
INTERVIEW

MAINTAINING A REDEMPTIVE COMMUNITY IN TODAY'S WORLD

A Conversation with John A. Hostetler

John A. Hostetler is a scholar in residence at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Dr. Hostetler was reared in an Amish family and now worships in a Mennonite community.

This interview was conducted by Frederick J. Buchanan.

WHO ARE THE MENNONITES?

They started in Europe during the Reformation. By refusing to baptize their infants they were nicknamed Anabaptists, a Latin word meaning rebaptizers. The name "Menno" comes from Menno Simmons, a Catholic priest who because of his doubts started re-reading the Bible and going to underground house churches. Eventually, he became a leader in the Anabaptist movement.

The Mennonite idea was first of all was that the church should be a free church—freedom of choice to be a Christian, and not being Christian because you were baptized as an infant, or you kept the rituals of the Catholic church. Unlike Lutherans, Anabaptists established believing communities separate and without authorization from the state. They were not anarchists. They believed that the state in a sense was ordained by God as a provision to protect the welfare of the whole—of unbelieving people as well. But they were nonresistant—in other words, they taught nonviolence and said they would not fight in war.

Today there are Mennonite church buildings but the Amish people gather in their homes for worship, as they did in Europe.

WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AMISH AND THE MEN-

NONITES?

They are all part of the spectrum of Anabaptists. The Mennonites today are for the most part modernized and have an open community. The Amish maintain the language, customs, the horse farming and have rather closed communities. The reason there are so many different expressions of community is due to their theology—they have no centralized office. The believing community is where the spirit of God is manifested. And that community is one that purifies the individual by realizing his forgiveness through forgiving other people and by grappling with problems of day to day living. It's in the community where the action takes place.

SO THE COMMUNITY IS WHERE REDEMPTION IS FOUND?

What the Anabaptists articulate is a theology of redemptive community—to be "saved" as an individual would be unsatisfactory, for them. Here they differ sharply from modern Christian fundamentalism. They do not feel at home knocking on doors and asking individuals whether they are saved. Many Mennonites feel that Billy Graham has done wonderful work by preaching repentance and being born again. But what is lacking is that there is no sense of a believing community coming together after the preaching and turning away from sin. Many Christian fundamentalists take the view that God dictated the very words in the Bible. Mennonites were never that contextually oriented. We go back to the community. That is, truth is articulated in a community—in relationships. Whether you are at peace with your brethren is more important than arguing

whether the words in the Bible should be understood literally. For Mennonites, the Word is a living word—it's something that you live out in the community. It's not so much as whether you feel happy with your own relationship to God; that is obviously necessary in a community, but it is not sufficient. You have to have a community in which that relationship is demonstrated ethically by your conduct.

IF THERE WERE ONE, WHAT WOULD A MENNONITE CREED CONSIST OF?

Mennonites want to obey the teachings of Jesus, and are very serious about it. They have a distrust of participating in the carnal world and are looking for the Kingdom of God; they believe that the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Evil and Darkness are in very severe competition in their lifespan. The loyalties to the coming kingdom are very severely taught.

HOW WELL DID THE MOVIE *WITNESS* EXPLORE THE AMISH COMMUNITY?

I did not appreciate it. It was a violent and erotically charged enterprise. Paramount missed a tremendous opportunity to make a good statement. The film was not a fair interpretation of the Amish. It was about was the friction between two law enforcement agencies, and the detective simply fell into kind of a cave where he met these funny people. He never learned anything from them and the Amish never learned anything from him. And in the end, murder was committed on Amish farms. There were horrible scenes, such as a gun held up to a woman's head, and the trauma of this I find very revolting.

HOW DO MENNONITES RESOLVE THEIR COMMITMENT TO A SIMPLE CHRISTIAN LIFE WITH THE INESCAPABLE INVOLVEMENT IN THE WORLD?

That is a very difficult line. If you live simply and are frugal and are thrifty and have no dirty habits, you're going to become prosperous. God will bless you. Then you have to decide what you're going to do with your wealth. Traditionally, you would invest it in other farms for the younger generation to stay on the land, but today there just doesn't seem to be any future for young people on the farm. So many Mennonites are turning to construction and building professions, and even the more conservative elements of the Amish are now legitimizing stores on their own farms. On the whole, Mennonites go to college and become teachers, nurses, service workers of some kind. They

emphasize the caring, domestic, mundane work.

Mennonites are finding it very difficult today to maintain their faith. With education, professionalism, and mobility, it is very difficult to maintain their sense of community. When you teach unity, peace, caring, and then you are confronted with exactly the opposite, you have to deal with that manipulative, carnal nature that is in you. Jealousy, envy, pride—those things have to be dealt with. So there are gaps between belief and practice; Mennonites are often accused of being contradictory in this regard. They emphasize humility and social harmony, but factionalism and mistrust is one of the ugly realities. Judging the motives of others and gossiping about people is one of the back stages within the Mennonite communities.

Another threat today is wealth. You couldn't become very wealthy in an Amish community without other people knowing it. But when you do become wealthy, you help other people buy farms. It does not show in the style of living, such as buying Cadillacs. As a Mennonite, however, you can be wealthy and manage your

wealth very well and be accepted. And your wealth can hopefully be some influence toward stability in the community. Wealth is not to be used upon yourself, to live better, to live more affluently, and to elevate your status to a high position.

