

Chilean-Mapuche Conflict, the Role of Pentecostals, and the Alternative of Anabaptist Political Witness

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The Anabaptist tradition has many distinctive theological contributions. One of these, which is especially relevant for this article, is its view of the political. In the United States, Anabaptists have had a small but strong presence, with prominent public theologians. There the spectrum of theological discussion is wide, thanks to the historical presence and significance of different Protestant traditions in the country. And Anabaptist theology, with its capacity to raise relevant positions on sensitive issues such as war and racism, has contributed significantly to the discussion. In this article, we propose that there is need to foster such dialogue between Pentecostals and Anabaptists in Chile, where Anabaptists are an even smaller presence among evangelicals, in order to enhance the Chilean Pentecostal theological view of politics.

In Chile, Anabaptist communities are few among a big evangelical community composed mainly of Pentecostals. Certainly there are other Protestant groups such as Presbyterians and Lutherans, but the evangelical social and political flag today is being waved by Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals. These groups are raising strong questions regarding Christians' role in politics, resulting in closer relations with rightwing politicians. This growing trend among Protestants of intervening in institutional politics, or, more precisely, of getting power, is also present in other countries in the region. This raises a very practical question: how to think and act as an Anabaptist in contexts where Anabaptist communities and thought are not influential? More precisely, how to be an Anabaptist witness beyond Anabaptists?

Let us mention a specific case. The Chilean state has been engaged in a long conflict in the Araucanía region, the territorial zone that has belonged to Mapuche people for centuries. There's an unpleasant history, starting at the end

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of the nineteenth century, regarding the occupation of this area by the Chilean army and the acquisition of Mapuche land by private buyers and the state. Today, the struggle for retaking lands has increased to an armed conflict between some rebel Mapuche groups and the Chilean state. In this setting, more than twenty rural church buildings have been burned in the past few years; many of these attacks have purportedly been committed to protest the imprisonment of Mapuche leaders. Many of the burned temples belonged to evangelical communities, largely made up of Mapuche people.

In this scenario, by the end of 2017 Chile held presidential elections, and rightwing candidate José Antonio Kast proposed to secure order by deploying the army in the conflict zone. Sadly, the result was as expected: some evangelicals supported the candidate under the promise that he could bring peace to Araucanía using military force. Matías Sanhueza, president of the Pastors Council (composed mainly of Chilean, non-Mapuche pastors) from Temuco, the capital of La Araucanía, issued a statement on behalf of the council supporting Kast publicly, even after he lost the election, praying for his “national leadership.”¹

As usual, the case has many complex branches. But there is one clear point: Christians have been harmed in an armed conflict, and some of them—specifically pastors—have taken the side of state violence. For them, this is the natural solution for resolving the chaos in the territory and establishing peace once and for all. During a trial of suspected church attackers in 2017, Sanhueza called the government to guarantee public order and condemn the offenders,² but no mention was made of the background conflict giving rise to the violent protest.

This position, however, is relatively new. In 2016, for instance, the Pastors Council signed a statement that said, “We must make a common effort, based on the truth, to recognize the historically vexatious treatment that Mapuche people have suffered from both the State and the national society.”³ Why is this statement so different from the 2017 declaration? The change in discourse from 2016 to 2017 might be explained by the national presidential elections and the growing number of church buildings that were burned in the conflict. But it is also important to note that in 2017, Sanhueza, who is a Pentecostal pastor, assumed the presidency of the council. It is possible—though by no means

1 Matías Sanhueza, Public Statement, La Araucanía Region Pastors Council. Digital document not available online. Temuco, Chile, 2018.

2 Matías Sanhueza, Statement. Digital Document not available online. Temuco, Chile, 2017.

3 Directory of the Pastors Council, Public Statement, La Araucanía Region Pastors Council on the Conflict Situation in the Region. Digital Document Temuco, Chile, 2016, 7–9, <https://www.camara.cl/pdf.aspx?prmID=64095&prmTIPO=DOCUMENTOCOMISION>.

certain—that the change reflects the new council presidency. This possibility raises an interesting question: what would the council say if the Pentecostal president had an Anabaptist viewpoint?

It is completely understandable that pastors and congregations from various denominations are angry about the situation and calling for justice (it must be noted, though, that many of them live and minister in the city, not in the affected rural areas). And, given their view of political power, it is also understandable that they are calling for stronger action by the state. So, it is not so easy to call them Constantinian and tell them they should abandon every attempt to obtain security. In fact, the idea of asking for military action is just the ending point of a larger theological problem that sometimes is not even on their radar, because theological education is not mandatory in some evangelical churches—especially not in Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal ones.

Given the fear and insecurity of the situation, there is no reason to consider the above reaction as odd. One may question whether fear and insecurity are satisfactory reasons to request military action but not whether those reasons are enough for requesting protection in a wider sense—with or without engaging the army. This latter, critical question can only be addressed theologically. Then, other questions can follow: What can the church expect from the state? Or, what's the role of the church when it is involved in an armed conflict? But none of the answers to these questions will take the fear and insecurity away from the people. In other words, the political reaction concerns an anthropological issue—the fear of death, of losing loved ones, of losing property, of losing the community's church building.

How can an Anabaptist alternative be offered to non-Anabaptist Christians who deal with armed conflict? There are two complementary areas to focus on when raising this question in the Chilean-Mapuche situation: (1) the contextual political conflict and (2) the theological understanding of the political.

