

What's so bad about being a Christian Nation?

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What's so bad about infant baptism?

You would die for this?

Good Christians baptized as babies

**We've forgotten—or –have rejected the
deeper implications of believers' baptism and
refusal to swear oaths**

THESIS

Biblical foundations
16th Century Anabaptists
Today

AGENDA

Biblical Foundations: OT

- **Genesis 12:3**
- **Red Sea event**
- **Monarchy and Israel's national God**
- **Exile: David vs. Daniel (Garcia)**
- **Ezra**

Biblical Foundations: NT

- **Temptations in the wilderness: how is this story a statement against Christian nations?**
- **Nazareth synagogue**
- **Sermon on the Mount**
- **Jesus before Pilate (John 18:33-36)**
- **Phil 3:20**
- **2 Cor. 5:17**

But what about Romans 13?

- **What does it mean to “submit?”**
- **It means you accept state’s right to prosecute you.**
- **All authorities?**
- **Literary context (Only God does vengeance)**
- **Paul’s civil disobedience**

Constantinian synthesis

- **Emperor Constantine and Theodosius**
- **State church**
- **Why so tempting? Let's brainstorm.**
- **Guarantees good theology**
- **Guarantees good ethics**
- **God as an excuse for your unethical actions**

Why so tempting?

- Every earthly kingdom must provide cohesion, unity. How do you do it?
- Shared vision
- Grand narrative (We are a Christian nation)
- Eliminate differences
- Enforce doctrines and morality

**State benefitted by having the church leaders
bless its violence.**

**Church benefitted by having the state police
enforce its morality.**

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

**But Jesus refused to make Rome great
again.**

Kingdom of God is voluntary.

Enter the Anabaptists

What reasons did early Anabaptists give for believers' baptism?

No explicit scriptures supporting infant baptism.

Babies can't commit to following Jesus.

Anabaptists then—and now:

We can know God's will apart from church authorities (we discern this in community)

Christo-centric hermeneutics.

We must obey Jesus over any human authority.

**WHAT WENT WITHOUT
SAYING**

Exceptions

- Hubmaier
- Menno Simons
- Munster

- “When it became clear that no city would implement Anabaptist reforms, the movement affirmed a vision for the church as a voluntary gathering of baptized believers outside a traditional, territorial church-state model.”
- Troy Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History*, p. 55.

- **“The Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism in favor of adult baptism undercut the universal foundations of Christendom.”**
- Osborne, p. 101.

State is established but has Limits

- Schleithem Confession
- Although God established rulers and governments to keep order and protect innocents, followers of Christ would abstain from bearing the sword.”
- Ungovernable faith.
- **Melissa Florer Bixler, “An Ungovernable Faith,” Christian Century, March 2025**

Why the persecution?

- Not bc of theology
- Tax roles
- No membership into official state church
- “Ungovernable faith”

When Anabaptists read their Bibles

- State-church (of any kind) is unbiblical
- Therefore, infant baptism, as the entry into the state-church, was unbiblical.

Taking Oaths

- Matthew 5:37.
- Taking of oaths forbidden in Schleithem Confession
- But why?
- What we typically say:
- Not about saying bad words
- Jesus is calling for integrity. Oaths imply manipulating speech.
- But again, it goes deeper...

Taking Oaths

- 16th Century historical-cultural background:
- Oath was agreement to uphold your obligations to the town (bailiwick!)
- It's about allegiance!
- Anabaptists understand there must be a boundary between kingdoms of this world and Kingdom of God.

- **“Oaths are promises that fetter us to the state’s way of organizing the world through coercion and violence.”**
- **Melissa Florer Bixler**

- “...the church’s operation is different. We gather, we discern, we pray, we listen. We repeat these actions over and over because the Holy Spirit’s movement forms and reforms our common life as the body of Christ. **Oaths barricade against the possibility for transformation because swearing them binds us to a fixed way of interpreting reality. They assume an outcome and hold us to it.**
- **Marius van Hoogstraten, as quoted in Bixler article**

By refusing to swear oaths, 16-century Anabaptists took away the state's primary tool for control.

- Break time!

We have forgotten part of our story

- There are many Christians who are baptized as believers who also...
- Love the subtle church-state connection in the US.
- They love the idea of a Christian nation.
- What gives?

What is a Christian Nation?

- Definition: Belief that the Kingdom of God is the same thing as my preferred version of the kingdom of the world.

