

Anabaptist reparations after 500 years

Mennonites and the Doctrine of Discovery

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Western Christendom and the Doctrine of Discovery

Western Christendom birthed the Doctrine of Discovery (DoD) project, and Euro-Anabaptists took advantage of the plunder in North America for centuries. The DoD's diseased framing of the great commission converted land, bodies, and cultures into sites for Christian conquering and bolstered a supremacy complex while conflating Western European Christianity, civilization, and bodies. The DoD ecclesially justified the stealing of lands and the domination of non-white peoples as part of European Christian duty, providing a sacred justification for plunder and creating the heresy of racial hierarchy.

The DoD was first articulated in the fifteenth century and was used to justify the colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of Africans by Spain and Portugal, soon to be joined by other European nations. Papal bulls such as *Dum Diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) theologically authorized seizing non-Christian (or non-European) lands and enslaving non-Christians (non-Europeans). The DoD is based on the idea that European Christians had a right to claim any land that was not inhabited by Christians. As Pope Nicholas V declared in the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455,

We had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso—to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities,

*dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.*¹

The DoD project that would unfold over five centuries was an inevitable outgrowth of medieval crusading ideology. It merely extended the trajectory that Western Christendom was already on. Missionary zeal during these years was simultaneously caught up in colonizing zeal and the goal

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of civilizing non-Christian peoples into Western ways of living. Evangelism and the Great Commission played a significant role in facilitating conquest and the plundering of peoples in Africa, the Americas, and parts of Asia. Colonial conquest and plunder, white supremacy, anti-Black oppression, Indigenous erasure and displacement, the mechanistic

plunder of the earth, and subsequent xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies are all deeply part of the DoD project. The impacts on Indigenous Peoples and African Americans in North America were particularly death-dealing. The DoD brought prolonged and disproportionate suffering, often by the hands of professing Christians, to Indigenous communities and descendants of enslaved Africans that persist to this day.

In his book *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings details the “diseased theological imagination” and underpinnings of colonial Christianity in Portugal, Peru, South Africa, and the United States.² Part of the ongoing power of his book for Anabaptists is how he picks up church history right where white Mennonites, Brethren, and Neo-Anabaptists wrap up. White Anabaptists are known to offer vital and powerful anti-Christendom critiques, but for centuries this has not traditionally included a critique of white supremacy and colonial conquest. Jennings helps everyone, including white Anabaptists, perceive the way that Western Christian imagination has profoundly shaped Christianity and the world we inhabit today.

There is a growing movement to recognize the historical impact and contemporary reality that the DoD has constructed. Among Anabaptists and beyond, the call to confess, repent, resist, and make amends for the

1 See <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/nichol05/romanus-pontifex.htm>.

2 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

DoD is swelling. Robert P. Jones's latest book, *The Roots of White Supremacy*, takes a macro and micro look at white supremacy.³ He argues that the origins of American white supremacy can be traced back to 1493, "the year in which [Columbus] returned to a hero's welcome in Spain" and Western domination and conquest went global with the church's support.⁴ He acknowledges the earlier Papal Bulls in the mid-fifteenth century but sees this year as decisive. His 1493 argument may or may not stick, but most of the book offers a powerful narration of local stories unfolding over many centuries in three different regions of the United States. With each regional story, white supremacy is unveiled as an American project. This kind of storytelling helps followers of Jesus comprehend their centuries-long participation in a society that is more shaped by the DoD project than most want to acknowledge.

Anabaptists must move beyond asking who physically forced Indigenous tribes off the land, or who owned enslaved people. Such a narrow focus is used to aid white Anabaptists in skirting historical complicity. The real challenge today is to perceive the comprehensive project that was the DoD and how Anabaptists benefited and advantaged themselves through their missional participation in a diseased imagination.

White Anabaptists' reckoning with their history

Anabaptists must reckon with their complicity and participation in the DoD project as they recognize their 500-year milestone. Their participation often came through claiming land that had been stolen by Indigenous Peoples, benefiting from an economy built on the enslavement of stolen Black labor, and assimilating into white habitus and society. While most white Anabaptist communities rarely took part directly in the physical act of enslavement or forcible removal, they nonetheless participated in it and advantaged themselves socially rather than resisting it. For that reason, they need to repent and join Jesus's reparative presence in our world in response to these harms.

It is easy to understand how white Anabaptists have struggled to see their participation and complicity clearly when considering how they frequently tell church history that conceals their own unfaithfulness regarding the DoD project over the last five centuries. A more truthful

3 Robert P. Jones, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy: And the Path to a Shared American Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

4 Jones, *Hidden Roots*, 14.

account must emerge that narrates beyond the anti-Christendom disposition of Anabaptism but also unveils how European Anabaptists engaged with white supremacist North America (and white supremacy around the world). Then it will be clearer that white Anabaptist narratives fail to offer the moral clarity necessary for white Anabaptists to be a healing rather than harmful ecclesial presence in response to the DoD project.

