Love Alone in Anabaptist Persuasion

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Anna Manz, who hosted the consequential January 21, 1525, baptismal gathering in her Zurich apartment, expressed a central testimony of the Anabaptist movement in a few simple words during her trial in March of 1526. She said that, in the most recent meeting of dissenters she had attended, her people had "talked about nothing other than the love of God."[1] Although we can only speculate about the specific content of these discussions about the love of God, Anna's son Felix, who shared his mother's faith convictions, wrote an epistle from prison before he was executed by drowning in 1527 that elaborated on this theme: "Only the love of God through Christ is meaningful and enduring—not boasts, threats or denunciations. Love alone (*Nichts als die Liebe*) is pleasing to God."[2]

In this letter that also circulated eventually as a song published in numerous Anabaptist hymnals—including several still used today—Felix Manz illustrated some practical applications of this "love alone" principle. Those who show Christ's love are merciful; they do not bring lawsuits; they hate no one; they do not betray, accuse, beat, or quarrel with anyone; they do not cling to their property; they do not shed innocent blood.[3] Moreover, in the perspective expressed by Felix Manz, this expansive and radical love is a condition for relationship with God: "Anyone who does not have love has no place with God."[4] The love of God as manifested in Christ's love, in other words, was the defining commandment and boundary line for genuine Christian faith in this early Anabaptist testimony. Moreover, this commandment of love was displayed in specific

[1] Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 447.

[2] Daniel Liechty, trans. and ed., *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 19; Leonhard von Muralt and Walter Schmid, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz I: Zürich* (Zürich: S. Hirsel, 1952), 219.

[3] Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, 18–19. The hymn version of Felix Manz's letter appears as number six in current editions of the *Ausbund* and in an abridged English translation as number 444 in *Voices Together*. See *Ausbund das ist: Etliche Schöne Christliche Lieder* (Lancaster, PA: Amish Book Committee, 2000); and *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

[4] Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, 19.

and concrete actions, although the list of specifics varied amongst early Anabaptist witnesses.

While the list of specifics in Manz's letter did not explicitly include rejection of the sword, an emerging embrace of nonresistance does seem to be implied by the rejection of lawsuits and refusal to protect property, as well as by the claim that "Christ the Lord does not force anyone to his glory," but instead displays "great patience" and shows love "to all people."[5] This statement rejecting force in matters of faith echoed a letter of admonition sent to the revolutionary reformer Thomas Müntzer by members of the Zurich dissenting circle—including Felix Manz—already in September of 1524.[6] This letter urged Müntzer to carry on "in accord with faith and love without being commanded and compelled"—similar to what Felix Manz advocated in his letter from prison. However, the letter to Müntzer also made rejection of the sword explicit, arguing that "the gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword" and that "true believing Christians" use "neither worldly sword nor war."[7] For those living by "faith and love," in other words, both military and juridical use of the sword were contrary to the commandment of love.

The teachings of the radical reformer Andreas Carlstadt were likely one influence on the Zurich dissenting circle's evolving equation of godly love with non-coercion—especially given that they mention Carlstadt as "a dear brother" in their letter to Müntzer.[8] Earlier in 1524, Carlstadt had published a tract "Regarding the Two Greatest Commandments: The Love of God and Neighbor," in which he argued that "the love of God is a work on which the love of neighbor depends."[9] This sort of love, Carlstadt argued, is a love grounded in faith—faith that is necessarily expressed in love.[10] Such faithful love reflects the love of God that is poured out on all people—both "good and evil."[11] Just as God makes the sun shine on all people without distinction, so those who embrace the love of God will stretch out hands to care for any neighbor in need, even those who are enemies.[12] In July of 1524, Carlstadt and his congregation at Orlamünde had also sent a letter to Thomas Müntzer expressing their refusal to join

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[5] Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, 18.

[6] Harder, *Sources*, 289–90.

[7] Harder, *Sources*, 289–90.

[8] Harder, *Sources*, 292.

[9] E. J. Furcha, trans. and ed., *The Essential Carlstadt* (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 234.

[10] Furcha, *Carlstadt*, 232.

[11] Furcha, *Carlstadt*, 246.

[12] Furcha, *Carlstadt*, 246.

in with an armed rebellion and proposing to put on the "armor of faith" rather than "running after knives and spears."[13]

The practical application of unarmed love alone found expression in the decision of the first Anabaptist congregation—begun in January 1525 in the village of Zollikon near Zurich—to break the locks off their doors and to practice community of goods.[14] This refusal to lock the doors displayed the relationship between defenselessness (living without force) and communalism (living without private property). Moreover, members of the Zollikon congregation testified that these commitments to defenseless communalism were rooted in the sign or pledge of "brotherly love and peace" that they experienced in their sharing of the Lord's Supper together.[15]

