

John Howard Yoder:

## "Discipleship as a Missionary Strategy"

*In this early essay, Yoder discusses the Bruderhof as an example of how living in community is a form of mission. He singles out Bruderhof education of young people for special praise.*

John Howard Yoder, "Discipleship as a Missionary Strategy", in *Radical Christian Discipleship*, ed. John C. Nugent et al. (Herald Press, 2012). Originally published in *The Christian Ministry* (January-March 1955).

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## Discipleship as a Missionary Strategy<sup>1</sup>

A number of North American Mennonites 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 an experiment in community living that grew out of some intellectuals' conviction that a radically new approach to life and to economic reality was the only answer to the social and spiritual chaos of modern Europe. The leader of this community was Eberhard Arnold. Though the beginning was an

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1. "Discipleship as a Missionary Strategy," *The Christian Ministry* (January-March 1955): 26-31. Though this essay addresses themes that are central to volume 3 of this book series, it is included here to make clear Yoder's conviction that the radical Christian discipleship to which we are called takes place in the context of the Christian community and on behalf of its witness to the world. Yoder's biblical case for many of the congregational practices that he assumes in this chapter is made in volume 3, *Real Christian Fellowship*.

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. This is the only organic link between the original Hutterian movement and the Wheathill and Paraguay Bruderhof 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, a number of English citizens joined them, two of whom stayed behind to dispose of their 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 that 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.<sup>2</sup>

The first reaction of a statistically-minded North American is to reflect that a movement that 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, percentage-wise, than any modern Mennonites can show. But the Hutterians do not live as they do in order to evangelize effectively. 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

2. Since their founding in the 1920s, the Bruderhof have grown to over 2,500 people living in ten different communities on three different continents (North and South America, and Europe). They should be distinguished from the Hutterites, who are a much older group of Anabaptists. For a brief but helpful overview see Donald F. Durrbaugh, "Bruderhof," in *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*, ed. Karen Christensen and David Levinson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 104-7.

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.

### An invitation to a changed life

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. This is how the Hutterians apply Jesus' invitation to "leave all and follow me" in our times. We may 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 North American individualistic materialism.

North American evangelists often interpret the gospel invitation to follow Jesus as forsaking tobacco, lipstick, or the movies. It is seldom proclaimed clearly that it means a whole way of life and a whole way of thinking about material goods. Evangelists have a tendency, right in one sense, 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 histories confirm, that the proclamation that makes plain the gospel's severest demands is the same one that makes plainest its good tidings. Is an evangelism that avoids mention of nonresistance, stewardship, and right living in all its details good evangelistic technique? Or is it an effort to please people, which will, if successful at all, flood the church with tepid Christians who feel it to be an imposition when the church asks anything of them?

### Radical stewardship

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 is a common kitchen, a common purse, and a common clothing supply, than where sixty 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 sixty families may be, their stewardship will in many cases be less efficient and in some cases more self-indulgent than if it were done together in the fellowship.

The strong case for the Bruderhof system has nothing to do with the advocacy of communism or socialism, which, being imposed on non-Christians, are often quite inefficient. It has to do with Christian fellowship. It would require a degree of devotion and willingness to submit to the fellowship that not all of us have, but that is an argument for and not against the proposal. Meditate for a minute on how you would like to submit to the judgment of fellow Christians as to whether you need a new shirt, how long you should work, how comfortably you should travel, and how you should educate your children. Then ask whether your initial negative reaction is biblical.

### **Evangelism directed toward people of goodwill**

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. It is not an attempt to convince people of the existence of God or the imminence of God's judgment. Nor does it seek to convict people of sin who are content with themselves. Rather, they seek out those individuals who, through their own thinking, are 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. It is directed at people 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 (for example, Cornelius, the Ethiopian, Dionysius), theologically, historically, and psychologically. This approach requires some things that modern mass evangelism tries to get along without, including the time to work with individuals personally, the backing of a fellowship of Christians who have life abundantly and let it show, and the capacity to meet people

on their own level without requiring them to learn pious language before being able to understand. Since the type of person most likely to receive such a message is often 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 oneself without revelation.

As was the case in the very first years of the Anabaptist movement, this type of evangelism appeals to independent thinkers, often middle-class tradespeople, professional people, engineers, white-collar workers, and intellectuals. This means that the group is enriched constantly by the influx of new people with such abilities. At the same time, the fact that a farm cannot use all these abilities shows one of the limitations of the purely rural Bruderhof system.

