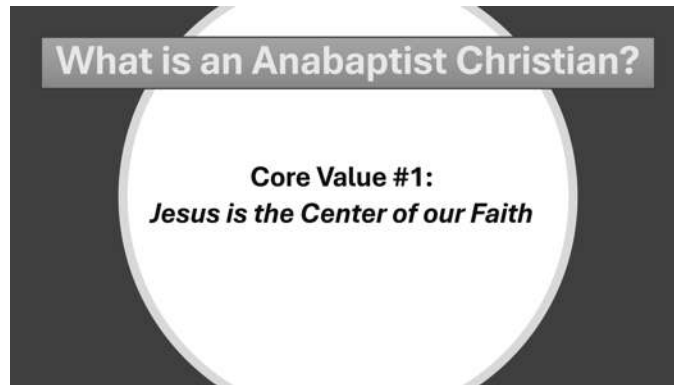


“31 Flavours of Jesus” // *Faith Exploration for Everyone* part 2
Wildwood Mennonite Church // Joe Heikman
April 21, 2024



Good morning! My name is Joe, my pronouns are “he” and “him,” and you can tell that I’m an Anabaptist preacher because I’m wearing the plaid, short-sleeve, button up uniform. :)

One Sunday morning in Sunday School, the lesson was from the Proverbs, something about the wisdom of hard work and preparation. And the Sunday School teacher thought they’d use an example from nature.



So the teacher began the lesson by saying, “I’m going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is.” The children nodded eagerly. “This thing lives in trees (pause) and eats nuts (pause)...” No hands went up. “It is sometimes gray or maybe brown (pause) and has a long bushy tail (pause)...”

The children were looking at each other, but still no hands raised. “And it jumps from branch to branch (pause) and chatters and flips its tail when it’s excited (pause)...”

Finally one youngster tentatively raised their hand. The teacher breathed a sigh of relief and called on them. “Well...,” the student answered, “I know the answer must be Jesus...but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!” 🐿️

This spring our worship services are asking, [“What is an Anabaptist Christian?”](#)

And we all know that the answer must be something about Jesus.

And it is--that's where we start: "Jesus is the Center of our Faith." Because, obviously. Of course he is.

So this morning I'm not going to tell you anything that you don't already know.

I'm going to describe these seven ways of relating to Jesus that, I think, cover the most common ways that Christians of any persuasion think about Jesus.



These are all biblical, and they're all well within the orthodox theology of the Christian tradition.

It's not a comprehensive list, there is a whole lot more that could be said about Jesus.

There are some gaps, for sure, and there's overlap between the categories.

Another preacher might arrange them differently--on a different week / I might arrange differently... but for today, I'll say these are the basics, and I don't think that will be controversial. No surprises. No squirrels here.

What I will say, and again I don't think this is controversial although it might make us a bit uncomfortable, is that there are a whole lot of different ways that different Christians relate to Jesus.

These are the ingredients, but there are a bunch of different Christian recipes, a lot of different ways to mix these together, and the result is a whole lot of different flavours of Jesus.

It's like when my family goes to an ice cream shop - we all order ice cream, but someone gets a dish of butter pecan, someone orders a cone of mocha almond fudge, and someone else gets a rainbow bubble gum birthday cake ice cream in a waffle cone

with extra sprinkles, and someone else doesn't like any of the options and grabs a Magnum chocolate-caramel popsicle from the freezer.

We're all having ice cream, I think, but it's a very different experience. And, most of the time, the variety serves us well. We're all happy with our choices, and the banter about which ice cream is best light-hearted and silly because it's ultimately about personal preference.



So my first question today is, what is your personal flavour of Jesus? Which of these are at the heart of your recipe? Which would you say are less important? Are there extra toppings not on the list that you like to throw in from time to time?

It's your faith, and for better or worse we get to choose the recipe.

