
THE GATHERED LIFE

BY EBERHARD ARNOLD

FAITH IN ACTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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*Eberhard Arnold, 1883-1935, was the founder and first elder of the Bruderhof. The following are excerpts from talks given throughout the years at various Bruderhof communities, taken from the book *God's Revolution: The Witness of Eberhard Arnold*.*

Birth of the Church

No one person or group of people could have brought about the first Church community. No heights of oratory, no burning enthusiasm, could have awakened for Christ the thousands who were moved at the time, or produced the united life of the early Church. The friends of Jesus knew this very well. Had not the Risen One himself commanded them to wait in Jerusalem for the fulfillment of the great promise? (Luke 24:49). John had baptized in water all those who listened to him. But the first Church was to be submerged in and filled with the holy wind of Christ's Spirit (Acts 2:1, 2).

At Pentecost the apostles of Jesus were suddenly able to feel so completely with other people that their hearers could take their words to heart, for these words echoed their mother tongue and their true calling. The crowd was moved by the same Spirit that spoke through the leaders; the listeners had the same overpowering experience as the speakers (Acts 2:4-11).

It was neither hypnosis nor human persuasiveness. People allowed God to work in them; they were overpowered and filled by His Spirit. At that moment the only true collective soul took on shape and form; the organic unity of the mysterious Body of Christ, the Church community, was born.

The crowds that were gathered from different nations for Pentecost cried out with one voice, "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God!" (Acts 2:11) ... Pentecost was God's message of righteousness to all nations, a powerful demonstration of God's deeds for the whole of human-kind and for each individual ...

In the presence of the living Christ, they were confronted with absolute truthfulness. Then they felt the need for forgiveness of their sins. They experienced the inner poverty that could be satisfied only through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The first response to this overwhelming inflow of the Spirit was the question that surged from people's hearts: "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).



of their lives. It was in fact the very change of heart and conduct that John the Baptist had proclaimed as the first requirement for the great revolution to come, the turning upside down of everything. We cannot separate personal rebirth from this total transformation in Christ.

—*Das Geheimnis der Urgemeinde, "Das neue Werk, August 1920*

The Witness of Community

We oppose outright the present order of society. We represent a different order, that of the communal Church as it was in Jerusalem after the Holy Spirit was poured out. The multitude of believers became one heart and one soul. On the social level, their oneness was visible in their perfect brotherliness. On the economic level, it meant that they gave up all private property and lived in complete community of goods, free from any compulsion.

And so we are called to represent the same in the world today, which quite naturally will bring us into conflicts. We cannot put this burden on anybody unless he or she prizes the greatness of God's Kingdom above everything else and feels inwardly certain that there is no other way to go.

—*Members' meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, March 26, 1933*

The only way the world will recognize the mission of Jesus is by the unity of His Church. But this unity of the Church must be translated into total community. Jesus spoke of the absolute unity between His Father and Himself. And His prayer for us is that we be just as united (John 17:21, 22).

Can there still be mine and thine between us? No. What is mine is thine, and what is thine is mine. In the Spirit of the Church everything we have belongs to all. First and foremost we have community in the innermost values of the common life. But if we share the treasures of the Spirit, which are the greater ones, how can we refuse to share the lesser things?

—*Meeting with guests, Rhon Bruderhof, August 15, 1934*

It is a great thing if we can go out and tell people about God's Kingdom. But it is a much greater thing if a historical reality is presented to the world, a witness to the truth of the Gospel to be unforgettably branded into the records of history. It means much more than our limited attempts to convert individuals, if we are called to participate in making history by representing with our lives the way of love and peace and justice in the midst of a hostile, untruthful, unjust world that is bristling with weapons—if we are called to live out this witness, unperturbed and unswayed, while around us the nations rage. That is the Church's true calling.

—*Worship meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, November 12, 1933*

If we live according to our old nature, we cannot represent anything good, even if we base it on the Bible. But in the new creation, in Christ, in His Spirit, wherever His Spirit is present without being distorted or caricatured, indestructible community has arisen among people. Let him grasp it who can! The truth of the Bible is not intellectual or logical truth. It is beyond logic. It is given only to those who believe (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

So we are faced with quite practical questions: Do we believe that the Holy Spirit will be increasingly poured out over the Church? Do we believe that Jesus comes into our midst, that He opens His heart to us so that we may live as He did and have an influence in society as He did? Do we dare to carry out the task as His Church in His coming Kingdom, to be a corrective within society through the grace of the indwelling Christ? Do we dare to live a life of love in the midst of the world, giving up all privilege and even the right to our possessions and our own bodies? Are we ready, completely defenseless, to follow Jesus?