### **The fellowship as the basis for evangelism**

The basis of evangelism is *koinonia*, the fellowship of those who seek the will of Christ together. The community's decisions are made prayerfully by the members' unanimous agreement, be it a matter of financial organization, work planning, or church discipline. Missionaries are guided week by week in their travels by the fellowship at home. The fact of Christian fellowship as a real sharing of all life's concerns, which the prayer meeting, Sunday school class, and small group movement try to provide, is expressed by the whole pattern of Bruderhof living. Tenth-generation Mennonite Christians with a solid tradition of family-centered rural community life can get along without a vital experience of Christian fellowship because family ties are a fair substitute. But for rootless and friendless modern Western individuals whose only home is a rented apartment, whose only society is party-going or business contacts, and 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 existence of a fellowship of Christians willing to accept them as one of their own, share with them their wealth and poverty, and treat them as people and no longer as things.

### Restoring baptismal commitment

Throughout Mennonite history, a major cause of spiritual decline in times of toleration, apart from the possession 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. 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 that person's family, than to leave it. Baptism became an act of conformity rather than a break with the world. 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 backward 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 to restore the original content of the commitment of baptism. The first is to have a clear and demanding standard of Christian life, enforced by discipline, so that no one thinks that ordinary decent behavior, "as good as anyone else," is enough. The Hutterians, like the Amish, apply 1 Corinthians 5:11 literally. Aspects of stewardship and simplicity should be dealt with by discipline just as clearly as military service.

It is just as important to avoid confusing Christian nurture and evangelism. This means we should avoid pressuring young people to follow the path of least resistance and remain within the group. This is the point where North 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 (see 1 John 4:18). A strategy of fear, aiming at survival (in spite of Matthew 10:39), seeks first of all to "hold on to the young people" by making baptism easy, sheltering them from outside contacts, encouraging them to be conscientious objectors with or without conviction, and building ties of family, community, and vocation that make it difficult, if not impossible 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 godparents renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. A strategy of love, on the other hand, has sufficient trust in the Spirit's work and in the attraction of true discipleship to risk waiting for the decision to request baptism until it comes uncoaxed from an adult who knows what the 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 on to the young people" than the strategy of fear that sets out with that purpose.

Attaining this goal in the apparently closed community of a Bruderhof requires a carefully thought through program of education. The school is, indeed, one of the most remarkable things at Wheathill. Better than in the public schools, children are taught to become individuals and to think 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 that would enable them to live better (in terms of wealth and social esteem) in "normal society" than in the Bruderhof. Then if they decide to return to the Bruderhof for life, as they usually do, they know what they are accepting and what they are rejecting. They also 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 young people to make their own commitments does not mean a sacrifice of Christian nurture. It 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 is to lead their children to become a mature, honest, informed, independent, industrious human being capable of

making a contribution in the world. This includes informing them of basic moral principles that are valid whether or not they are believers and informing them, more by deed than word, that one can follow those principles in the abundant life of the Spirit. This education gives them the necessary basis for a Christian commitment and unavoidably creates a certain leaning, but it will not make the decision for them nor keep them from becoming acquainted with 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 100 percent 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.

### **The Spirit will lead us**

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. I have used the example of the Hutterian Brethren (which incidentally does not correspond with the North American Hutterians) to illustrate an attempt to apply the Anabaptist viewpoint today. 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 person is called and every disciple is committed. May that same Spirit reveal again in our day, as God has in the past, God's will for church order, education, stewardship, and evangelism.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yoder, John Howard.

Radical Christian discipleship / John Howard Yoder; edited by John C. Nugent, Andy Alexis-Baker, and Branson L. Parler.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8361-9666-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Christian life. I. Nugent, John C., 1973- II. Alexis-Baker, Andy, 1975- III. Parler, Branson L., 1980- IV. Title. BV4501.3.Y63 2012 248.4—dc23

2012029035

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RADICAL CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2012029035

International Standard Book Number: 978-0-8361-9666-5

Printed in United States of America

Cover design by Brian Nugent, design by Joshua Byler  
Cover photo by David Dean

16 15 14 13 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To order or request information, please call 1-800-245-7894 in the U.S. or 1-800-631-6535 in Canada. Or visit [www.heraldpress.com](http://www.heraldpress.com).

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