

500 years of powerless politics

by Jonny Rashid

[From Anabaptist World, January 2025, Vol. 6, No. 1](#)



The election of Donald trump was a victory for Christian nationalists who aspire to make the United States a Christian nation and codify their values in the nation's laws. The values they call Christian mirror the powers of wealth, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism and White supremacy.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, I want to herald how the Anabaptist witness has engaged politically while rejecting worldly power. Then I want to consider what this combination of engagement and rejection models for us today, politically and interpersonally.



The 16th-century Reformation was partly a repudiation of magisterial power. The Anabaptists' Radical Reformation continued in this path, but more thoroughly.

Anabaptists rejected the supremacy of church leaders and argued that common people had an intimacy with God that didn't need to be administered by the church or the state.

Their refusal to participate in the state or comply with its demands was a deeply political act, one that Americans today cannot fully appreciate. We are free to worship and to participate (or not) in the state as we please. No one is getting martyred for not baptizing babies.

We might be tempted to place our hope in the political party that opposes the Christian nationalist one. Because the Republican Party is essentially sponsored by Christian nationalists, we might think our hope lies with the Democrats.

Certainly, a Trump presidency gives peacemaking and justice-seeking Christians reasons for concern and fear. We should take the president-elect at his word that he will try to deport millions of undocumented immigrants, reverse progress on climate change, arm Israel with more deadly weapons to fuel its genocide of Palestinians and roll back the rights of women and queer people.

We should organize to resist these threats and do so with no apology.

But we should not place our hope in any political power — not an ally’s power nor any we might gain for ourselves. Rather, we must divest our power and rely on the power of Jesus, the Messiah. This aligns with how the early Anabaptists believed and lived.

Our powerlessness should shape our politics. Powerlessness leads us to ally with the vulnerable and the marginal. It aligns us with the oppressed, as our Savior did in his own divestment of power in the Incarnation.

Renouncing power impacts not only how we engage politically but how we live personally. While embracing a powerlessness that relies on the reign of God, it is crucial that we confront the forces of oppression, like sexism and racism. But if we do so by engaging in power struggles, we will repeat the mistakes our opponents make.

Often we are blind to our own prejudices. I know that I have been. I’ve fought against racism while ignoring my own sexism. I’ve confronted leaders who wouldn’t let go of power while ignoring my own ambition.

Power struggles are fruitless gridlocks. Even the “winner” is left tattered and wounded. There is little satisfaction in a painful victory.

Collecting power and wielding it over someone is not the way of Jesus. That doesn’t mean we stop working against oppression. Rather, we engage strategically.

My advice is to engage those with softened hearts, those who want to work together. As tempting as it is to argue with a Christian nationalist or a defender of Israel’s war in Gaza, our energy is not best spent that way. Stepping away is better than plunging forward.

Especially for minorities, who feel the existential effects of ideological disputes, we need to know when to let go. Knowing when to relent in a power struggle is more important than winning. I’ve learned that the hard way.

In the spirit of the Anabaptist refusal to engage in power struggles with the state, let’s avoid power struggles with the already-decided. Liberation won’t come from winning an argument, but by organizing with those who want to move with the Spirit.

Sometimes this involves moving on, breaking away, doing something new. It’s not easy to let go when it feels personal. But the cost of tightening our grip may be our own torn and bloodied palms.

Let’s embrace political powerlessness and cling not to our own understanding but to Jesus, the Messiah, who will liberate us better than any earthly power.



Jonny Rashid is pastor of West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship and the author of *Jesus Takes a Side* (Herald Press, 2022)