—*Public lecture, November 28, 1922*

Our faith in God is not the product of our wishful thinking; the basis of our communal life is God and God alone. But we cannot say we have acquired this basis and now we own religion as one owns property. What we have must be given to us new each day. It is a dreadful thought, but we have to face it: We can lose it any day. All we can say is that we are placed on



The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is our way of expressing the central experience in Jesus, because we do not want to forget Jesus. How easy it is for us to forget Him! We need a very powerful reminder of Him ... (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

What does the Meal of Remembrance point to? That Jesus is not forgotten, that His death is proclaimed ... In the Lord's Supper we acknowledge that this Body of the Church is alive, that it is of God, and that it belongs to Jesus.

—*Worship meeting, Alm Bruderhof, June 2, 1935*

The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles was written down during the second century in an attempt to retain the earliest memories from the time of the apostles. It gives the following picture as part of a thanksgiving prayer at the Lord's Supper: The seeds of grain are scattered over many fields, and then comes harvest time ... Grain from many fields in different places is baked together into one loaf. So we are many people; we have come together from many nations, from many different strata in society, from a variety of ideologies and traditions (Revelation 5:9,10). We come from many different fields, but we are baked together in one loaf ...

Before the bread can be baked ... each grain must be ground. If one remains unground, it will be a whole grain in the loaf, and when the loaf is served, someone will take a knife and remove that grain because it is out of place in the bread. It has kept its own nature, its individual existence, its own importance.

When the grain is ground, the flour is put in a hot oven to bake, and only then does it become bread. Then it is placed on the table. And if it is a truly communal table, the bread is for all to share. Then we cannot pray, "Give me today my daily bread." Rather, we pray together, "Give us the bread we need each day." For us all, every day! (Matthew 6:11).

Then the bread is broken and shared. Once again community is stressed, this time in the sharing of the bread. The risen Jesus was recognized by the way He broke bread and distributed it at the common table (Luke 24:30, 31).

—*Alm Bruderhof, May 1934*

Bread and wine were combined in this meal, the one basic and nourishing, the other noble and fiery ... In our eating and drinking too, Jesus wants us to combine simplicity with real joy in God's gifts to us ...

The loaf is broken; the wine flows in streams. Unity is a visible reality, uniting is complete: "This is my body, and this is my blood" (1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

To be sure, that is a message so simple and so radical that the proud intellect cannot tolerate it. This message shows God's will, which is for us to be united, to be broken for the sake of unity.

Just as Jesus let His body be broken and His blood be shed, He wants you to give up being a separate grain of wheat, a separate grape. He wants you to throw yourself into the unity of the Body, the unity of the flowing wine; He wants you to go through the death of Christ. Unity will then be created, the new Spirit will flow and give life to the Body, making it of one heart and one mind. This is the mystery of Christ, of the Church, the mystery of complete unity. This is the Lord's Supper.

—*Rhon Bruderhof, January 8, 1933*

Mission

The colossal need facing humankind in this hour of history makes it urgent to show a new way. The time is here for the communal Church to be a light on the lampstand, a city on a hill



Kingdom must be spread abroad. But we are exceedingly weak, and our numbers are small, very small, when we think of the magnitude of this calling ...

We cannot evade the call of Jesus or the impulse of our hearts. It is a call that goes out to all, especially to all the needy. And when the misery reaches such a pitch as we see around us today, the call of Jesus becomes all the more insistent and pressing—more so than ever before: "Go ye out into all the world!" (Mark 16:15). Go out, get to work! Call the people and gather them in! Now is the hour!

—*Rhon Bruderhof, summer 1932*

If we are no longer here for all people, if we can no longer concern ourselves with the need and suffering of the whole world, community life has lost its right to exist.

—*Rhon Bruderhof, May 12, 1935*

The Church can be compared to a lantern with a light burning and shining in it. The light shines out through the lantern glass to all the world. The rays of light are brothers and sisters sent out on mission ... The messengers sent out are not independent, they do not undertake anything on their own. And the Church community is not shut in on itself and does not undertake anything for its own sake. It is its nature to shine, to send out light.

—*Worship meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, October 22, 1935*

The Body of Believers

We believe that the Holy Spirit reveals His presence in the living Church community. This is where our Christianity differs from a purely personal one. True, the individual heart must be visited by the Holy Spirit. Yet the Spirit's actual working begins in the communal Church. When the experience of the individual heart is shared by the whole believing community, then, and only then, will the Kingdom of God be visible.

