

# Stewards of our Heritage

Christians accept the responsibility of stewards. This is a high calling, and we take it seriously. We try to use the earth's resources, our money, our time, and our bodies wisely. We do this because we believe we will be held accountable for the way we have handled the gifts God has given us.

When looking at the word *steward* in the Bible; it is usually in the context of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to steward our spiritual gifts as well as the natural. So, we preach and teach and obey the Gospel.

In Deuteronomy, the Lord placed a responsibility on fathers to teach their children about Him and His ways. They were stewards of God's ways. Paul instructed Timothy to teach faithful men who would teach faithful men the doctrines that Paul had taught Timothy. This process of teaching and learning the ways of God is part of being a good steward. This process of teaching and learning is also a way to preserve important concepts.

Five hundred years ago, a group of men decided to take the Bible seriously and obey it. It started small but grew into a movement with some distinct concepts. Some of these concepts overlap – you can't have one without the other. But without these, Anabaptism would not have been anything different than the other reforms. These are not in any particular order.

*Freedom of conscience* – This point may not be the most obvious to us today. But the idea that true Christianity cannot be forced upon anyone, and no one should be persecuted for their beliefs is an Anabaptist idea. It has been adopted by many if not all Christians today. But this was radical and transformative in that time. The culture did not understand that the church would be made up of voluntary members separate from a state entity.

*Repentance and amendment of life* – this idea does not seem foreign to us. But in the church's apostasy of the time of Anabaptism's formation, this was practically unexpected. Even the reformers lamented the sinfulness of their members. Anabaptists, on the other hand, believed that true Christian faith would be accompanied with a newness of life. This was a life now lived in faith according to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. They insisted that an inner experience would result in outward expression and that this was an indication of true repentance.

Amendment of life could also be called *discipleship*. This meant that following Jesus was a living and real way of life. It was a way of life for everyone who professed faith in Jesus. The testimonies of the first Anabaptist contemporaries show their awareness of a very different practical Christianity than that of the Catholic or reformed churches.

*Believer's baptism* – only individuals who understand sin and repentance and can request baptism should be baptized. This would disqualify infants and small children. Baptism should be for those

who have proven that they understand what repentance and newness of life is. Then they would be baptized into the church membership. The name Anabaptist means something like “rebaptizer”. It is understandable then to think that this issue of baptism was the point on which the whole movement hinged. This is not quite accurate. The rebaptism and the consequent teaching that infants should not be baptized is a logical result of the belief that repentance and amendment of life is necessary to be a part of the kingdom of Christ. The act of rebaptizing then was the ultimate proof that a person was breaking with the state churches.

*Church as a brotherhood* – The Anabaptists saw the church as a brotherhood of believers. This went deeper than mere words. At its basic level, it meant the sharing of goods with one another and fervent love for one another. The Hutterites are an example of the complete communal experience, but most were not on that level. But they did believe that we are only stewards of our goods and that a Christian would share with those who had need. Brotherhood also implies the idea of equality in the church. There were no priests or popes, all had the same spiritual access to God through Christ. The leaders of the early Anabaptist movement included clergy from the Catholic church, but anyone who lived a faithful life of discipleship would be eligible for leadership.

*The two-kingdom concept* – the concept that Christ’s kingdom is active and alive while inviting people out of the world’s kingdom was a different way of thinking. It also is the basis for one of the primary doctrines of Anabaptism. Nonresistance toward all was one of the defining principles for the Anabaptists. This was during a time when the Catholic and Protestants saw war as a duty of the church. The Anabaptists believed that if Christianity meant discipleship, then there was no way to illustrate one’s loyalty to Christ through war or physical force. The Anabaptists also believed that the world as such would never be completely converted. Therefore, Christians should withdraw from the worldly system and create a Christian social order separate from the world – the church. Missions and evangelizing would involve the conversion of individuals who come to Christ through faith and live in newness of life. The Anabaptist expectation was most people in and of the world and a minority in the church. This would lead to inevitable conflict and persecution. The joy and fulfillment that came from the brotherhood experience made it worthwhile to suffer in this world.

It is an oversimplification to think that we can just chart a line of doctrine and practice straight back to the group in the room in Zurich where they baptized one another. This is not to say there is no connection, but it’s fraught with human error and genius. But we can see God at work in the Anabaptist movement.

The trials and persecutions, tests and perseverance, and time and patience needed for Anabaptism to survive and thrive over the years is beyond this article. These topics have been developed by more skillful writers and thinkers. Let us now turn our minds to those of us who have claimed this heritage. Let us consider what we have gained by identifying with this cause.

Because of the brave and conscientious men and women who wanted more than anything to follow Jesus Christ, we have been given several important gifts. These are not listed in any order, nor is this a complete list. But when we consider the chaos of churches, homes, and communities who reject the basic understanding of Christ-centered New Testament obedience, we are indeed blessed.

