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Church Life

Discipleship as a Missionary Strategy

A major cause of spiritual decline in times of toleration is the too easy integration of the children of Christians into the church.

John H. Yoder

A number of American Mennonites, including the "Peace Caravan" invited to England by the Society of Friends in the spring of 1954, have had the privilege of visiting the Wheathill colony, a Hutterian "Bruderhof" in the west of England. For those who feel that Mennonite discipleship is a matter of church history, who wonder whether it is possible for a small and largely rural church to "hold its ground," the example of this colony and its three sisters in Paraguay is both a lesson and a reprimand.

After the first World War there began in Germany, under the leadership of Eberhard Arnold, an experiment in community living which grew out of the conviction of a number of intellectuals that a radically new approach to life and to economic reality was the only answer to the social and spiritual chaos of modern Europe. Though the beginning was an entirely original idea, Dr. Arnold later became acquainted with the history of the Hutterian movement, visited the North American Hutterians, and received their fraternal blessing, which is the only organic link between the original Hutterian movement and the Wheathill and Paraguay colonies.

Driven from Germany by Hitler in 1936, the group found refuge in Southern England, only to be obliged to leave for Paraguay at the beginning of World War II because of their German nationality. During their brief stay in England, however, they had been joined by a number of English citizens, two of whom stayed behind to dispose of the property. Before they could leave, however, these two were joined by forty more, and, after consultation with the group in Paraguay, it was decided that a new property should be found and a colony formed which would stay in England. This is the Wheathill Bruderhof which now has a population of one hundred adults and one hundred children. The group which went to Paraguay, after first finding a home among the Mennonites, now has three colonies with a total of some seven hundred members. Some fifty persons yearly join the Wheathill group.

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The first reaction of a statistically minded American is to reflect that a movement which in thirty years can have nearly 1,000 members, starting from nothing, in the face of confiscation of their property and forced migration, is a more successful mission enterprise, percentagewise, than any modern Mennonites can show. The Hutterians do not live as they do *in order to* evangelize effectively; rather, they live and witness as they do because they are convinced that it is the only way to answer the Lord's call to obedience, and this commitment is in itself the only sound foundation for evangelism. Even though the Hutterian Brethren themselves rightly see the problem in another light, it will be justifiable for us to analyze their approach *as a missionary strategy,* for it is undeniably the most effective strategy to be observed in our century in any of the churches of the Anabaptist tradition.

I

The evangelistic appeal of the Hutterians is not an invitation to change churches or religions, but to change *lives.* The utter break with the old life is rendered visible and irrevocable by the fact that it involves giving up private property and going to live in the Bruderhof, which is the way the Hutterians apply "Leave all and follow me" to our times. We may, I believe justly, refuse to agree that the rejection of private property has the status of a moral absolute; but it is wrong to hide behind this justified refusal and to go on living in conformity to American individualistic materialism, thinking of the Gospel as "purely spiritual." "Leave all and follow me" as interpreted by an American evangelist is likely to refer to forsaking tobacco, lipstick, or the movies; that it means a whole way of life and a whole way of thinking about material goods is not often clearly proclaimed. Evangelists have a tendency, right in one sense, to want to make the Gospel easy; yet Jesus' words about counting the cost and planning to bear the cross (Luke 14) teach, and Anabaptist and Hutterian history confirm, that the proclamation which makes plain the Gospel's severest demands is at the same time the one which makes plainest its good tidings. Is an evangelism which avoids mention of nonresistance, of stewardship, of right living in all its details, good evangelistic technique? or is it an effort to please men which will, if successful at all, bring into the church tepid Christians who feel it to be an imposition when the church asks anything of them?

II

The Bruderhof pattern has a second advantage; it facilitates radical stewardship. The simple life and the giving of surplus are much easier to administer where there are common kitchen, common purse, and common clothing supply, than where threescore families must each manage an income and a household, each providing its own transportation, food, housing, and clothing, paying its own income taxes, and making its own decisions about saving and giving. However conscientious the threescore families may be, their stewardship will in many cases be less efficient and in

some more self-indulgent than if it were done together in the brotherhood.