That's not to say that anything goes--there is a point where you no longer have ice cream, more like a "frozen dairy dessert." There's a point where we're not talking about the same Jesus anymore--there certainly are traditions out there that call themselves Christian, where I might think *"well... that's just not who Jesus is. You're describing a squirrel, or, more often, you're projecting your own stuff onto Jesus."* And they would say the same about me, for sure.

I'm okay with that, because I know that I'm biased, that my recipe is not *the* only recipe, and that I'm probably wrong with some parts of my belief system. There are definitely a few squirrels in my theology. That's inevitable; my understanding is limited. I am both flawed and biased.

BUT, I don't know which parts I'm wrong about. I'm doing my best to hold all of the pieces together, to be faithful to what I've learned along the way, and my perspective is the only perspective I've got.

I talked about Martin Luther last week--during his heresy trial in front of the Emperor, with his life on the line, Luther is reported to have said, "I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."

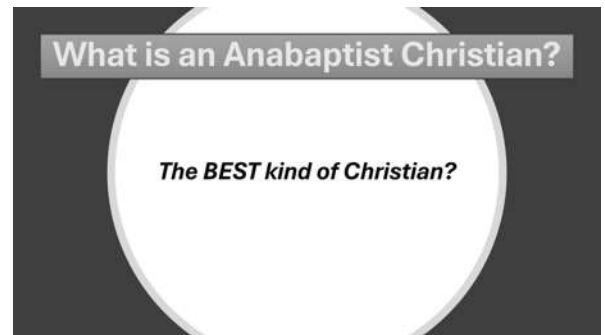


In context of a heresy trial, that's daring and dynamic. But it's also self-evident. You can't be anywhere other than where you are.

My flavour of Jesus is no doubt different than yours, and you might be more correct than I am, but I can only follow the recipe in front of me, with all the faithfulness and integrity that I can. And I have to assume that you are doing the same, despite our differences.

That's a bit of an aside to my main point today, but I think it's worth saying.

Because as I'm talking about *my* convictions, when I'm describing the perspective of Anabaptism, especially next month when we get to talking about church membership, and why someone would choose to join the Mennonite church and *this* congregation in particular, it's really easy to get into the game of *our* way is better than *their* way. Thank God I'm not Lutheran, or Pentecostal or Mennonite *Brethren!*



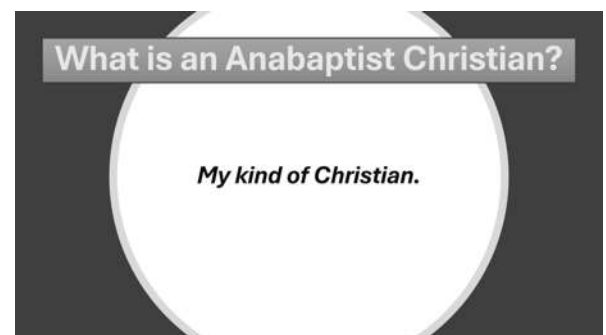
Three cheers for Wildwood, we're right and they're wrong! (Hip-hip...Hooray?)

Well, yes. We love this place. We are right. And we are also wrong. And they are right, and they are wrong. We stand where we stand and they stand where they stand, and who am I to know which is a better place to stand?

I have to say, from 2000 years of church history, while diversity seems to make us humans rather uncomfortable, it sure seems like God is okay with it. There are 2 billion Christians spread across 45,000 denominations around the globe. (See [Christian Denominations flow chart](#)).