Wealth, status, affluence, and convenience are real temptations. There are Mennonites so involved in the world that their time and effort is so diffuse that it's not going in the religious community.

WHAT ABOUT MISSIONARY WORK IN THE WORLD?

Mennonite missions today are related to service. Wherever there is a catastrophe, floods, or war and disaster—Mennonites feel compelled to help in some way or another. If people see by example the light of Christ within them, that's probably one of the most powerful testimonies they can give, rather than running a radio or television program or knocking on doors.

Mennonites feel guilty about taking a non-resistant position that is only negative. They

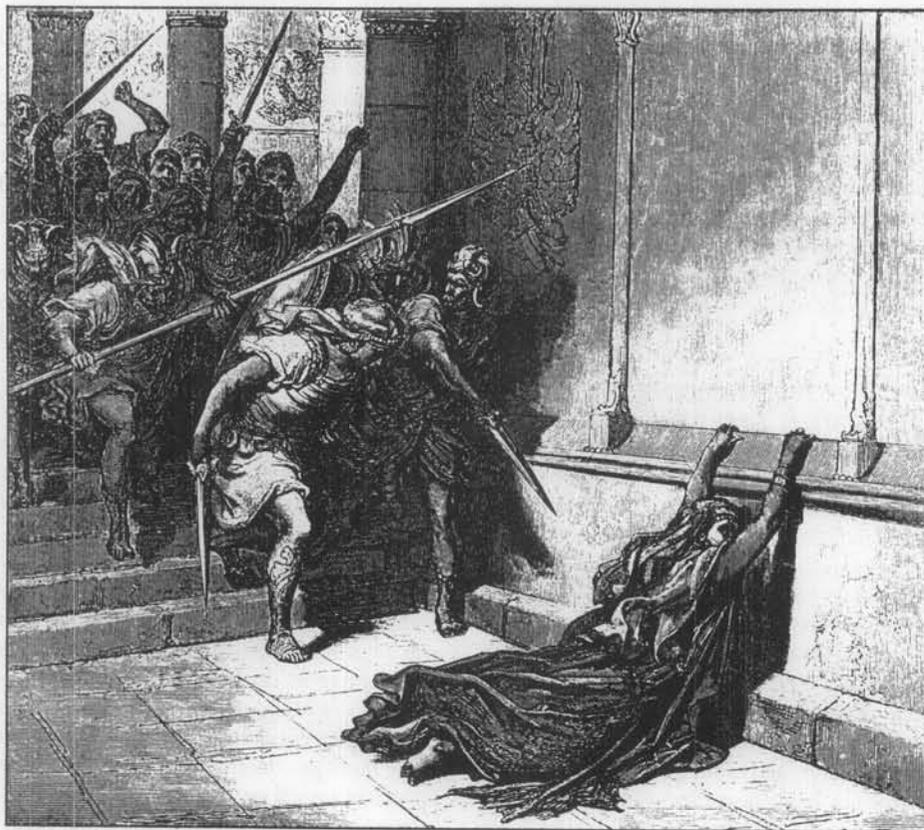
say, "We will not participate when there's a war, so what good can we do?" They want to do something positive in the way of peace making and feeding the hungry world. And of course, they have farms and they have crops and they have material goods, and they do feel guilty if they don't have a chance to share. I think more basic than that is the Bible teaching that the only way wealth can be sanctioned is to give to those who are needy.

WHAT ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENTS?

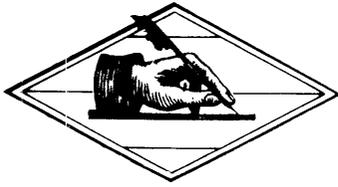
Mennonites vote. But Mennonites generally take a dim view of politics, believing that it's the world's way of running its business. You could probably do more good in the world if you prayed more for your country and for the people who are elected because those people are subject to great temptation, corruption and misuse of power. Mennonites themselves don't want to be put in a position where they have to exercise physical force on other people. By taking a position of non-resistance they are a witness to the wider world.

There is another contribution that the Mennonites make, one might call it mediation—refraining from going along with the majority. Sometimes the bureaucrats and many bureaucratic structures today, and service oriented people have trouble pushing the Mennonites into conformity. The Mennonites will not go along with certain things—defense, and defense-related things, for example. Mennonites also have a problem with becoming American, in the sense of being patriotic. They want to be patriotic for their faith. They don't mind helping a nation clean up and look better, but they don't like the flag-waving symbol of being American. We stand between world's power structures and the helpless people in the world. When there is a very concerted tendency in a certain direction, Mennonites are perhaps somewhat reluctant to follow.

This confrontation can sometimes become rather serious, and the Mennonites can sometimes be misunderstood because of their position. But I think that in a democracy it is very important to have groups that are mediating. They are a witness against war, and the injustices of the society and they call into question some of the extremes within Christianity itself. You might say they are a light to the world—or they are moderating influences in the larger society. It's not something you can buy, it's not something you can program, it's something that grows out of a deep religious commitment of a people.



"There she is, brethren! That's the woman who told the bishop we snuck out of priesthood meeting to watch the Super Bowl!"



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