

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Kommunisten! - Part 1

by Leonard Verduin

The sermon explores the historical and theological tensions between the Reformers and Anabaptists, particularly regarding economic practices and the concept of community of goods.

Scripture: Matthew 19:21, Luke 12:33, Acts 2:44, 1 Corinthians 7:30, 1 Timothy 6:17

Topics: "Church History", "Stewardship"

Description

Leonard Verduin delves into the historical tension between the Reformers and their Stepchildren regarding the concept of 'community of goods,' as seen in the Belgic Confession and accusations of rejecting authority and introducing disorder. The sermon explores the ancient cliché of heretics seeking to abolish magistracy and decency, often associated with advocating 'community of goods.' Verduin highlights the biblical perspective on ownership, emphasizing that God is the ultimate owner and humans are stewards accountable for sharing with those in need. The sermon also addresses false accusations of 'community of wives' and 'goods in common' against the Stepchildren, revealing a lack of understanding and unfair treatment by the Reformers.

Transcript

As though they possessed not I Cor. 7:30

STILL ANOTHER AREA OF TENSION BETWEEN THE REFORMERS and their Stepchildren involved what was known as "community of goods." It finds its classic expression in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, where we read; "Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious folk, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men." Here the charge that the Stepchildren "reject the higher powers and magistrates" (which charge we have already weighed) is followed by the charge that they "would introduce community of goods"; and this is further expanded in the words "and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men."

On the face of it this sounds very much like a translation of an ancient cliché in the German. There is in the German language an ancient idiom, used through the centuries to describe the "heretic"; he was said to be a person whose ambition it was to put an end to alle Ober-und Erbarkeit (all magistracy and all

decency). This idiom seems to lie behind the wording of the Belgic Confession. The lilt and the alliteration were of course lost in the translation but the idea was preserved, namely that the "heretic" had two ambitions; (1) to "overthrow the magistracy," and (2) to "put an end to all decency," a feature of which was the ambition to introduce "community of goods."

We have indicated that this was an ancient cliché. It was by no means invented when the Second Front was opened; for it had been bandied about for a long, long time already. Leo the Great had already said around the year 450: "Heretics overthrow all order and decency By them every care of honesty is removed, every compact of marriage dissolved, all law, divine and human alike, is subverted."! This accusation became standard procedure and this feature became a part of the stereotyped delineation of the "heretic." It quite automatically devolved upon the Stepchildren.

That this was so may be gathered from a memorandum which the archbishop of Cologne sent to the Emperor in 1535, a memorandum intended to alert the emperor to the dangers allegedly lurking in the Anabaptist vision. Said the archbishop: "The Anabaptists wish to redivide all properties etc. -- just as the nature of the Anabaptists has always been, even as the ancient chronicles and the Imperial laws made a thousand years ago do testify."² Here was a well-informed man who, as he saw the Anabaptist movement coming up, recalled the ancient cliché that "heretics" have radical ideas in the area of economics; for a millennium or more, he recalls, rebaptizers have been inclined that way.

There was an element of truth in this ancient cliché. The "heretics" had indeed, from very early times, revealed certain sensitivities in the general area of "mine and thine," sensitivities that the Constantinians disliked, disliked so much that they called it a matter of "community of goods." A group of these "heretics," apprehended in the vicinity of Turin in the year 1030, had confessed that "All our possessions we have in common with all men."

So much was this a stereotype that when the attack upon Luther was first launched this too was thrown at him, that he advocated "community of goods." When people heard that there was a new "heretic," the "heretic" of Wittenberg, they automatically included this in the report,"

There is reason to believe that the cliché of which we speak had its roots in the Donatist rebellion. The French scholar Martroyehas written:

It is to be noted that Donatism began when the orthodox clergy became the ally and protégé of the Emperors. Apparently the Christians had seen in Christianity the promise of a new social order and they considered it tantamount to surrender to accommodate themselves to the social organizations represented by the Emperor. The orthodox priests were considered traitors ... because they seemed to have betrayed the religion itself.⁴

Certain it is that, whatever was novel in the economic vision of early Christianity, this was again lost in and with the Constantinian change. The economic conscience, if indeed there was one in medieval society, can hardly be said to have derived from the New Testament writings; one does not have to go beyond the writings of ethnic origin to locate the sources of medieval ideas of economic justice.

Two things stand out very clearly in the Christian Scriptures in regard to mine and thine. One of these is that no man is ever in absolute possession; only God owns absolutely; and this precludes absolute ownership by men, His creatures. Human beings, according to these Scriptures, are at all times amenable to God in the matter of ownership. This makes human ownership to be always less than absolute.