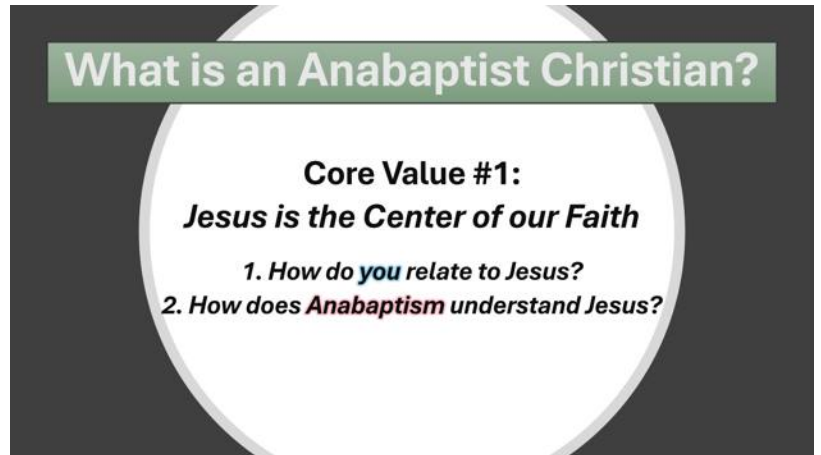
To me, it's undeniable that God has been present in each of these traditions. AND that we've all had our own unique adventures in missing the point, sometimes with horrible outcomes.

All that to say, as we talk about the essentials of our faith, let's make space for others to hold those essentials differently. Let's hold each other's recipes with curiosity and compassion, rather than criticism and condemnation. And our own, as well.



The question isn't "do I have this right?" but "why do I think this way? Why do I stand where I stand? How does it serve me; what am I getting out of it? And how might I learn and grow as I listen for what God is saying to me now?"

So. Two questions to think about as I describe these ways of relating to Jesus. 1) What is your personal blend, how do you mix these together? And 2) Is there a particular Anabaptist flavour to all of this. When Anabaptist Mennonites as a whole talk about Jesus, which pieces do we keep coming back to, which notes are strongest in our collective flavour palette?

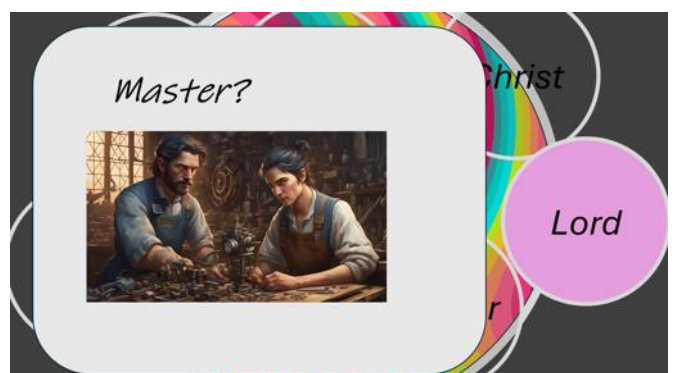


The [What is an Anabaptist Christian](#) booklet emphasizes the language of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, so I'll start there.

Jesus is Lord // Now, I'm already uncomfortable, because I find "Lord" to be an outdated and loaded term. We simply don't use that word for anything other than as a religious term, so it has little meaning for people who don't already know what it means. And what meaning it does have, currently, comes with negative connotations.

"Lord" in English comes from the days of feudalism--a lord is the rich man who lives in the castle on the hill, the guy who owns all the land, who demands tribute and obedience, who will beat you or kill you if you fail to pay up or you get out of line.

Jesus is *not that kind of Lord*. A better word might be "Master," in the sense of a Master-apprentice relationship that is about shared work, passing on knowledge and experience in ways that serve both master and student. But "Master" also carries the weight of slavery, so again, not a great word choice. Jesus does not wield power *over*, but shares power *with*.



“Lord” and “Master” both carry that kind of top-down domination, which has long been part of the human story. But that’s not what the ancient Christians meant when they named Jesus as Lord. In the first century, the Roman Emperor was the self-proclaimed Lord, by force. Give your allegiance to Rome, or suffer the consequences. Obey or die. Pretty standard government stuff.



But the followers of Jesus made a choice. We *choose* Jesus as Lord. We *give* him our allegiance, we *obey*, not out of threat and fear, but out of love, out of trust. Jesus is worthy of our loyalty and obedience; he’s a *Good Lord*, he has earned our allegiance.