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such is a result of how I have encountered Anabaptism through books and informal conversations with other Anabaptists. There is a common story told by Anabaptists. Sometimes it is told with more nuance, and other times it is simplistic, but either way it reveals the anti-Christendom disposition of Ana-

baptism while also concealing white Anabaptist participation in white supremacy and the colonial project.

The common story goes like this. The early church was born on the margins of society without political or social power. They experienced periodic persecution in different regions. However, they took discipleship to Jesus seriously, even to the point of rejecting the sword and accepting the consequences of living into the peace of Christ. While some Christendom habits were beginning to get implemented in the life of the church in its first centuries, things changed radically after Constantine came to power, eventually becoming the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. During that time the church began moving from the margins to the center of the empire. Bishops got elevated to the place of the Roman senate. The church received all sorts of privileges. Soon, the once-persecuted church began persecuting other religious minorities (and often other Christians who did not fit into their definition of orthodoxy). The emphasis of this story is on the pre-Constantinian versus Constantinian church. There is deep concern to pay attention to the power dynamics of the early church and its bottom-up Christianity in comparison to the Constantinian church that coercively wields a top-down Christianity. The more nuanced versions of this story will talk about how Western Christendom did not happen all at once but took many centuries and climaxed in the medieval period.

Most Anabaptists do not have much knowledge of medieval Christianity, so as they tell church history most skip immediately to Reforma-

tion history. A similar theme arises. Two reformations take place: the magisterial reformation, including Lutherans and Reformed Christians in Europe (and reforms within Catholicism), and the Radical Reformation, which includes Anabaptists. Anabaptist historiography unveils the ways that folks like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin did not end the entanglements of church and state but instead simply fractured Christendom. Mini-Christendoms still organized as state churches persisted with the same “Constantinian Christian” mindset. Anabaptists, in contrast, severed church and state ties, recentered the life and teachings of Jesus, and formed concrete communities defined by mutual aid, the priesthood of all believers, rejection of the sword, and adult baptism that led to a radical clash with Western civilization. They were deemed heretics by Christendom churches and were violently drowned, burned at the stake, tortured, hunted, and displaced. The major emphasis again is on the clash of these two different expressions of the church, highlighting the power dynamics and the manner in which following the way of Jesus confronted the Christendom logics and practices of the mainstream church.

I have noticed a different concern rise to the forefront when white North American Anabaptists begin to talk about church history after the Protestant reformation. From that moment forward, I hear stories of

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Swiss and German Mennonites, Dutch and Russian Mennonites, horse and buggies, denominations and splits. I hear stories of whose family lineage goes back to the days of Menno Simons or Alexander Mack. I am told of shoofly pie and plain dress customs. While learning about the splits and fights among white

Anabaptists over the last few centuries is helpful for comprehending the particular fights and divisions among Anabaptists today, they lack the social analysis of the earlier story, especially as it relates to power dynamics that have been so prevalent for Anabaptist rehearsals of church history prior to North America. This way of telling church history can condemn other mainstream Christian traditions for their participation in the Christendom project while simultaneously concealing Anabaptist assimilation into the DoD project and its white supremacist entrapments in North America. Anabaptism does theology and ethics in conversation with church history; however, the common Anabaptist way of telling the story of Western Christianity hides as much as it reveals.

White Anabaptist participation in the DoD project

White Anabaptists in North America were full participants in the DoD project. After Indigenous Peoples were violently displaced by others, Mennonites and Brethren were quick to claim thousands of acres of stolen land, even before the tears and blood of Indigenous People had dried. Old Order Anabaptist groups are still uniquely associated with land. The DoD project in the United States was translated into the idea of Manifest Destiny. This was not a deterrent for white Anabaptists who saw

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lands as *available for them* and therefore sought economic opportunity by coming and turning purported empty lands into square acres of productivity. Many Anabaptists fled European persecution when they came to North America only to build their lives on the suffering of others once here. There was no vision of joining the Indigenous of the land in mutuality. They replaced them on the

land. Working the stolen land with an imagination of Western productivity and civilization led to significant wealth accumulation in an exploding economy built on the stolen labor and exploitation of Black people. The wealth accumulated from this past (that is still present) is obscured by phrases about living simply, yet few white Anabaptists voluntarily lived at the poverty line in solidarity with those on the underside of engineered systemic poverty, as the slogan might suggest. As Black people were tortured by whips on plantations, sold as property on auction blocks, and had their families torn apart never to be seen again, white Anabaptists frequently flourished. Anabaptist abolitionists actively seeking to end the enslavement of Black people were the exception to the rule, not the norm.

Mennonites and Brethren assimilated into whiteness and white society during their time in North America. Many initially retained their German language and lived in farming communities until the late nineteenth century. The early twentieth century in North America produced various forms of nonconformity in terms of plain dress and a rejection of the ways of “the English.” But most Anabaptists were deemed white and not subjected to Jim Crow, Native reservations, Chinese exclusion, or Japanese internments. In the early twentieth century, many white Anabap-

tists had internalized racial segregationist practices and habits.⁵ The civil rights movement was similar to the abolitionist movement, where active participation in the movement was an exception rather than the rule for white Anabaptists. Most mirrored the fractured and polarized positions characteristic of white dominant culture. This assimilation process into white identity and white mainstream society through the twentieth century, coupled with economic advantages from a system built on exploitation and plunder, underscores white Anabaptist participation and complicity in the DoD project.