There is thus a strong case of the Bruderhof system, based not on grounds of the absolute moral wrongness of personal property, but on arguments of practical efficiency in stewardship. This has nothing to do with the advocacy of communism or socialism which, being imposed on non-Christians, are often quite inefficient; it is a matter for the Christian brotherhood. It would require a degree of consecration and willingness to submit to the brotherhood which not all of us have (let the reader meditate for the minute how he would like to have to accept judgment of his brethren as to whether he needs a new shirt, how long he should work, how comfortably he should travel, how he should educate his children, then let the reader ask whether his first reaction, negative, is Biblical); but that is an argument for and not against the proposal.

III

Evangelism as the Hutterians practice it, through correspondence, publication, and visitation, is not an effort to persuade into faith people who know what God wants and refuse to do it; nor is it an attempt to convince people of the existence of God or the imminence of His judgment; nor does it seek to convict of sin people who are content with themselves. They rather seek out those individuals who, through their own thinking, generally out of reach of the church's language, come to be dissatisfied with life and are looking for a better answer. Evangelism is thus directed not at the children of Christian families and people on the fringe of the church, but rather to men of good will among the pagans who know nothing of the Gospel message but are ripe to receive it. There is much to be said for this view of evangelism Biblically (Cornelius, the Ethiopian, Dionysius), theologically, historically, and psychologically. This approach requires some things which modern mass evangelism tries to get along without; the time to work with individuals personally; the backing of a brotherhood of Christians who, in contrast to the pagan, have life, have it abundantly, and let it show; and the capacity to meet people on their own level and not require them first to learn pious language before being able to understand. In fact, since the type of person most likely to be disposed to receive such a message is often someone capable of independent thinking and ignorant of Christian thought, one must often deal with very muddled self-made theories and principles spun by the mind in its effort to understand himself without revelation.

As was the case in the very first years of the Anabaptist movement, this type of evangelism appeals first of all not to unthinking people who are subject to mass persuasion, but to individuals with a degree of independence of mind, often to middle-class tradesmen or professional people; engineers, white-collar workers, intellectuals. This means that the group is enriched constantly by the influx of new people with valuable abilities; at the same time the fact that a farm cannot use all these abilities shows one of the inadequacies of the purely rural Bruderhof system.

IV

The basis of evangelism is the brotherhood, the *koinonia* of those who together seek the will of Christ. The decisions of the community are made, in prayer, by the unanimous agreement of the members; be it a matter of financial organization, of work planning, or of church discipline. Missionaries are guided week by week in their travels by the brotherhood at home. The fact of Christian brotherhood as a real sharing of all life's concerns, which the prayer meeting, the Sunday-school class, and the cell movement attempt to recreate, is expressed by the whole pattern of Bruderhof living. Mennonite tenth-generation Christians with a solid tradition of family-centered rural community life can get along without a vital experience of Christian brotherhood because family ties are a fair substitute; but for the rootless and friendless modern western man, whose only home is a rented apartment and whose only society is party-going or business contacts, whose deepest feeling is one of loneliness in the midst of the city's crowds, no aspect of the Hutterian witness is more appealing than the simple fact that there exists a fellowship of brethren willing to accept him as one of them and share with him their wealth and their poverty, treating him as a person and no longer as a thing.

V

Throughout Mennonite history, a major cause of spiritual decline in times of toleration, apart from the posssession of wealth, has been the too-easy integration of the children of Christians into the church. As long as persecution continued, it was clear to everyone what was involved in confessing one's faith, and the request for baptism retained its character of dangerous and conscious commitment to a break with the world. With persecution gone it became easier for a young person to stay in the church community, which was also his family, than to leave it. Baptism became an act of conformity rather than a break with the world, and young people, ever so serious and well-meaning, could not really know what commitment was involved. Two generations of such practice, coupled with a lack of discipline, suffice to render any church lukewarm.

It would be attacking the problem backwards to go looking for a "moral equivalent of persecution" in order to keep the church alive. There are, however, measures which can be taken, and which should be taken for their own sake, which tend to restore to the commitment of baptism its original content. The first is to have a clear and demanding standard of Christian life, enforced by discipline (the Hutterians, like the Amish, apply I Corinthians 5:11 literally), so that no one thinks that ordinary decent behavior "as good as anyone else" is enough. Aspects of stewardship and simplicity should be dealt with by discipline just as clearly as is military service.