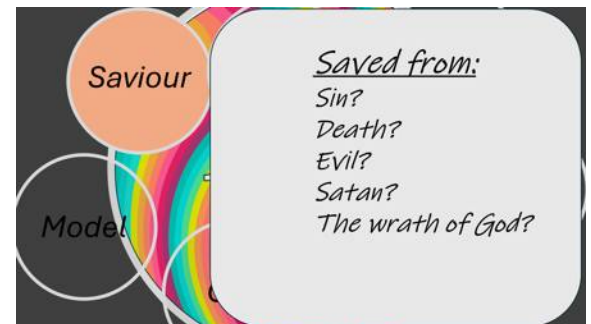


Sure, we’ll pay our taxes, we’ll keep the Roman rules, we’ll serve the Empire for the good of our neighbours--but where the way of the Empire goes against the way of Jesus: *Sorry sir, we’re with Jesus. Do what you must.*

That’s what Jesus is Lord means in the Anabaptist tradition. A bit of protest, a bit of a claim of freedom of choice, a chosen hierarchy. *I submit my life to Jesus, I follow his lead, his commands. Jesus is in charge; I am not. And that’s my choice. That’s a hill I’m willing to die on.* And many have.

Jesus is Saviour // This one has a wide, wide range of interpretations. Saviour of what, from what?

Some Christians will say that Jesus saves us, rescues us from sin. Some make that personal--Jesus saves me from sin. Jesus saves you from sin. Some make that collective - Jesus saves humanity, the world from sin: everyone, everywhere, all at once.



Some Christians will say that Jesus saves us, rescues us from death, Jesus saves us *for* eternal life.

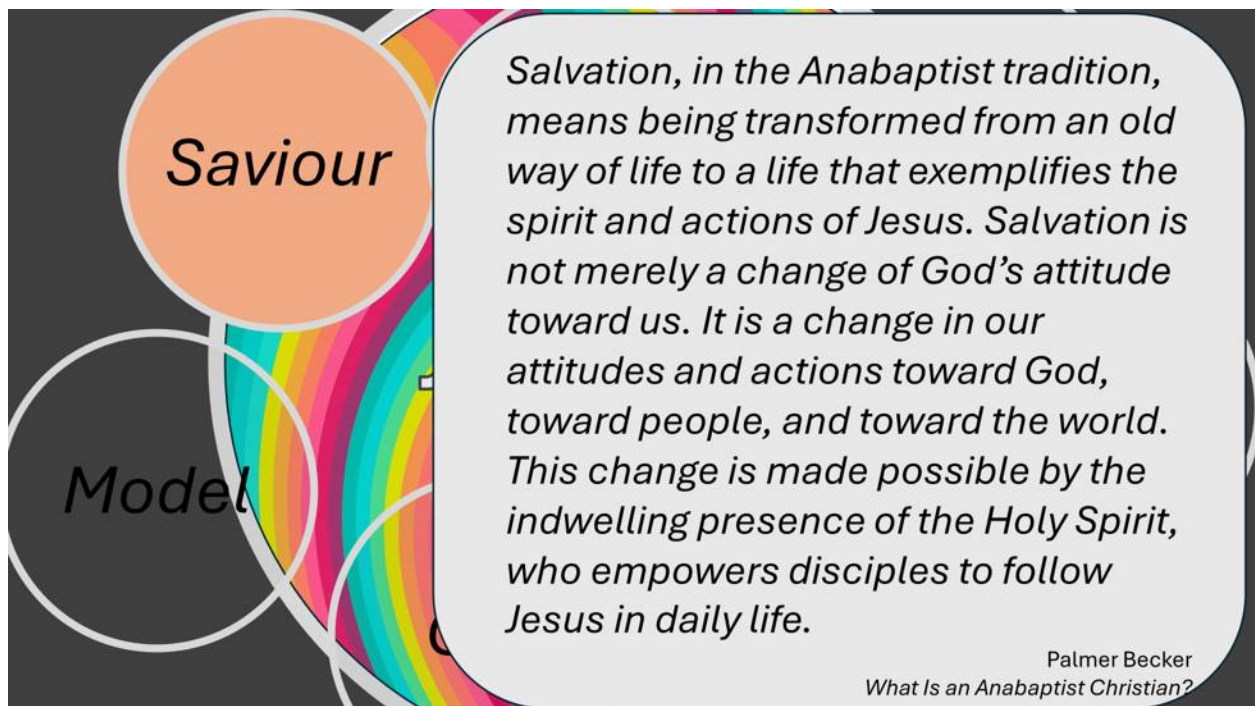
Some Christians will say that Jesus saves us, rescues us from evil, perhaps in general, perhaps personified in the Devil and his demons.

