

On Judgement and Discernment

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1 Disclaimer

This leaflet is a brief introduction to Judgement and Discernment in an Anabaptist perspective. We encourage you to "test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and to peacefully set aside what does not resonate with you.

2 Jesus' Teachings on Judgement

In the teachings of Jesus, we find a profound and compassionate approach to judgement that challenges us to reflect on our own lives before passing judgement on others. Central to this teaching is the call for introspection and humility.

2.1 Key Gospel Passages on Judgement

Jesus' teachings provide profound insights into the nature of judgement and the importance of seeking the good in others. The following passages highlight these themes with direct quotations from a literal translation:

- **Matthew 7:1-5:** "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." This passage warns against the hypocrisy of judging others without recognizing one's own faults.
- **Matthew 7:7-8:** "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." These

verses imply that our intentions guide our discoveries. By seeking the good in others, we encourage the revelation of their virtues rather than their faults.

- **Leviticus 19:18:** "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." The Old Testament teaches the sentiment of not judging but rather focusing on loving.
- **Luke 6:37:** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Jesus here connects the act of refraining from judgement with the grace of forgiveness, encouraging his followers to embrace a forgiving spirit.
- **Philippians 4:8:** "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Paul echoes Jesus' sentiment by advising believers to focus their thoughts on the positive attributes and virtues, fostering a mindset that looks for and encourages the good in others.

These passages not only instruct us on how to judge but also remind us to seek the inherent goodness in our fellow humans, thus creating a more loving and forgiving community in line with Jesus' teachings.

2.2 Understanding 'Judge Not'

The directive "judge not," as expressed in **Matthew 7:1**, is often misunderstood. It does not advocate for the absence of moral discernment but warns against the kind of judgement that emanates from a place of self-righteousness and presumption. Anabaptist tradition interprets this as an exhortation to approach others with humility and introspection, recognizing our propensity to sin as echoed in **Romans 3:23**. We are encouraged to be discerning, yet always through the lens of grace, as exemplified by Jesus in **John 8:7**, where He invites those without sin to cast the first stone. This ethos is further supported by **James 4:12**, which reminds us that there is only one lawgiver and judge. Our call is to love, as stated in **James 2:12-13**, which urges us to speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty, for judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment, guiding us to reflect the love and compassion of Christ in our interactions with others.

2.3 Mercy and Understanding in Judgement

The essence of Jesus' teachings on mercy shines brightly throughout His ministry. Not only does He highlight mercy in His response to the woman accused of adultery in **John 8:7**, but He also personifies this mercy in His interactions with sinners and in His parables, such as the Prodigal Son (**Luke 15:11-32**). In the face of grievous wrongdoing, Jesus' message remains consistent: it is always acceptable to forgive and to love. This is perhaps most poignantly demonstrated when Jesus, even while suffering on the cross, extends forgiveness to those who crucified Him, as narrated in **Luke 23:34**, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." His teachings and actions exemplify that no action is beyond the reach of forgiveness, no matter how seemingly grievous, unforgivable, or unacceptable. As Anabaptists, we are called to embody this radical mercy and understanding, recognizing our shared human frailty and the transformative power of forgiveness. This approach to judgement and mercy is further reinforced by **Matthew 18:21-22**, where Jesus instructs Peter to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven, symbolizing the boundless nature of forgiveness.

2.4 Righteous Judgement

Jesus' teaching on righteous judgement emphasizes the necessity of looking beyond mere appearances to discern rightly. In **John 7:24**, He says, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement." This invitation to righteous judgement calls for a deeper understanding and discernment that transcends superficial observation.

The full context and quote of Jesus' description of His own judgement in **John 8:15-16** provide further clarity: "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me." Here, Jesus delineates the contrast between human judgement, which is inherently flawed and limited, and divine judgement, which is perfect and true. He affirms that any judgement He makes is valid because it is not based on solitary human perspective but is in unity with the Father and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This acknowledgment of divine guidance in the process of judgement is significant. It suggests that human judgement, even at its best, is prone to error and cannot match the perfection of divine judgement. In the Anabaptist tradition, this understanding underscores the importance of humility and reliance on the Holy Spirit for discernment, acknowledging that human per-

spective is not absolute and must always be open to the correction and leading of God's Spirit.