A second thing that stands out clearly in the Christian Scriptures concerning "mine and thine" is that since the earth and its riches have been entrusted to mankind as a whole, no individual man may ever hold things as though he were alone on the earth. The fact that there are other human beings puts a further check upon the idea of ownership. This points to a moral problem connected with being a possessor. The moral problem of coming by one's possessions honestly is by no means the only problem which the Christian vision posits. Perhaps it may even be said that in this vision the moral problem only begins at the point of lawful acquisition. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus does not address itself to the problem of acquiring honestly but to a subsequent problem, the problem of holding property in the context of human suffering. Dives went to hell in the Parable because he lived in luxury with not so much as a thought for the privation that lay at his doorstep.

Moreover, no sin is scored so frequently nor rebuked so severely in the New Testament as the sin of pleonexia, whatever that is. The word means, literally, "much-having" or "more-having." This word has been translated, very conveniently, with the English word avarice, a word meaning some inordinate craving for wealth. So translated, it loses most of its cutting edge, for one can always persuade himself that his own desire for enlarged possession does not exceed the limits of the correct and proper. Whether "more-having" connotes the ambition to have more than one's rightful share, or, more than one's neighbor has, or whatever, it certainly lies very close to unrestrained, undisciplined, conscienceless acquisition.

The question has been raised, and the final answer is still to be given, as to whether capitalism is the legitimate offspring of Christianity. Much depends on one's use of the word "Christianity." If by Christianity one means "Christendom," then it could very well be that the product of that Christendom is that irresponsible capitalism that is now happily on the run. But if by 'Christianity one means the life and world view that stares at us, from the pages of the New Testament then it must be said that Christianity has never supported conscienceless ownership. Irresponsible "mine and thine" is the child of sacralist "Christendom" and not of authentic Christianity.

It was felt, and said, in medieval times that when the Church "fell" the economic insights that were uniquely Christian went into eclipse. A fifteenth-century rebel put it this way: "All that is evil comes from the Latins; they posit the jus quiritum militare, this is mine and that is thine, with which they wreck all kindness and the love of God, for Roman law is contrary to natural and divine law, and from it all envy and hatred have taken their origin." This rebel went on to date the moment of the great innovation of evil: "the Donation of Constantine laid the foundation for the deterioration; and greed and avarice have from that time reared their heads mightily among the 'Clergy.'"

It is apparent from the above quotation that it was especially the callous wealth of the clergy that irked those who rebelled against the medieval order. The clergy did indeed eat of the fat of the land; their standard of living was incomparably much higher than that of the common man. Save for the bankers perhaps, the Church's men were the only ones who could afford brocaded cloth and ermine. Small wonder that in the eyes of the Restitutionists some of the outstanding sins were the sins of pomp and pride, of avarice and exhibition, the very sins that later re-appear as outstanding sins in the eyes of the Stepchildren.

[a. It is said that when Pope John XXII died (in 1334), he had amassed a fortune of 25,000,000 florins. For purposes of comparison we may observe that at about the same time, the ransom demanded by the ruffians who had abducted the King of France was set at 800,000 florins, a sum which his subjects had difficulty raising.: XXII may have been exceptional in his avarice, but it was on y too true that the Church

was the outstanding possessor in those times. (For details see Coulton, Inquisition. and Liberty, p. 217.)]

It goes without saying that the "heretics" ideal priest was the priest in homespun. "How can anyone recognize under the regalia of the pope a disciple of Jesus Christ?" they asked wistfully. The Poor Men of Lyons, otherwise called the Waldensians, wore undyed wool by way of contrast, and alleged that "all who are proud are sons of the devil."

This evaluation of wealth and splendor, this rebuke of callous wealth, passed over into the camp of the Stepchildren, as a cursory glance at the record makes apparent. One needs only to consider the contemporary descendants of these Stepchildren, our Mennonites, to see the connection. Here we still find clergymen who wear frocks with hooks and eyes rather than buttons, who wear no ties or jewelry -- and that as a matter of principle, these being considered evidences of pretentious living.

This high appraisal of frugal living was quite non-existent in the camp of the Reformers and therefore did not take its origin in the events that began in 1517. One needs to read but little of the Anabaptist literature to discover that here the sin of gluttony and similar excess stands at the head of the list of deadly sins, in a unique way. Men who think that "a basic dualism" is the key to the understanding of Anabaptism have sought to derive this Anabaptist peculiarity from it, a sort of neo-Platonic vilification of the flesh; but it is more likely that this sensitivity resulted from the conviction that he who overeats is thereby denying to some fellow-man the very necessities of life. It is therefore related to the sensitivity that earned the Stepchildren the charge of "community of goods."

