

The Christian Community of Goods: Peter Walpot, 1577

Background: Hutterian Anabaptism began around 1530 and takes its name from an early leader, Jakob Hutter, who was executed in 1536. The Hutterians agreed with other Anabaptist groups on many points but were unique in their rejection of private ownership of property and their formation of intentional communities called “Bruderhofs.” They found relative tolerance in Moravia where their communities developed agricultural, technological and medical skills and from which they sent missionaries. Peter Walpot, leader of Hutterian communities in Moravia from 1556 until his death in 1578, was a major Hutterite writer. In the following dialogue, our invented, interested questioner inquires about yieldedness and community. Yieldedness (“Gelassenheit”) was an important spiritual term, used by late medieval Catholics as well as by Anabaptists. The readers may say either “yieldedness” or “Gelassenheit.”

Requirements: Two persons

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Questioner: Tell me, Peter Walpot, why are you setting up communities in Moravia? Where do you get your ideas for this?

Peter: Well, remember how the Lord called his disciples Simon Peter and his brother Andrew; also James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. Remember what he said? “Follow me.” And what did they do? They left their nets, they left their boats, they left their father and they followed him. That’s how it is with us. Christ places demands on us—on our possessions and relationships. When we follow him, we have to leave our goods, our parents and friends. And he leads us in a path of yieldedness/Gelassenheit and community.

Questioner: Hmmm. Yieldedness/Gelassenheit and community. What do these mean?

Peter: Think about it. Think what Jesus said: “No one may serve two masters. For you will hate the one and love the other, or obey the one and despise the other.” You can’t serve two masters. One master says you can be selfish and possessive. The other says you should live in community. How can you bring these into agreement? Whoever is a servant of mammon is certainly no servant of Christ.

You can’t go in two directions at once. You can’t put your foot in two places at once. You can’t cook two stews in the same pot. A bird can sit only on one perch at a time. You’ve got to choose. To have one thing, you’ve got to let the other one go. And we’ve chosen, chosen not to cling to money and wealth but rather to give them to God’s poor.

Questioner: Am I getting you right? You think that our spirituality is linked with our attitudes to wealth? And you—and your community—say that we should leave personal possessions behind, share what we have and give to the poor. That’s pretty demanding, isn’t it?

Peter: Well, remember what Jesus said: “Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is narrow and the way is small that leads to life. To life! A life of Christian community is the narrow gate. Indeed Christian community is an oven of yieldedness/Gelassenheit in which the person is tried like gold in the fire but finds life.

Questioner: Narrow gate, broad gate, oven of yieldedness/*Gelassenheit*— it's all very poetic. But what does it really mean ... in today's world?

Peter: Well, what did Jesus say? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," he said, "that is the first commandment. And the second is the same, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This little word "yourself" contains within it the idea of true community—and all the works of love and mercy which one person can show to another. Indeed, to love your neighbor as yourself is the measure of true community.

Do you know what it's like in community? In true community no one seeks advantage over the neighbor but rather mutuality and common concern for each other. To love one's neighbor as yourself is not to have *part*, or even *half*, but the *whole* in common, and to give *all* things for the common use.

Questioner: But is this really required for Christians? I mean, most Christians share a common faith, and yet we never speak of sharing goods. Are you saying that community of goods is necessary for spiritual community?

Peter: Look, this is what I've observed. It's people whose love has grown cold who say what you're saying. They think that spiritual communion just means oneness in doctrine, oneness in faith. But this is what I've learned: Where there is true spiritual community there will also be a community of goods. And without economic sharing you won't have true spiritual community. You simply can't have the one without the other. You can't do it.

Source: Peter Walpot, *True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods* (1577), chapters 21, 24, 29, 43, 137, in Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 138-196.

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