—*Meeting with guests, Aim Bruderhof, July 25, 1935*

The Church is a living structure, made up of live building stones. They are far from perfect; they need to be dressed and hewn if they are to fit into the building. And yet it is a perfect building.

The mystery is this: The life of this building does not reside in its parts, but rather in the living, gathering Holy Spirit. Its unity does not result from assembling the parts that make it up or from an agreement of opinions. By nature the stones are spiritually dead. But the Holy Spirit awakens them to life by joining them together in a new unity (1 Peter 2:5).

—*Rhon Bruderhof, July 30, 1933*

We are not a collection of people who have good intentions about living in community and think that if all these good intentions are led in the right direction, the result will be something like unity in the Spirit ... We know that in spite of our incapacity for communal living, in spite of our weaknesses of character and our lack of gifts, in spite of the way we are, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who is the Spirit of unity, calls us to this way and bids us gather others.

—*Meeting with guests, Rhon Bruderhof, November 3, 1932*

The Law of Love

There is no law but that of love (2 John 5, 6). Love means having joy in others. Then what does being annoyed with them mean?



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Words of love convey the joy we have in the presence of brothers and sisters. By the same token it is out of the question to speak about a Brotherhood member in a spirit of irritation or vexation. There must never be talk, either in open remarks or by insinuation, against a brother or a sister, against their individual characteristics—under no circumstances behind the person's back. Talking in one's own family is no exception.

Without this rule of silence there can be no loyalty, no community. Direct address is the only way possible; it is the spontaneous brotherly service we owe anyone whose weaknesses cause a negative reaction in us. An open word spoken directly to the other person deepens friendship and is not resented. Only when two people do not come to agreement quickly in this direct manner is it necessary to talk it over with a third person who can be trusted to help solve the difficulty and bring about a uniting on the highest and deepest levels (Matthew 18:15, 16). Each one in the household should hang this reminder up where he works and can see it all the time.

—*"The First Law in Sannerz," 1924*

Woe to us if we do the correct thing but have no love. Woe to us if we say the correct thing but have no love (1 Corinthians 13:1). Then it would be better to say nothing.

Never tell a person an unpleasant truth unless the Holy Spirit has given you the assurance that you love that person with all your heart and you may therefore say it (Ephesians 4:15). Woe to anyone who admonishes brothers or sisters and does not have love for them in his heart. He is a murderer. For truth without love kills, while love without truth lies.

—*Worship meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, July 17, 1933*

Love sees the good Spirit and the inner light at work in a person and delights in him (Romans 12:9, 10) ... We will overcome our personal disagreements to the degree that we joyfully acknowledge the working of the good Spirit in each other ...

When we take love's prophetic point of view, we see each other as something to be carved from wood that may still be too hard (or too soft), and we think of what God plans to make out of it.

—*Rhon Bruderhof, March 20, 1933*

Called to Serve

Remember: the reason we live in community is not so that the individual members can attain the highest possible degree of perfection.

Instead, we believe that by living in total community we set an example and that this is the best service we can do for society today in its fragmented state. We want all those who sigh and groan under the wrongs in today's world to see that full community lived in love is possible!

—*Meeting with guests, Rhon Bruderhof, November, 1932*

In such dangerous times as these, we will only survive if each individual is inwardly awake and interested and ready to take an active part in the struggle, and that includes a personal interest in current world events. But for that to happen, our common life needs a deep and firm grounding in the order brought about by the Spirit. Then the personal or private concerns of individuals will recede into the background.

Any personal striving for holiness will be given up for the sake of the greater cause; then, because it is given up, something new can be given. Self-abasing comparisons and feelings of inferiority simply vanish. Envy disappears, and so do selfish, touchy stubbornness and pride. No one can remain indifferent, weary, sluggish, sleepy, apathetic, or unmoved.

—*Worship meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, November 21, 1934*

Individual Gifts

A person's natural gifts are, to begin with, neither a help nor a hindrance in this communal



absolutely no pride at all in being gifted and no feeling of inferiority about being less gifted. Instead, there will be exuberant joy in the grace of Jesus Christ, who has accepted each one just as he is.

—*Worship meeting, June 20, 1934*

Whether people are very gifted or not so gifted, if they are freed from their selfish life, they can use all their physical and mental abilities to serve the community. They give what they have and do what they can. If we have much, we give much; if we have little, we give the little we have. Even those whose working strength is very limited do whatever they can. And those who are very capable and strong should likewise give all they can.