2.5 The Perils of Self-Righteous Judgement in Scriptural Teachings

The teachings of Jesus and the biblical narrative caution against self-righteous judgement, which can foster pride and diminish compassion, deviating from the ethos of love and humility. In **Matthew 7:1-5**, a direct admonition against such judgement is clear, while **Luke 18:9-14** illustrates the folly of self-exaltation through the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, emphasizing humility and mercy.

Old Testament wisdom, particularly in **Proverbs 21:2**, underlines the sovereignty of God's judgement, acknowledging that God assesses the heart's intentions rather than mere outward appearances. **Micah 6:8** furthers this by promoting justice, mercy, and humility as fundamental to godly living, in stark contrast to self-righteousness.

The New Testament echoes this sentiment, with **1 Corinthians 13:2** highlighting love as the utmost virtue, surpassing even the most profound gifts and achievements. Similarly, **Galatians 5:22-23** identifies the fruits of the Spirit, including love, kindness, and gentleness, as antithetical to self-righteous judgement and indicative of a life aligned with the Spirit.

Collectively, these scriptures converge on a message that discourages self-righteousness, advocating instead for a life characterized by love, humility, and a merciful heart in both judgement and action.

3 Discernment as a Daily Practice in the Anabaptist Tradition

In the Anabaptist tradition, discernment is the spiritual practice of seeking God's guidance to understand and follow His will, as described in **1 John 4:1**. It involves both individual and communal commitment. Through prayer, reflection on Scripture, and engaging in shared worship and dialogue within the community, discernment is exercised to align actions with Jesus' teachings. This process requires believers to "test the spirits" to avoid deception and stay true to the Gospel's essence, as echoed in scriptures like **John 15:27** and **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21**.

Communal discernment, a key aspect of Anabaptist practice, is conducted through collective worship and consensus-driven dialogue, as indicated in **Acts 15:28**. This approach ensures that decisions align with both the Holy Spirit's guidance and the collective wisdom of the community. Personal discernment, while an individ-

ual endeavor involving daily prayer (Philippians 4:6), meditation (Psalm 1:2), and openness to God's leading (Proverbs 3:5-6), is also supported and enriched by the insights and counsel of fellow believers (Proverbs 11:14). This dual approach reflects Jesus' example of discernment, considering both individual and communal contexts in his interactions, as seen in his dealings with the Pharisees (Matthew 23), the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30), and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in both personal and communal discernment, aiding in interpreting and applying Jesus' teachings in everyday life. This process, encompassing both individual growth in faith (Ephesians 4:15) and collective wisdom in judgment and decision-making (James 1:5), honors God's commands to love Him and our neighbors (Matthew 22:37-40) and bears witness to the Gospel's transformative power (Acts 1:8).

4 Anabaptist Views on Authority and Judgement

Anabaptists are known for their commitment to principles of nonviolence, nonresistance, and a clear separation between church and state affairs. This stance is rooted in their pursuit of a Christ-centered life that emulates the peace and love taught in the New Testament, diverging from the traditional roles of secular power and authority.

4.1 Biblical Foundation

Leviticus 19:18 instructs, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Similarly, *Deuteronomy 32:35* states, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." These Old Testament scriptures form the foundation of the Anabaptist view on vengeance, which is further reinforced by the New Testament in *Romans 12:19*: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Furthermore, *Matthew 5:38-48* encapsulates the teachings of Jesus on nonresistance, with instructions to turn the other cheek and to love one's enemies as a testament to the higher calling of love and forgiveness.

4.2 Community and Conscience in Anabaptist Practice

Within the Anabaptist tradition, the concept of community accountability holds a significant place, deeply rooted in the principles of mutual support and integrity as outlined in Galatians 6:1-2. This accountability is aimed at fostering spiritual growth and maintaining the community's adherence to Christ's teachings. Historical

practices such as the ban, detailed in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, highlight the community's collective responsibility to maintain Christian conduct, though its use has evolved over time.

4.2.1 Historical Anabaptist Position

Menno Simons, a prominent early Anabaptist leader, is often quoted as saying, "The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife. They are children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and know of no war." This sentiment is echoed in the Schleithem Confession of 1527, particularly in the article concerning the sword, which explicitly rejects the use of force in legal disputes and punishment, aligning with the Anabaptist doctrine of nonresistance and peace.