America as a Christian Nation

- Christian nationalists believe:
- God has especially ordained America, (our government) to be a beacon of light for the world. God uses our government to help fulfill God's will and bring about God's kingdom.
- OR...that Christians ought to get America to be more godly, as in "take America back for God."

Congregations, denominations should

Align themselves with a certain political party.
Tell people how to vote, which should be obvious because God is against certain things and for other things.

Americans have been inclined to believe that God's will was manifested in the founding of our country and is yet manifested in the global activity of our nation. Throughout our history, most Americans have confidently assumed our nation's causes and wars were righteous and just and that God was "on our side." In our minds, and in our churches, the cross and the national flag have gone hand in hand. Consequently, the conservative church has, to a large extent at least, tended to view itself as the religious guardian of all that is godly in our culture. America is a holy city "set on a hill," and the church's job is to keep it shining.

Greg Boyd

Connections

- Early Anabaptists knew that God's people are trans-national.
- The church should never use a government to enforce their brand of Christianity.
- We have only 1 allegiance.

- Few, if any, early Anabaptist documents say, “We’re against a state-church.”
- They simply quote scripture.
- But they had an underlying foundation that needs to be said explicitly:
- If state asks for an action not in line with Jesus—we say no.

Articulating our Faith

- Let's practice!
- See page 28-30 of Cesar Garcia's book, *What is God's Kingdom and What Does Citizenship Look Like?*

Why we broke with Zwingli

- Zwingli had sound biblical theology.
- But—
- He held to the concept that the state knows best (or he was afraid to act on his beliefs)
- Anabaptists made a radical departure from prevailing view that God reveals God's will through an ordained government.

- They knew that the Kingdom of God is a real kingdom but...
- It is different than any earthly kingdom, no matter how good that earthly kingdom is.

If the state asks you to disobey Jesus...

- You obey Jesus.
- “Since the oath has always been held to be essential to the existence of the state, it was inevitable that the refusal of Mennonites to use it would bring them into conflict with government.”
- **GAMEO**

What's so bad about the kingdoms of this world?

- Every human government needs to bring cohesion
- So they use...
- Power over.
- Jesus used
- Power under.
- Unity—cohesion—comes as a gift of the Spirit.
- *Cesar Garcia, What is God's Kingdom and What Does Citizenship Look Like?*

- Greg Boyd: Power under
- “Power under” implies submission to others, which can lead to suffering.
- Gelassenheit.
- God will not force goodness.
- So we can’t either.

Gelassenheit

- Michael Sattler's well known letter to the brotherhood at Horb, sent out of his prison in May 1527. "In this peril I completely surrendered myself unto the will of the Lord, and ... prepared myself even for death for His testimony. [Yet] I deemed it necessary to stir you up to follow after us in the divine warfare" (quoted from Martyr's Mirror).

From the tract *Concerning the True Soldier of Christ* by Hans Haffner, 1534. The major idea is Gelassenheit, the victory over "world, flesh and the Devil." "The world truly accepts Christ as a gift, but does not know him at all from the point of view of suffering." "When we truly realize the love of God, we will be ready to give up for love's sake even what God has given us." "It is by this Gelassenheit that a true disciple is first recognized. Only by overcoming all selfishness will a community of love become possible."

What about today?

Understood in its proper historical context,
refusing to baptize your baby and refusing to
swear an oath = a daring political act.

Is God calling us to do the same today?

Articulating our faith

- Edward Yoder story
- Tell your stories. Speak of your faith with respect and love.
- Practice talking to Christians who embrace the US as a Christian nation.
- Advocate for minorities.
- Practice “power under.” Luke 22:25-27

- “We are, by baptism, people who do not obey in advance.” Bixler

“Do not obey in advance.”

Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny*

Works Cited

- Melissa Florer Bixler, “An Ungovernable Faith,” *Christian Century*, March 2025, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/ungovernable-faith>
- Greg Boyd, *Myth of a Christian Nation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.
- Cesar Garcia, *What is God’s Kingdom and What Does Citizenship Look Like?* Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2021.
- Troy Oswald, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History*, Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2024.
- Joanne Wolfe, *In the Hollow of God’s Hand: The Life and Times of Edward Z. Yoder*, Novia Scotia, Canada: Eaglefeather Press, 2018.

Works Cited

- GAMEO, <https://gameo.org/>
 - Believers' Baptism
 - Oaths
 - Schleithem Confession
 - Gelassenheit

START HERE, GO EVERYWHERE