Some Christians will say that Jesus saves us from the wrath of God, from the contradiction of God's holiness and mercy.

Most of the time, when Christians say "Jesus is the Saviour" they're referring to some sort of [Atonement Theology](#): penal substitution, Christ-the-Victor, satisfaction theory, moral influence theory. Yep, I can google big words. :)

All of the above are referenced in the 1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith; there's a [whole article on Salvation](#).

But I find it interesting that [What is an Anabaptist Christian](#) goes in a different direction:



Salvation as transformation. I like that.

Jesus is our Teacher // That's the most clear role that Jesus took in his earthly life, the itinerant, wandering teacher. *Rabbi*, he was called, a Jewish leader who engaged in religious scholarship and especially debate. He walked into the synagogue, and was invited to read the scripture, given the place of honour.



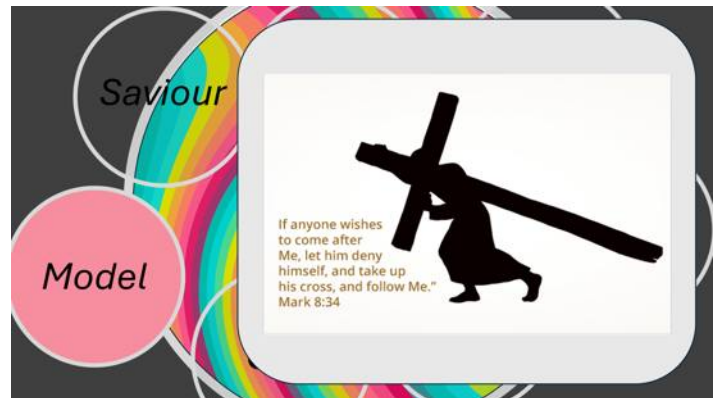
People flocked to hear what he had to say, to hear his take on the Hebrew scriptures, to ponder the meaning of his practical yet cryptical parables.

Jesus is a source of wisdom, still. The Golden Rule, the Beatitudes, the Greatest Commandment. Christians turn to Jesus for insight on themselves, on each other, on relationships, on how to navigate the world with satisfaction and joy.

Jesus is our Model, our Example for how to live. Similar, but different--we don't just practice what Jesus' taught, we try to live as he lived. WWJD.

As we read in Philippians chapter 2 during Lent, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

As early Anabaptist teacher Hans Denck put it, "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him."



Maybe I should put those two together, Teacher and Model. But Anabaptism puts an emphasis on that daily living piece, not just learning but following in his footsteps, walking in the way of the cross. Though that remains largely metaphorical for most of us.

Jesus is a Friend // (singing: "...he's a friend next to ya!" Anyone else remember that Sunday School song, "Sing a la, la la, laleluia...")