As the late Dr. Lydia Muller saw, with a bit of womanly intuition perhaps (for she was, generally speaking, no friend of the idea that Anabaptism has roots that go far back of 1517), this trait in the Anabaptists is a "Waldensian heritage." It will be recalled that Peter Waldo began his career by selling all that he had and giving it to the poor. It was so much a part of this earlier eruption of protest against the Church's falleness that the Waldensians were commonly known as the Poor Men of Lyons. These "heretics" were great sharers, noted exponents of "community of goods."b

[b. It is true, one finds a similar exaltation of voluntary poverty among certain groups that continued within the Church, the Mendicants for example. We know that the Church sometimes took over certain features of the "heretics" in order to take the wind out of their sails, as it were, and fight fire with fire. It created an order of itinerant priests in an effort to counteract the Leufer. It could be that in a similar way voluntary poverty within the Church was devised in order to off-set the effect of the voluntary poverty of the "heretics."]

Another feature in the Biblical vision concerning mine and thine is the prohibition of usury. This word, which has come to stand for a too-high rate of interest, does not in the Christian Scriptures have to do with interest rates. It has to do with human distress. In pre-modern times men borrowed money only in emergencies; and the prohibitions were to prevent one man from lining his pockets with another man's misery. What was forbidden was the cashing-in on the distress of a man who had been overtaken by calamity. This sensitivity was lost in the medieval world; only a regulation as to rates of interest remained. It is no wonder that in the Restitutionist vision the taking of usury was likewise under fire. It was prominent in the assaults lodged by the Stepchildren in Reformation times. As such it is closely related to the clamor for "community of goods." Both are integral parts of a protest against irresponsible ownership; both are features of a desire to return to the sensitivities that run in the Scriptures as they deal with mine and thine.

Associated with the charge of "community of goods" we frequently find the charge of "community of wives." The origin of this companion accusation is not in all respects clear. In all likelihood it is connected with the image of the "heretic" which was constructed in pre-Constantinian times in the assaults made upon the early Christians, an image which was then conveniently transferred in post-Constantinian times to the Restitutionist "heretic." The idea of a "love-feast," celebrated in total darkness or in greatly subdued light as a safety measure, was enough to stimulate the imaginations of the early Christians' pagan neighbors and so give rise to unsavory tales, the more so since many an ancient religious cult had gone hand in hand with sexual abandon. When we find the enemies of the medieval "heretics" repeating these pre-Constantinian charges, sometimes quite verbatim, we are led to say that the accusation of "community of wives" was an ancient, extremely ancient, cliché, one that was a millennium and a half old when it was hurled after the Stepchildren. Such legends are extremely long-lived.c

[c. How persistent some of these ancient vilifications can be may be gathered from the following. In 1950, during a stay in the Netherlands, the present writer was told, not by some credulous fish-wife but by a professional man, that "When the Baptists celebrate the Lord's Supper it all ends in a frightful promiscuity."]

It is also possible and even likely that the slur of "wives in common" was fed by the fact that the Restitutionists, who avoided the Church's "sacrament of matrimony," cohabited in a way that must have looked quite irregular. It was difficult or even impossible for an outsider to know for sure which woman went with which man, there being no such thing as a civil record of marriage. This situation afforded a fine opportunity to raise the cry of "community of wives."

In all events, the charge was a cliché, part of a legend which men repeated uncritically. How uncritically may be gathered from the fact that the unbelievably vulgar priest, Broer Cornelis as he was called, ascribed the same evil behavior to the Calvinists. He had accused the Anabaptist Jacob de Keersegieter of "wives in common"; in an effort to show how intolerable was this slur, his Anabaptist victim said: "We are not the only ones who have to hear this from your lips, you preach this likewise, so I hear, concerning the Calvinists." To this Broer Cornelis then replied: "They do indeed also have their wives in common. Don't you think I know what it is they do when they blowout the candles after they have had their accursed devilish Supper?" What we have here is simply this. Broer Cornelis considered the Calvinists to be "heretics"; by that token they "have their wives in common." So stereotyped was the image of the "heretic."

All this determined the lot of the Stepchildren. They too cohabited without the benefit of the Church's ceremony. They too were therefore under suspicion of "repudiating marriage." But, since children continued to be born, it was apparent that they did cohabit. But, by having their "wives in common."