—*Meeting with guests, Rhon Bruderhof, August 1933*

Social Responsibility

When we speak of a radical social revolution, of turning everything upside down, of bringing in the reign of God's justice, we can only do so if we are deeply convinced that such an upheaval will affect us all quite personally, you and me, every single one of us, as part of humankind. We ourselves have to be thrown over and then put back on our feet. We are all responsible for the social injustice, the human degradation, the wrongs people inflict on each other, both public and private. Each one of us bears guilt toward all humankind because we are deaf and blind to their degradation and humiliation.

—*"Die Revolution Gottes," Die Wegwarte, 1926*

Laying down our Lives

We live in poverty and without personal possessions; we do this for love of Christ and for the sake of those who are poorer than we, the very poorest. There is such an endless amount of misery that wealth and affluence are unbearable to anyone living in the love of Christ.

Undeniably, sin and injustice rule in the world today, and as long as this continues, there will always be poor people. It is idle to ask what we would do if there were no more poor. Even a rigidly enforced social system has not managed to do away with poverty.

Therefore Jesus says, "The poor you have with you always." And the Old Testament has it: "The poor will always be with you in the land" (Deuteronomy 15:11). Yet this love for the poor cannot be the final thing. It must be surpassed by love to God. Christ says, "You will not always have me with you" (Matthew 26:11).

—*Novice meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, September 17, 1934*

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's brothers and sisters (John 15:13). Laying down one's life does not only mean dying a heroic death; it means finding a life in which every moment is lived for others. In such a life we can give all our strength, all our fortune, all our possessions, and all our intellectual gifts for others.

That was the life Jesus lived. He did not ask whether Palestine was too small; He did not hanker after life in a palace in Rome. He acquired no titles or honors, He gained no influential position. He went the lowliest and simplest way. As a newborn child, He lay in a feeding trough for cattle. And His whole way was one of utmost poverty. It was the very simplest way, and it ended as it began—in utter poverty, in the poverty of the Cross.

—*Meeting with guests, Aim Bruderhof, August 19, 1934*

Suffering

Jesus knew suffering. He knew hunger and thirst. He had no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). He had no house, no home. But He knew his Father, and in Him He had unbroken joy of spirit. Jesus proved to us that happiness in life depends on one thing only, on how well we know our Father in Heaven.

—*Public lecture, December 1, 1918*

When the day of judgment masses the clouds closer and closer together, we must be



lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24).

We have to go still deeper into the willing acceptance of the cross and death. Only when we are ready for this can we ask God to intervene and make His history.

—*Worship meeting, Rhon Bruderhof, 1933*

Pain is the plow that tears up our hearts to make us open to truth. If it were not for suffering, we would never recognize our guilt, our godlessness, and the crying injustice of the human condition (Psalm 119:67, 71).

—*Public lecture, Berlin, April 7, 1919*

Steadfastness in the encounter with suffering shows that we are completely surrendered to God's will and yet have the courage to act. Both are needed if our lives are to be used.

—*Evangelisches Allianzblatt, September 19, 1915*

Prayerful Readiness

What we seek in calling upon God is an action that is not ours, a deed that is not our doing, a fact that we cannot create. What we seek in prayer is for something to occur that can never occur through us, for something to happen at last that we can never cause to happen. It is for something to be prepared that we can never prepare, for history to be made that we can never make, for a judgment to come to us that we can never summon.

The object of our prayer has to be what God has wanted all along. He is only waiting for us to be ready. This readiness is true prayer. God will come to us in answer to true prayer.

—*Alm Bruderhof, June 1, 1934*

To be ready is everything! Let us be ready! The expectation of God's coming shall be our active readiness. That means stretching out our hands to Him in order to be crucified with Him. It means going down on our knees, ready to be humbled by Him. It means laying down all our power over ourselves so that He alone may have power over us.

In these days of wrath and judgment the heart of Christ is needed all the more to blaze up in the world and in history. The Church is sent into the world for this purpose: in the midst of the mounting waves of panic, in the midst of the furious breakers of spilt blood, the Church must fling itself against the waves and bring the banner of love to those who are drowning in loveless wrath ...

We cannot ask for God to come, for Christ's way to be followed, for the Holy Spirit to send down His stream, unless we for our part are ready for the utmost. And we all have to be completely agreed about this. Only if we are one in what we ask God for will He grant it, but then He surely will.

—*Rhon Bruderhof, 1933*

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