This one is a meme online, and it's admittedly pretty easy to poke fun at. *How can you be friends with a person who lived and died two thousand years ago? It sounds like you're talking to yourself, or perhaps an imaginary friend.*

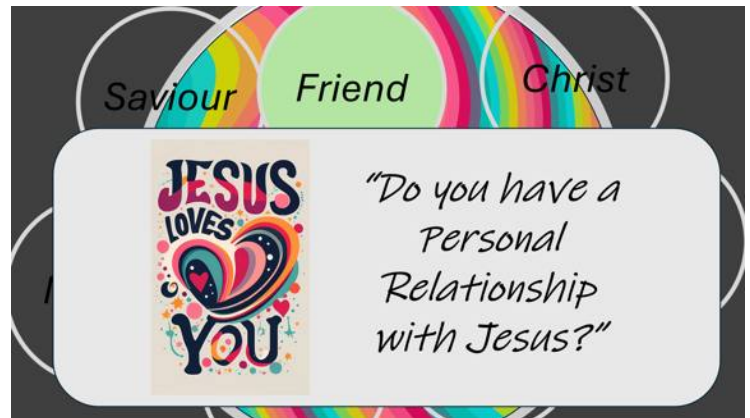
Fair enough. It doesn't make a lot of sense, and there certainly is the possibility that a personal relationship with Jesus can end up being heavy on the personal and light on the actual Jesus bit.



I would say this language of friendship with Jesus hasn't been a point of emphasis in Anabaptist theology, but it is a big part of the personal faith of many Anabaptists now around the world. I grew up in a Brethren in Christ church, and this "personal relationship with Jesus" was pretty central. Our Mennonite Brethren cousins here in Saskatchewan would use that language as well. Those are definitely both Anabaptist denominations. (represented heavily on that map of Mennonite World Conference churches over there)

At Wildwood, we might talk about how God loves you, God cares about your problems, God wants you to live well, God is always with you. That's Jesus the friend.

(singing again) "... [he walks with me](#), and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own..." I've heard that song at plenty of Mennonite funerals.



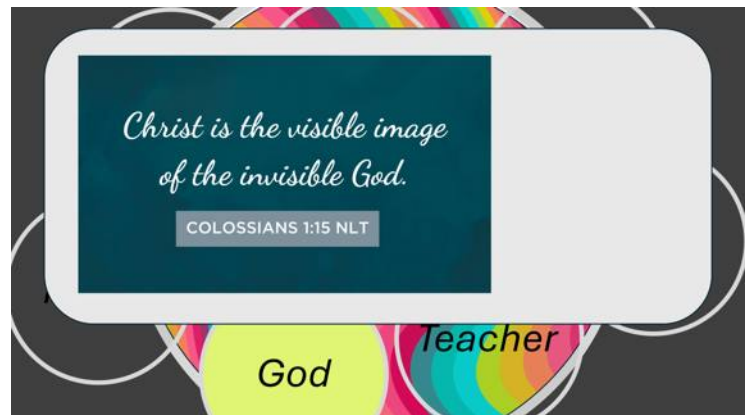
Probably not at the top of my list, but definitely a part of the Anabaptist faith.

Jesus is God, or Jesus is the Son of God, God Incarnate.

"He is the image of the invisible God," we read from Colossians. I know that there is a ton of theological depth to a statement like that, but where most of us operate, it's pretty simple.

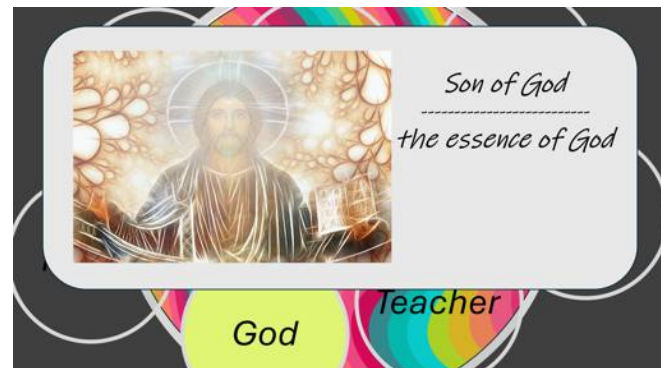
If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

The whole of God is pretty difficult to wrap our heads around--beyond time, beyond space, Creator of the Universe and yet intimately connected to and present *with* the Universe. Omniscient, omnipotent, all that stuff...(head-exploding motion: pow!).