But just as important is the avoidance of confusion between Christian nurture and evangelism, which involves the scrupulous avoidance of any sort of pressure upon the young

person to remain within the group as the path of least resistance. This is the point where American Mennonites have the most to learn from the Hutterians, and at this point there comes to light the basic difference between a strategy of love and a strategy of fear. I John 4:18. A strategy of fear, aiming at survival (in spite of Matthew 10:39), seeks first of all to "hold the young people" by making baptism easy, by sheltering them from outside contacts, by encouraging them to be CO's with or without conviction, by building ties of family, community, and vocation which make it difficult if not unthinkable for baptism to be understood as a break with everything. Where there is no real freedom to make a commitment the commitment is worth little more from a twelve- or fifteen-year-old than it would be from an infant in a Lutheran baptism when the godfather renounces the world, the flesh, and the devil. A strategy of love, on the other hand, has sufficient trust in the work of the Spirit and in the contagion of true discipleship to be willing to risk waiting for the decision to request baptism until it comes uncoaxed from an adult who knows what his choice means. Whereas this attitude is open to the reproach, "You make it easier for young people to leave the church than to stay," the probability is that this strategy of love works better at "holding the young people" than the strategy of fear which sets out with that purpose.

Attaining this goal in the apparently closed community of a Bruderhof requires a carefully thought through program of education, and the school is indeed one of the most remarkable things at Wheathill. Better than in the public schools, children are taught to become individuals, thinking out their own answers. They are taught to use money, which no one in the colony handles. After primary school they go into apprenticeship or advanced education, away from the Bruderhof, where they learn the joys and temptations of being one's own boss, and where they acquire skills and friendships which would enable them to live better (in terms of wealth and social esteem) in "normal society" than in the Bruderhof. Then if they decide, as they usually do, to return to the Bruderhof for life, they know what they are accepting and what they are rejecting, and, secondarily, they have more to offer the brotherhood in terms of skills and personality than if they had fearfully been kept at home in an attempt to preserve them from the world. In a period of toleration or even prosperity the commitment of adult baptism retains its original meaning, and the first principle of Anabaptism is safeguarded as in no other way.

This concern for the freedom of the young person to make his own commitment does not mean a sacrifice of Christian nurture; it rather puts nurture in its proper perspective by separating it from evangelism. In practice the two may coexist but in concept they are distinct. The parent's responsibility before God for every child is to lead him to become a mature, honest, informed, independent, industrious human being capable of making a contribution in the world. This includes informing him of basic moral principles which are valid whether he be Christian or not, and informing him as well, more by deed than by word, that there exists a possibility to follow those principles in the abundant life of the Spirit. This education will give him the necessary basis for a Christian commitment, and unavoidably will create a certain leaning, but it will not make the decision for him nor keep him from becoming acquainted with the other possibilities. In one sense it may be said that the difference between Calvinism and Anabaptism is that Calvinism considers every child of Christian parents as destined to be Christian, whereas Anabaptism maintains the possibility that a child of Christians may reject the faith. This difference needs to be built into the foundation of a Mennonite philosophy of education. Whereas Calvinism, aiming to produce one hundred per cent Christians, makes some proud Puritans and some rebels, Anabaptism leaves the percentage to God and aims to produce either disciples who can stand on their own commitment or non-disciples who will make an honest contribution to society because of their solid moral education.

VI

Without taking the space to dot all the I's and draw all the morals, we have seen what it means to say that discipleship is a missionary strategy. The example of the Hutterian Brethren (which incidentally does not correspond with the North American Hutterians) is used as an illustration of an attempt to apply today the Anabaptist viewpoint; our guide remains, however, not the Anabaptist or the Hutterian example but the life of the Spirit as revealed in the New Testament, to which every man is called and every disciple is committed. May that same Spirit reveal again in our day as He has in the past, His will for church order, for education, for stewardship, and for evangelism.

We Have—by Giving

A curious paradox! Commercially unsound, but a basic principle in the spiritual realm.

A kingdom built on love can only survive by the exercise of love. Love begets love, but love withheld leads to spiritual declension, and results in eternal poverty. Love expressed is founded on the divine principle, which says: "Give and it shall be given unto you."

The history of missions is full of instances when this seeming paradox has become the means of blessing at home, and of the extension of Christ's kingdom abroad.

Our spiritual heritage is measured not by what we have but by what we give. It was because God loved that He gave. Let our love be characterized by giving.