Focusing first on the contextual political view, it is important to note that a given conflict has its own particularities stemming from where and when it takes place. But at the same time, every conflict has in common the fact that it is composed of two or more groups confronting each other to achieve a particular good. That is why it is necessary to understand what is mobilizing Mapuche people to fight against the state. It is not mere anarchical intention; it is not mere desire to do damage. There is a disputed good that must be understood in order to have a clear view of the conflict. Along with it, the Christian addition to the understanding of the particular conflict is theological. Christians must add the idea that conflict is a consequence of sin, and sin is present in all struggling groups. There is no simply right or wrong side, no clear friend-or-enemy

dichotomy.⁴ That's why Christians cannot simply trust in the state—not because it has the structure to bring legal order but because there is no guarantee that it will effectively bring justice to the possible rightful reclamation of those who have taken up arms against it when they see no other solution.

In fact, in this conflict there have been regrettable cases of unarmed Mapuche people killed or seriously injured by police forces, children included; the police have violently broken into Mapuche schools and communities. Many non-Christian Mapuche live with insecurity and fear as much as Christians do. Moreover, the state has consistently protected the economic interests of Chilean corporations, to the detriment of local communities. More than merely trusting the state, Christians should strive for and propose ways of reconciliation for the different sides, and remind the authorities that their state position is given in order to impart justice, which goes beyond merely punishing the offenders.

How might we clarify Christians' relation with the state from an Anabaptist theological perspective? Anabaptists have provided a rich insight that can nurture a critical and proactive position. In the view of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, Christians are called to a "critical witness" to those in power, a witness that takes as its primary example Jesus' teaching about "the sword."⁵ Jesus's call to nonviolence and to love the enemy is the basic principle used to define the relation between the Christian and the neighbor. Although a Christian "realist" might argue that these teachings cannot be applied to the political arena but rather only to a limited "social" arena, for Yoder the social and political are intimately related. The awareness of Christians about the nature of political power and its predisposition not only to rule but also to control, dominate, and take human life, should make them always stand in critical distance in order to obey first the commandments of Christ, the Lord of all powers of the earth.

These Anabaptist views can be useful for dialogue with evangelicals involved in situations of armed conflict. Moreover, they open other ways of reaction and action. The church itself as social agent can promote a culture of peace in the middle of conflict, helping damaged people, giving love where there is a lack of hope, and building community among the victims. These options may not establish order as military forces would, but they can bring meaningful change to the lives of the whole community. Embracing this culture of peace

4 German jurist Carl Schmitt conceptualized the political in terms of a friend-enemy distinction. See especially his book *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [German original 1932]).

5 See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

means that Christians not only can, but must, walk alongside Mapuche people, especially in the current situation.

Fortunately, there are non-Anabaptist pastors and churches that have understood this gospel's commitment, even in the midst of burning temples. One poignant case is that of pastor Daniel Matus, whose church building was burned on July 10, 2018. Matus pastors in a rural Mapuche community, in a church mostly composed of Mapuche people who identify as such. They serve their community and are well regarded by non-Christian neighbors. While their building was still in flames, rather than pursue judicial action, the pastor addressed the unknown attackers, saying, "We love you so much anyway and desire that you may know this God of love."⁶ This is a first step toward a stronger action for justice.

Building Anabaptist witness beyond Anabaptists holds a twofold challenge. Although this challenge is focused in Chile, it can be useful for other contexts provided they focus on the following points. On the one hand, there is a practical need to establish or strengthen communication between Pentecostals and Anabaptists. It is possible and necessary. In Chile, the evangelical majority is Pentecostal. Given this fact and the interest that Pentecostals are increasingly showing in social and political issues, Mennonites can make a great contribution to them given that Mennonite communities in Chile have an interesting relationship with Pentecostalism. As Guenther and Loewen say, "Insofar as the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Chile (IEMCH) congregations share the core beliefs and much of the worship style of the Pentecostals, they hardly stand out from their Pentecostal surroundings."⁷ This closeness, however, does not mean that there are no differences between Pentecostals and Mennonites. Although there are liturgical and theological similarities given the particular Chilean context, a mutual recognition of these differences can allow for a fruitful exchange between Mennonites and Pentecostals. Mennonites might thereby learn to share their theological understanding of politics in a Pentecostal idiom.

Such theological exchanges have successfully been made in other places. For example, Swedish Pentecostal theologian Michael Grenholm has developed what he calls Charismatic Anabaptism—combining Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit with the distinctive Anabaptist commitment to peace

⁶ Video recording, <https://www.facebook.com/maida.francisco.7/videos/2003395586340121>.

⁷ Titus Guenther and Karen Loewen Guenther, *Churches in the Margins: Anabaptist Polygenesis in Chile*, 2018, https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21763/Guenther_Church_on_the_Margins_ENG.pdf, 15.

and justice.⁸ This kind of theological effort can be developed in other places like La Araucanía, according to contextual particularities. Maybe the model of Charismatic Anabaptism can be a strong idea in such a context.

Last, but not least, Pentecostals themselves have a forgotten pacifist tradition around the world that must be reclaimed and from which they can build a dialogue with Anabaptism.⁹

These proposals are a call to continue walking beyond the mind of Christendom along the path of Jesus.

⁸ Michael Grenholm, “Charismatic Anabaptism: Combining Signs and Wonders with Peace and Justice,” in *A Living Alternative: Anabaptist Christianity in a Post-Christendom World*, eds. Joanna Harader and A. O. Green (New York: Ettelloc, 2014).

⁹ For instance, see the work of Jay Beaman, especially his book *Pentecostal Pacifism: The Origin, Development, and Rejection of Pacific Belief among the Pentecostals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989).