But Jesus, Jesus we can see and touch and know and understand. To a limited degree, of course, and only through the window of history passed down through generations, imperfectly. We can't know God fully, but through Jesus, we know *enough*.

The fullness of God, the essence of God, the Spirit of God, lived in human form, in Jesus. Yes that's mysterious and contradictory, but Christians have long chosen to live with that paradox. Given the choice between God as too big to know or the paradox of Jesus being fully human AND fully divine, we choose the paradox.



As the writer of John's gospel puts it, "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Creator's heart, who has made him known." God is with us, in Jesus. Even if that doesn't really make sense.

Jesus is the Christ // On one level, Christ has a simple meaning. Christ, *khristos* in Greek, is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach* (*mah-SHEE-ahk*). The anointed, the Chosen One.



This one is special, this Jesus is the anointed One, the one we've been waiting for. In that sense, it's a title for Jesus, he's the Chosen One. Familiar stuff for most of us.

But there's another level to the idea of Christ, which we heard in that [Colossians 1](#) passage. I'll read it again:

Christ is the image of the unseen God, and the firstborn of all creation,

Got it, Messiah, the Chosen One, Jesus is special. But here it gets weird:

*for in Christ were created, all things in heaven and on earth:
everything visible and invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignties, Powers—all
things were created through Christ and for Christ.*

Hold on, Jesus was present at Creation? He was [some kind of time traveller](#)? But not only was he present, somehow he was the implement, the agent through which the Creation happened, and he was the inspiration for it?

*Before anything was created, Christ existed,
and all things hold together in Christ.*

*The church is the body;
Christ is its head.
Christ is the Beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
and so Christ is first in every way.*

*God wanted all perfection to be found in Christ,
and all things to be reconciled to God through Christ—
everything in heaven and everything on earth—
when Christ made peace by dying on the cross.*

So Christ was instrumental in the Creation process, is now holding everything all together, and healing, restoring, making peace. Christ is the glue of the universe, and the catalyst, the spark, the magnetism, the healing--it's like Christ is a verb, not just a title.

That's some high-level mysticism right there.

When we say that Jesus is Christ, we're not just saying that he's the Chosen One, the anointed. Somehow, Jesus is also the anointing, the God-in-action that makes *all of Creation* sacred. Christ is the anointing of everything.

That's how we can say that Jesus is present in the ritual of communion--the ordinary bread and juice are made sacred by the presence of Christ, anoint-ing.

That's how we can say that Christ lives in our hearts, through faith.

That's how we can say that we, the church, are the Body of Christ--the Spirit of Christ is anointing us, holding us together, making us more than who we are.

That's how we can look at the world around us, in nature, in our neighbours, in the whole universe, and see the image of God, the divine spark.

Jesus is the full expression of this Christ anointing, but it didn't start there, and it didn't stop there, either. Christ is with us, Christ lives in us, Christ is the mystery beyond us.



As my friend Richard Rohr puts it, “We live in a Christ-Soaked world.”

Those are some... words... eh? I’m preaching about things I don’t fully understand, and maybe that’s the point.

