glory with the Father and for our sakes became poor and a servant, to share everything with his followers. This is how we should love each other, he said. Out of his great love he has made us inheritors of heaven. Therefore, we ought to make our brothers heirs to our earthly possessions with us. He has made us fellow subjects with the angels and companions with God. Therefore we ought also to take our brothers in under our roof and shelters, demonstrating love in both external as well as spiritual matters. That is why John said in his letter: If anyone has worldly possessions and sees a brother in need and closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be in him? (1 John 3) ...

When the Holy Spirit was sent and came, the perfected Christian community was established (Acts 2 and 4). The three thousand and five thousand in Jerusalem, indeed, all who had come to the faith, were together and held all things in common. They sold their goods and possessions and divided it all with each among them who was in need. Therefore the apostle called this a community of the Holy Spirit. For where the Holy Spirit truly dwells, this community is worked and established (Philippians 2; 2 Corinthians 13).

Luke wrote of this again in the fourth chapter of Acts. The great crowd who believed were of one heart and mind. No one claimed that his possessions were his alone, but they shared all that they had in common. There were also none among them who were in need, for those who had fields or houses sold them and brought the money from the sales and laid it at the feet of the apostles. And it was given to each who was in need. It does not say that each took whatever he wanted. And so it should still be today, God willing and if God grants a place, that all things which serve to praise God should be held in common. Whoever does not do this betrays and mocks the footsteps of the earliest apostolic church...

That community among them did not dissolve and was not abandoned is proven repeatedly. For Paul said there was community in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 16). There was also community in Laodicea in the house of Nymphas, for Paul sent them greetings (Colossians 4). Archippos, the fellow worker of Paul, also had a community living in his house (Philemon 1). Did they live in community in these houses? Surely they did. They show that they did live communally, just as was done in Jerusalem. They did not do as the world today and the false brothers, who without shame sit at a separate table and eat, one better and the other less, according to the means of each ...

The mystery and meaning of baptism also teaches us true community. For Paul said that we are all baptized into one body ... We are baptized into just such a spiritual body, that

we may demonstrate just such community in spiritual graces and gifts, but also in the lesser things, in temporal gifts and possessions ...

In the same way the communion bread and wine is a teaching for us, in admonition and witness, to Christian community. Christ used bread and wine exactly for this beautiful correspondence and comparison. For regardless of how many grains of corn there are, each is a separate entity. But as each is ground together, losing what was its own, the result is the loaf of bread ... In the same way, although there are many grapes and berries, they are crushed in the press and their juices all become one fluid. Therefore, the faithful should practice true unity and community, not only in the higher spiritual things but also in the simple temporal possessions, in honour of God and in service to the neighbour. Whoever does not stand within this community is yet a separated and unground piece of corn ...

Community means nothing else than to have all things in common out of love for one's neighbour, to have everything equal and for no one to have private property. There is nothing higher, better or more perfect than someone presenting himself and his wealth for the common good and from that point on sharing with each other both sickness and health, love and suffering, each one wanting to be the other's neighbour, debtor, fellow member and loyal comrade. That is the Christian Church and the community of saints, which is neither forced nor unnatural, nor impossible to do, so long as love is there ...