Here was a chance for their foes to apply pressures. It was decided "to record every marriage that has ecclesiastical status so as to know who cohabits lawfully and who not; then all who are not honorably joined are to be driven either to the Church or to separation." Very similar steps were taken in 1601 in the Reformed city of Croningen."

Finally, it may be that the charge of "wives in common" was fed by the fact that Anabaptist husbands travelled a great deal, partly because of their urge to carry the Gospel to others and partly as a safety measure. During their absence their wives and little ones would be parcelled out with other members of the fellowship. This could lead to the suspicion that the woman who lived now under this roof and anon under that was "held in common." This would also explain how that, occasionally at least, the slur of

"wives in common" went hand in hand with the charge of "children in common."

The charge of "community of wives" was a false charge. It did not result from observation; rather was it an ancient cliché, which came to people's minds whenever they heard the word "heretic." For example, no sooner had the archbishop of Mainz, Johann Cochlaeus, been informed of the fact that there were 18,000 Anabaptists in Germany, than he reached for his pen and in a letter of January 8, 1528, urged Erasmus of Rotterdam to prepare a book against them, specifying that there should be a chapter in the projected book on the Anabaptist tenet "that all things should be held in common, wives, virgins, temporal goods, etc."⁷

John Calvin did his bit to 'keep alive the ancient slur about "wives in common." In his writings against the Anabaptists he repeated the accusation" -- with as much justice as when Broer Cornelis levelled the same charge at Calvin and his followers!

[d. Calvin's misrepresentation of the Anabaptists must have had serious consequences seeing the wide publicity his tracts received, having been translated at once into English and Dutch., These tracts, perhaps more than anything else that was put in print, turned the tide of the Reform from the Restitutionist vision in which it had run hitherto and into the channels of neo-Constantinianism. It has been said of late (by Franklin H. Littell, in his *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 7) concerning Calvin, that "Among widely read authors probably none understood them [the Anabaptists] less .. " Certainly it is true, as the same historian asserts, Calvin's writings "lent misunderstanding to the historiography of the Anabaptists."]

In his Tracts against the Anabaptists, Calvin slides from the charge of "wives in common" to that of "goods in common."e He says, "Now in order not to leave any order at all among men they commit a similar confusion as to possessions, saying that it is part of the Communion of the saints that no one possesses anything as his own but that each ought to take what he can get." But Calvin makes this charge gingerly, puts it in the past tense, saying, "At the first there were indeed some mixed-up Anabaptists who talked that way, but after such absurdity had been rejected by all as being repugnant to human sense ... they have become ashamed of it." What had happened is that two decades of laboratory proof had demonstrated that "community of goods" was not an integral part of the Anabaptist vision -- so that Calvin refrained from putting it in the present tense. One could wish that he had pointed out who had in the earlier days repudiated "mine and thine" only then to repudiate the repudiation. He would have found it hard to document this thesis. We find him On the one hand granting in substance that contemporary Anabaptists did not advocate "community of goods," and on the other hand assailing the idea -- so whipping a dead horse, as it were.

[e. To Calvin's credit it may be said that he was one of the first to realize that not all "Anabaptists" were birds of a feather, writing two Tracts, one against the "furious" Anabaptists and one against the milder kind. This was a step in the right direction. At the same time, as Littell has pointed out (op. et lac. cit.), when Calvin attacked the free-thinking Spirituals at Geneva, he thought that he was dealing with the same movement that had expressed itself at Schlatten am Rande, a regrettable confusion. Calvin "made no distinction between the Spirituals and the Biblicist wings of the movement -- if, indeed, he knew there was such a distinction."]

But, at that, the dead horse had never been alive. The early Anabaptists, generally speaking, did not teach what Calvin lays to their charge. Perhaps the fact that Calvin did not read German (the language in which just about all writing that is Anabaptist was couched), so that he had to have everything at second hand, may have contributed to Calvin's unfair treatment of the Stepchildren. The saying is that if a man wants to

hurl a stone at a dog he can usually find the stone; Calvin was out to get the Anabaptists, primarily because they stood in the way of his idea of reform sponsored by magistrate; in his eagerness to make a good case he gave them less than a fair deal.

Consider the example of Schlatten am Rande. In the manifesto put forward there, nothing is said about the doctrine of the incarnation -- for the quite sufficient reason that in 1527 there were as yet no tensions touching this item. But when Calvin wrote his tracts against the Anabaptists the situation had changed. Menno Simons, following Melchior Hofmann, had abandoned the orthodox view concerning the incarnation. Rather than admit that in 1527 there had been no occasion to say anything about the matter, Calvin suggests that the silence of 1527 was due to bad faith, a "cunning trick" (par cautelle), "seeing that their doctrine is curse-worthy."⁹ Surely this is less than fair.