Other Anabaptist testimonies confirmed the developing Anabaptist application of the "love of God" in expressions of "brotherly love," as signified in the Lord's Supper and exemplified through uncoerced communal sharing. The Anabaptist preacher Hans Krüsi confessed prior to his execution in July 1525 that "all things should be held in common, in the love of God and in faith."[16] Felix Manz stated in his November 1525 trial testimony that "Christian and brotherly love must be shown openly, each to the other."[17] Balthasar Hubmaier—a German Anabaptist theologian and pastor who had been involved in the discussions about baptism in Zurich—penned a liturgy of the Lord's Supper based on the premise that gratitude for God's "overabundant and unspeakable love" as shown in Jesus Christ leads to costly works of mercy for our neighbors—including giving up our lives if need be, just as Christ did.[18] In this liturgy, participants were invited to make a pledge of sacrificial love for both neighbors and enemies before sharing the Lord's Supper.[19] South German Anabaptist mystic and Bible translator Hans Denck wrote a tract "Concerning True Love," in which he advanced the claim that for the sake of unity, the sacrificial and impartial love of God "willingly forgoes all things except love."[20]

The earliest Anabaptist testimonies did not agree on whether the sword was included in the list of "all things" that must be given up for love. In

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[13] Peter Matheson, trans. and ed., *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntze*r (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 93.

[14] Harder, *Sources*, 345.

[15] von Muralt and Schmid, *Quellen I*, 41.

[16] Harder, *Sources*, 423.

[17] Harder, *Sources*, 441.

[18] H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 397.

[19] Pipkin and Yoder, *Hubmaier*, 403–5.

[20] Clarence Bauman, trans., *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 182–85.

his November 1525 testimony, Felix Manz had also said in response to a question about involvement in government that "no Christian strikes with the sword, nor does he resist evil."[21] While this admonition against the sword echoed the nonresistant sentences in the 1524 letter to Müntzer that Felix Manz had signed, most Anabaptist testimonies from the Zurich dissenting circle and the Zollikon congregation did not explicitly extend the practice of costly and vulnerable brotherly love to a complete rejection of the sword, as Arnold Snyder has noted.[22] Balthasar Hubmaier, who played a significant role in expressing the theological convictions of emergent Swiss Anabaptism in Zurich—including the commitment to sacrificial love for neighbors and enemies, following the example of Christ—insisted that Christian magistrates must make use of the sword to maintain a just civic order, even if they may not use the sword to coerce a specific practice of faith.[23] While the Zurich dissenters' letter to Thomas Müntzer did include a call to nonresistance, Felix Manz was the only member of the circle to clearly reject the sword in other testimonies that appear in the historical record, while the words and actions of some members of the circle suggest that they were not yet ready to completely embrace the nonresistant position.[24] At the same time, the paragraph against the sword in the letter to Müntzer does suggest that the members of the Zurich circle were at least familiar with the argument for nonresistance and were perhaps at least sympathetic to it even if they hadn't worked out exactly how to implement it.

In any event, by 1527 the argument that the love of God as expressed in brotherly and sisterly love puts away the sword had convinced a sufficient number of Swiss Anabaptists that they featured their commitment to nonresistance prominently in the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* of 1527:

> Thereby shall also fall away from us the diabolical weapons of violence—such as sword, armor, and the like and all of their use to protect friends or against enemies—by virtue of the word of Christ: "you shall not resist evil."[25]

The cover letter of the *Brotherly Union* stressed that the convictions it outlined were offered to all those who "love God."[26] Moreover, this confessional statement often circulated with a congregational order

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[21] Harder, *Sources*, 442.

[22] C. Arnold Snyder, "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism, 1520–1530," *MQR* 80, no. 4 (Oct. 2006), 524–30; 545–48.

[23] Pipkin and Yoder, *Hubmaier*, 504–7.

[24] Snyder, "Birth and Evolution," 526–28.

[25] John H. Yoder, trans. and ed., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 38.

[26] Yoder, *Legacy*, 35.

prefaced by the mandate to follow the "new commandment" of "love toward one another" given in 1 John 2:8.[27] The seventh point of the congregational order described the practice of the Lord's Supper as commemorating "how Christ gave his life for us" in order that "we might also be willing to give our body and life for Christ's sake, which means for the sake of all the brothers," a view that appears to echo Hubmaier's sacramental "pledge of love."[28]

Although the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* rejected the Christian use of the sword, it also acknowledged in article six that "the sword is ordered by God (*ein Gottes Ordnung*) outside the perfection of Christ."[29] The text of article six contains a clue about the premise behind this concession to the magisterial use of the sword. It acknowledged a question asked by "those who do not understand Christ's will for us": may the sword be used "for the sake of love?"[30] This question seems to be related to a framework for discernment that Protestant reformers like Zwingli called the "norm of love."[31] For Zwingli, this rule of love meant placing a higher priority on the peace and unity of a community than on following specific commandments of Christ such as holding property in common, refusing to swear oaths, or declining to carry a sword.[32] By contrast, for Zwingli's Anabaptist opponents, as we have seen, the "norm of love" meant following Christ's commandment to lay our lives down for our neighbors—rather than clinging to possessions and weapons—at least for those who subscribed to the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* and the congregational order that circulated with it. Put another way, Protestant arguments premised on love assumed that the sword of the magistrate is a loving compromise that is commanded by the grace of God while Anabaptist testimonies premised on love assumed that the pledge of love is a godly commandment that is compromised by the violence of the sword.[33]