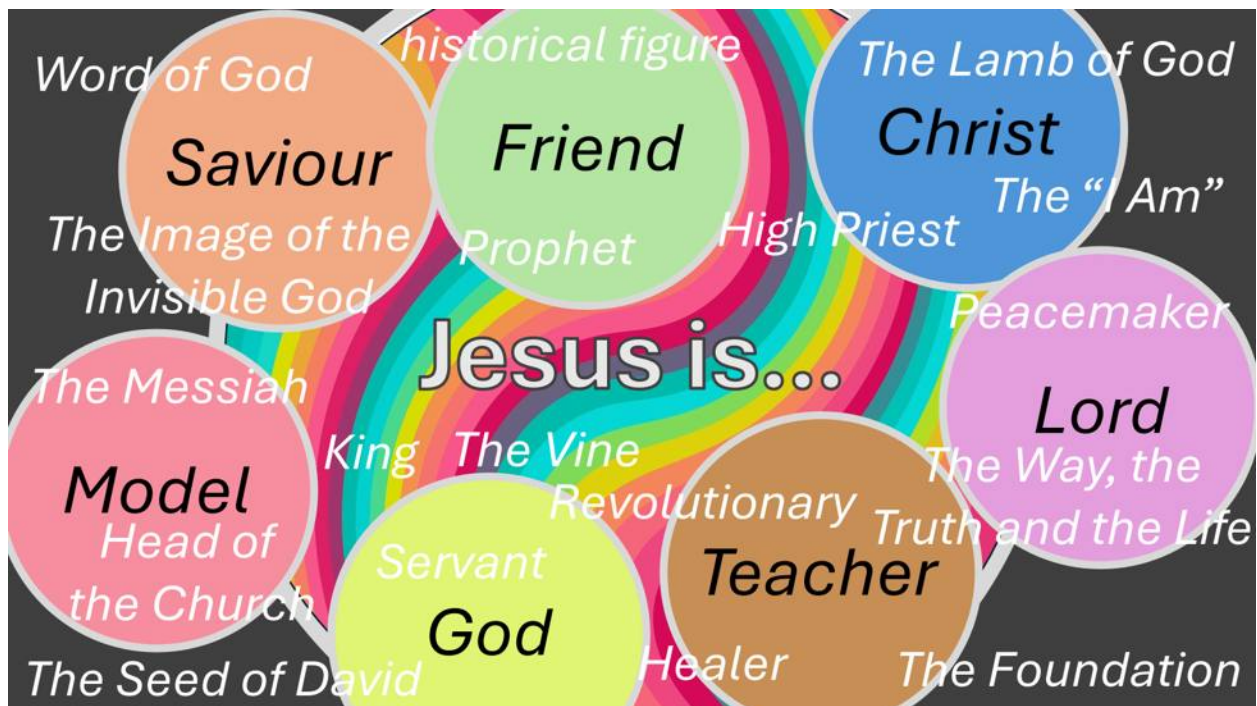
Jesus the Christ is, at least in part, beyond my understanding, and that’s a good thing. For all our practical, humble living, Anabaptism has also had a mystical stream from the very beginning.



So. Jesus is Lord, Saviour, Friend, Teacher, God, and Christ.

The [1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith](#) also adds Word of God, Head of the Church, the Lamb, the Foundation, the Messiah, the seed of David, Prophet, High Priest, King, Servant, and the Image of the Invisible God, among other descriptions and attributions.

I would add others like Peacemaker, Healer, political Revolutionary, historical figure, the “I Am,” the Vine, the Way, the Truth and the Life... there’s plenty to go around.



What’s your flavour?

Again, all of these are biblical, all have roots in solid, historical Christian theology.

You don't have to understand or agree with all of it to be a Christian or to be part of this church.

But I do hope that you resonate with some parts of it, that you're challenged by some of it, and that you're okay with letting other parts exist for other people even if you disagree.

These are all are part of the "Anabaptist faith," which is of course going to be a pretty broad considering that there are 2.13 million people in [Anabaptist churches around the world](#).

If I had to say what a "Classic Anabaptist Recipe" would look like, I'd give a lot of weight to "Teacher" and "Model." That piece of following Jesus in daily living is pretty central to the Anabaptists that I know. That's just my perspective, though. I don't actually know a very large percentage of those 2.13 million. :)

So that's core value #1. Core Value # 2 and #3 are "Community is the Center of our Life" and "Reconciliation is the Center of our Work." *Like and subscribe for additional content coming soon. :)*

Along with [the blessing of St. Paul from the letter to the Ephesians](#),

I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, in the company of Christians everywhere, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Amen.