Nor was Calvin alone in this unfair treatment; the Reformers generally were so emotionally involved in the battle that raged at the Second Front that they were unable to pass a fair judgment concerning it. It would have been quite impossible to find twelve men who would be acceptable as jury members at the trial of the Stepchildren. A man like Zwingli for instance, who said with a straight face: "The Anabaptists have their wives in common and meet at night . . . for lewd practices . . ." ¹⁰ had already disqualified himself.

[f. How tendentious the testimony of the Reformers touching the Anabaptists was may be gathered from the fact that they said of them also that they lived exemplary lives, but that this was nothing but a device of the devil, bait put on the hook in order to catch more people. These testimonies cannot both be true. There was therefore an inner contradiction in the Reformers' testimony concerning their Stepchildren.]

One can only regret the un-Christian charges hurled at the Stepchildren: "As often as you confess Christ you make a confession which is worse than that of the demons; for they had experienced His power, in such measure that they sincerely confessed Him to be the Son of God, but you, when you confess Him, do so hypocritically."¹¹ This allegation was uncalled for, no matter how one looks at it. It was the direct result of an uncritical acceptance of an ancient cliché, one that only time could wear down.

Only so can we understand how it was that when Anabaptist prisoners denied everything that even remotely resembled "community of wives and of goods," men only turned the thumbscrews tighter or drew the rack up closer. So sure were they that the "real" Anabaptist was hiding behind the empirical one, that they were unable to believe their own eyes and ears. And so, back to the rack!

When Zwingli laid the charge of "community of goods" against Hübmaier, in 1526, the man answered:

I have always and at all places spoken about community of goods as follows: that a man must at all times be concerned for his fellow man, in order that the hungry may be fed, the thirsty given to drink, the naked clothed. For we are verily not lords over our own possessions, only administrators and dispensers. There is, believe me, no one who advocates taking another man's goods and making it common -- then rather leave to him the coat as well as the mantle!¹²

That should have put an end to the accusation -- at least until there was empirical evidence of a contrary thrust. But to expect that would be to forget what a hold the tradition had on men. Zwingli and the rest kept making the accusation, just as he made the charge (printed above) a year after this same Hübmaier had testified:

I am being suspected of wanting to make all things common. But this I have not done. I have the rather called that a Christian community of goods where one who has the wherewithal and who sees his neighbor suffering want then distributes his alms to him, with which the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked, and those in prison may be helped. The more a person practices such acts of compassion the closer he comes to a Christian mode of existence.¹³

When Jorg Dorsch, another Anabaptist prisoner, was instructed to inform the Court "what the Anabaptist rule, order, or intention or conspiracy may be," he replied:

I verily know of nothing concerning any rule, order, or conspiracy which I share with other Anabaptists, save only this, that when a poor person who has received the sign[g] comes to another Anabaptist he is to be given that on which he may exist. No one is required to give to another that which he himself needs I have not heard that they wish to be against the magistracy or that their intention is that all goods, wives, and children are to be held in common or be free to all comers.¹⁴

[g. I.e., the sign of baptism, believers' baptism, as administered among the Anabaptists. The reader will observe that whatever the Anabaptists meant by "community of goods" it was intended for those who belonged; it did not contemplate society in general.

Heinrich Seiler, an Anabaptist from Arnau, said at his trial, in 1529, when asked to state his ideas in regard to "community of goods": "I allow that a Christian man owns property -- in such a way, that when there are needy people he shares with them and deals correctly with them in the matter, for he is no more than a steward thereof."h

[h. This idea, that ownership is nothing more than stewardship and that he who possesses must answer both to God and to his fellow man, led the Anabaptists to a sort of "Christian Conservationism," the idea that a man must use the resources of the earth in such a way as not to deprive later generations of what is rightly theirs. Moreover, it was felt that the government has an assignment in this matter, must keep men from stripping the earth bare, as it were. We find the Anabaptist Jorg Schnabel saying that the civil magistrate is "van got verordenet ... , dan wann neit oberheit were, es wur wider holz noch feld gedeien mogen, es wurden auch weinig fleische einer dem andern gleichs tun, seintemal die fleishliche art so gar verdorben ist, das sei neit weiter dan das ihr sucht und der nachkomling weinig acht hat" (Quellen Hesse, p.178).]

Felix Manz, who was drowned in the Limmat for his Anabaptist convictions, gave as his idea touching property: "A good Christian shares with his neighbor when the latter is in need."

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