Article six of the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* thus offered a politically and rhetorically savvy response to the question of whether the sword may be used "for the sake of love," stating that as Jesus did, "so should we also do": refuse to intervene in lawsuits, refuse to use violence, refuse to use the sword, and, perhaps most importantly, refuse to be a magistrate who wields the sword (even if the sword-wielding magistrate is acknowledged

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[27] Yoder, *Legacy*, 44.

[28] Yoder, *Legacy*, 44.

[29] Yoder, *Legacy*, 39.

[30] Yoder, *Legacy*, 39.

[31] Harder, *Sources*, 304.

[32] Harder, *Sources*, 509.

[33] John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 177.

to function within God's ordering).[34] Article six, in other words, can be understood to express a strategic ambiguity about the sword in terms of a friendly dualism: true Christians should not use the sword and should therefore not be magistrates; nevertheless, in a fallen world through God's providence the sword functions to maintain order. Therefore, while Christians must for the sake of love reject the sword, they should at the same time acknowledge for the sake of love the valid, if less than ideal, wielding of the sword by magistrates who did not share Anabaptist convictions. Thus, the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* both established Anabaptist rejection of the sword while at the same time limiting the scope of this rejection's application to Christians "who understand Christ's will for us."[35]

This account of love alone in early Anabaptist teaching has highlighted the contested issue of how the commandment of love applied to the rejection of the sword in the earliest years of the Swiss Anabaptist movement—between 1524 and 1527. Anabaptist testimonies appearing in the historical record suggest initial disagreement about how to apply the commandment of sacrificial neighborly love, including love for enemies, to the carrying of the sword. At the same time, such testimonies mostly agreed on the premise of love alone as a defining commandment for Christian discipleship. Moreover, such testimonies interpreted the commandment of love to require uncompromising love rather than loving compromise—an interpretation that is characterized well by Felix Manz's distinct phrase: "*nichts als die Liebe*"—love alone.

The love alone rule and the complicated story of its application to the social ethics practiced by the church is, in my view, the most significant legacy of Anabaptism. Yet this legacy has also been constrained by the Schleitheim concession to the providential validity of the magisterial sword "outside the perfection of Christ"—a formulation that developed into an Anabaptist iteration of two-kingdom theology: nonresistance for the peace church and legitimate violence for secular governments, with the former seeking tolerance from the latter for a testimony presumed to apply only to those with religious scruples against violence.[36]

Nearly thirty years after the formulation of the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union*, the Dutch Anabaptist reformer Menno Simons expressed the same love alone principle without deferring to the friendly dualism that came

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[34] Yoder, *Legacy*, 39–40.

[35] Yoder, *Legacy*, 40.

[36] For a more thorough analysis of the evolving and varying Anabaptist expressions of nonviolence in connection with practices of separation, see Gerald J. Mast, "Nonviolence: Anabaptists Against the Sword" in Brian Brewer, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 251–70.

to characterize much of Swiss and South German Anabaptist expressions of nonresistance. In a published epistle responding to one of his theological debating partners—Reformed pastor Martin Micron—Menno called for Christian magistrates not to leave their station, but rather to put away their sword: "it would hardly become a true Christian ruler to shed blood."[37] In the preface to this epistle, Menno began by articulating the same love alone commandment that had captured the spiritual imaginations of the early Swiss Anabaptists: "All scriptures teach and enjoin, honorable Martin, that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. On these commandments, says Christ, hang all the law and the prophets."[38] Menno then drew out the hermeneutical and ethical principles succinctly: "Love is the total content of scripture" and "where love is, there is a Christian."[39]

In 1950, during the aftermath of World War II, a group of North American Amish and Mennonite church leaders drawn from a broad range of denominations and conferences met at Winona Lake in Indiana to formulate a new statement of their convictions about war and peace. This statement repudiated the friendly dualism of Schleitheim by confessing that "we are bound in loving outreach to all to bear witness and to serve, summoning men everywhere to the life of full discipleship and to the pursuit of peace and love without limit."[40] This Anabaptist commitment to love alone and "without limit" is the point of departure for the most creative and transformative of Anabaptist testimonies: From the Zollikon Anabaptist congregation's decision in 1525 to live without locks to North American Mennonite proposals in 2021 to live without the police. Such testimonies are meaningful and will endure because, as Felix Manz said, "Love alone is pleasing to God."

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[37] Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 920.

[38] Verduin, *Writings*, 917.

[39] Verduin, *Writings*, 917.

[40] *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns, 1900–1978*, edited by Urbane Peachey (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1980), 161.