4.2.2 Schleithem Confession on the Sword

The Schleithem Confession Article VI states: "The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law, the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and death, and the secular rulers are established to wield the same. But within the perfection of Christ, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

"Now many, who do not understand Christ's will for us, will ask: whether a Christian may or should use the sword against the wicked for the protection and defense of the good, or for the sake of love. Our reply is unanimously as follows: Christ teaches and commands us to learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart and thus we shall find rest for our souls. Also Christ says to the woman caught in adultery, not that she should be stoned according to the Law of His Father (and yet He says, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first') but with the merciful warning that she should sin no more. Thus He also says to the thief on the cross: 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.' Accordingly, we should also proceed."

4.2.3 Contemporary Anabaptist Practice

In contemporary Anabaptist communities, the practice of discipline reflects a restorative rather

than punitive approach, aligning with New Testament teachings on reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This shift favors counseling and mediation, embodying Christ's teachings on redemption (Matthew 18:15-17), and represents a balance between communal discernment and individual conscience.

Communal discernment, while a collective endeavor drawing on the congregation's wisdom for decision-making and disciplinary matters (Acts 15, 1 Corinthians 12:7), is tempered by a respect for personal conscience. This balance ensures that while decisions are made collectively, they also honor the individual's discernment guided by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13, Romans 14:1-4). This approach, as illustrated in the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 and narratives from the Martyrs Mirror, reflects the Anabaptist commitment to integrating communal care with individual moral responsibility, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of living out Christ's teachings in a community context.

4.3 The Role of Magistrates

4.3.1 Anabaptist Perspective on Worldly Order

Anabaptists recognize the role of magistrates in maintaining societal order but advocate for Christians to adhere to a higher standard of peace, mercy, and forgiveness, as taught by Jesus Christ. This approach, while aligning with the principle of separation of church and state, also encourages active engagement in promoting restorative and compassionate justice. Scriptural teachings like Matthew 5:38-39 and John 18:36 underpin this perspective, emphasizing non-retaliation and a kingdom not of this world. Furthermore, Romans 12:17-21 encourages Christians to live peacefully, avoiding evil for evil. Anabaptists actively envision a Christian order supporting fundamental human rights and meeting basic human needs (Micah 4:4), fostering a society built on mutual aid, peace, and dignity for every person.

4.3.2 Participation in Government and Legal Professions

While traditionally abstaining from roles requiring force or judgment, Anabaptists engage in government and legal professions that align with Jesus's teachings of nonviolence and love. This involvement can take the form of advisory roles or positions that promote love and kindness (Romans 12:18, 1 Peter 2:13-17), allowing participation without compromising their principles.

Menno Simons' words reflect this active engagement in society through acts of love and service. Modern Anabaptist communities balance respect for secular authorities with their convictions, engaging in civic duties like voting, jury duty, and holding public office in ways that focus on reconciliation and restorative justice (Matthew 5:9, Romans 12:18), demonstrating a commitment to applying Jesus' teachings in all aspects of societal involvement.

As Menno Simons said: "For true evangelical faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love; ... it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad; it does good to those who do it harm; it serves those that harm it; it prays for those who persecute it; it teaches, admonishes and judges us with the Word of the Lord; it seeks those who are lost; it binds up what is wounded; it heals the sick; it saves what is strong (sound); it becomes all things to all people. The persecution, suffering and anguish that come to it for the sake of the Lord's truth, are to it a joy and a consolation."

In conclusion, the Anabaptist approach to participation in government and legal professions embodies their commitment to Jesus' teachings, as reflected in passages like Romans 12:18 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. By engaging in roles that emphasize nonviolence, love, and service, and by fulfilling civic duties with a focus on reconciliation and restorative justice, they demonstrate a practical application of scriptural principles in public life. This approach, resonating with the spirit of Matthew 5:9 and Luke 6:27-36, shows how religious convictions can inform active, positive involvement in society, offering a model of integrating faith with communal and societal responsibilities in a way that reflects the transformative and peace-building message of Christ.

4.4 Conclusion: Commitment to Peace and Central Teachings

Anabaptists' dedication to the peace teachings of Jesus, emphasizing love, mercy, and forgiveness, often distinguishes them in societal matters related to law and justice. This commitment, as reflected in scriptures like Luke 6:27-36 and Romans 12:17-21, shapes their interaction with all aspects of society. It underpins their distinctive approach to issues of law, authority, and governance, demonstrating a unique embodiment of Christian principles in everyday life.