My critique of white Anabaptists in North America mirrors the critique that Anabaptists have traditionally laid at the feet of Protestant reformers. White Anabaptists failed to take their anti-Christendom critique to its logical conclusion, extending its implications towards an anti-colonial and anti-white supremacist disposition in solidarity with those on the underside of the DoD project's death-dealing plunder and oppression. White Anabaptist stories are helpful in exposing some Christendom abuses, but they lack the stories, experiences, and wisdom of those who have most experienced the underside of white supremacy and colonialism to enable Anabaptism to become an actual shalom church in twenty-first-century North America. White Anabaptism needs to be anchored in Black and Indigenous stories to avoid the sanitized myth and self-aggrandizing narrative that has been told for the last five hundred years in most Anabaptist corners. White Anabaptists must reckon with their participation in the DoD project as it unfolded over the last five centuries as they recognize their 500-year milestone. There are not enough Anabaptist landed stories with deep analysis.⁶ Anabaptist participation in claiming stolen land, benefiting from an economy built on slavery, and assimilating into whiteness and white mainstream society is reason enough to pursue reparations.

Anabaptist reparations after 500 years

White Anabaptists are often quick to identify with Jesus when reading the Bible, and often they imagine they must live like Jesus *for others*. Discipleship to Jesus certainly must lead us to embody the Jesus story for our neighbors; however, it does not always mean that the character in the

5 Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

6 Elaine Enns et al., *Healing Haunted Histories : A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

Jesus story that most rhymes with our own lives is Jesus. Sometimes our discipleship to Jesus will be anchored in our ability to see ourselves from the vantage point of those Jesus encounters. I want white Anabaptists to take this 500-year milestone as an opportunity to identify with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who advantaged himself by benefitting from the exploitation of his Jewish siblings. Zacchaeus took up a trajectory that ran directly contrary to the flow of Israel's story of having been dominated by many empires. Zacchaeus found himself complicit in the imperial project of plunder of his own community. And yet, on encountering Jesus and his jubilee vision, he radically responded to the messianic reign that had irrupted into the world by redistributing half of his wealth to the poor and then committing reparations (fourfold) to all those who experienced the exploitation of his imperial activity. Scripture tells us that this act of repair and healing led Jesus to announce that salvation had come to his house.

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This story is good news to an Anabaptist tradition in North America that has too frequently been lost but still can be found faithful despite centuries-long participation with the DoD project.

It is not clear that the Anabaptist tradition in North America has earned the title “peace church,” given its response to genocide, slavery, displacement, oppression, plunder, and ongoing discrimination on this land.

However, its story is not over. Now is the time to anchor Anabaptism in the twenty-first century with the experiences and wisdom of those most affected by the DoD project. This is not an erasure of Anabaptism but a more robust Christian discipleship that is as anti-colonizing and anti-racist as it is anti-Christendom. It is a liberating, harmony way, grounded in Black and Native theological wisdom. White Anabaptists must encounter Jesus again, witnessed by Black and Indigenous people, as they strive to become a shalom church five hundred years into their story.

Pursuing reparations precedes being a shalom church. There is no genuine shalom without restorative justice and healing mercy also present as its foundation. Avoiding conscription to war while apathetically letting your neighbors be destroyed does not make for a peace church. Reparations is part of the harmony and liberating way that must be taken up as disciples of Jesus. White Anabaptists must seek reparations that are not

limited by narrow conversations defined by financial debt. Like Zacchaeus, Anabaptists must promote the comprehensive healing, wellbeing, and ultimate thriving of those who have had their backs against the wall of white supremacy. There are multifaceted dimensions to reparations work that must address eradicating ongoing racial injustice at local, regional, state, and national levels in housing, education, livable wages, policing, prisons, safety, and physical and psychological healthcare.⁷ And then there is redistributing *land*. None of this can be done without radical and prophetic truth-telling so that we can live into a more healed future. There is an opportunity to participate in the delivering and reparative presence of Jesus Christ in North America, but first Anabaptists must come down from their tree like Zacchaeus.⁸

As Anabaptists mark this significant 500-year milestone, there ought to be celebration and lament. Lament and repentance can transfigure the church's witness toward God's shalom, especially for Indigenous and Black Americans and the many other peoples who have suffered from this anti-Christ and death-dealing project that is also approximately five hundred years old. Let Anabaptism after five hundred years lead disciples of Jesus to work for repair and amends for its assimilation into a violent mainstream dominant culture that enjoyed the advantages of whiteness and benefited from the stolen land and labor of Indigenous and Black people. The time is now for Anabaptism to become a shalom church.

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7 Michael D. Barram et al., eds., *Reparations and the Theological Disciplines: Prophetic Voices for Remembrance, Reckoning, and Repair* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023).

8 Drew G. I. Hart, *Who Will Be A Witness: Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love, and Deliverance* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2020), 241–76.