*Practical obedience to the wisdom and commands in the Bible* – to obey the Bible and the example of Christ as recorded in the Bible gives us an obedience mindset. This can be misguided sometimes. But

it is a blessing to be part of a heritage that asks the question, “How can I obey this command?” rather than, “How does this not apply to our day?”

To truly steward the gift that the Anabaptists gave us, we should never lose this wrestling with the Scriptures in the context of brotherhood. Today’s pressures are to avoid obedience and to become individualized in our study and application. This path has been taken by many and the end of the road is far from the obedience to Christ that the Anabaptists held as the most important part of Christianity.

*Stable and disciplined marriages and homes* – one of the results of an obedience mindset is solid homes. When the Bible is followed as a pattern for good marriage and child training, we will have stability in our marriages and safety in our homes. To properly steward this gift, we must continue to believe in Jesus’ definition of marriage and to value children as a gift from God.

*Relatively stable and disciplined churches* – I chose the word “relatively” for a reason. Many of us are familiar with church stress and even breakdown in relationships in the churches of which we are part. However, churches that are disciplined and take obedience seriously are stable in the sense that there tends to be a group that remains intact and stays faithful. In other words, wanderers – whether they are community contacts or our children – will know where to find a group of serious Christians. There is a tremendous blessing in this, and it is a result of careful obedience and following Christ collectively. To be faithful in stewarding this gift, we must continue to prayerfully deal with sin in our lives and in the church brotherhood. We must stay sensitive to the voice of God speaking through our brothers and sisters. We must continue to teach and practice that repentance and faith will mean amendment of life.

*Values of honesty, love, friendship and community* – everyone says they value these, but what we live is proof of belief. Repentance and amendment of life will lead to radical honesty, fervent love, true friendship and functioning community in ways that seem miraculous to those who have not experienced it.

There is pressure in the modern age of technology to undermine all of these. Online interactions allow us to have a “community” of friends and counselors apart from those God has arranged in the brotherhood. Honesty and love are less real in online interactions and true friendships seem to be more exceptional.

Insurances will not promote community in brotherhood assistance. The costs of medical procedures make it seem like an unbearable burden for the brotherhood. But we cannot dispense with a Biblical concept without negative consequences. The community in Anabaptist days may have meant a difference of life or death in the days of persecution. Today, it might be a matter of life or death in the spiritual sense. Living the Christian life without the community of believers in a local brotherhood is futile.

We can steward these values best by simply putting them to practice in daily life.

*Values of gender roles and modesty* – in a world of confusion, the clarity of obedience to the Word of God is necessary. Perhaps, it is difficult to find explicit early Anabaptist writing or teaching on this

point. They do have things to say about modesty, especially in the context of finery and excessive clothing.

Here we are considering the role of men and women as defined in the headship order. Practically this means that men will lead out in the church and home. Women fill a vital role of support and nurture. The practical veiling for women is a powerful witness to Biblical obedience.

The present-day challenge to this is powerful. The confusion of gender roles and the loss of modesty has led to confusion of gender as such, and a sexualized culture.

To be good stewards, we need men of integrity and willing to take their role as leader seriously. Men need to lead the way in simplicity and modesty in their realm of business and personal appearance and behavior. Women need to behave and clothe themselves in ways that illustrate the principle of the head veiling.

*Values of purity and morality* – taking Jesus word’s seriously, we must be pure and upright in our moral character. Our homes and schools and churches must be safe for our children. Our young men and women need to be taught what purity is in courtship and come to marriage with no regrets. When moral integrity is compromised and not properly dealt with, the community will suffer. We believe there is healing and forgiveness for failures, of course. But let’s do what we can to avoid failures in our lives and in the lives of those for whom we are responsible. The digital age makes this harder than ever. But to follow the example of our forefathers, we radically obey Christ. We make no provision for the flesh, and we cut off anything that offends us or offends those we care for. In doing this, we steward a gift that makes strong communities.

When analyzing a list of benefits we have received, we should not become conceited or lazy. We should not become selfish or proud. Rather, as stewards we are humbled, careful, and generous. We are blessed to have been given the tools that this heritage gives us. We willingly share it with those around us. Strong Christian homes and communities are a bright light in a dark world and the opportunities to share the Gospel are countless.

Jesus warns us that if we have been given much, much will be required. We are required to be faithful in the smallest trust given to us. The context of this teaching in Luke is money. But I think we could apply it to the blessings of the heritage of Godly people who taught us to obey and live the Gospel practically in the context of brotherhood. This is a privilege that many would love to have.

Will this movement die in our generation? Will the pressures of the friendly world prove to be too much? Will materialism make us selfish and seek more security from worldly methods of protecting our wealth? It seems there are many ways to fail. But God is faithful. Just as the very first Anabaptists found grace to take a stand and remain faithful, so can we. The battle looks different in our day, but it’s really the same – follow the worldly ways or choose loyalty to Christ.

~Lyndon Burkholder