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Author(s): Elias Wiebe.

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MORAL GROWTH AND MATURITY AND THE CHURCH

Elias Wiebe

How does a believing, loving, caring, committed, covenantal community — in this case the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America — foster moral growth and maturity in its members? How does moral maturity inform issues now facing the Mennonite Brethren Church?

This study applies the findings of psychology and sociology to Christian nurture of the Christian community by parents and by the Christian education program of the church.

God's purpose ...is maturity in all ways.

I will then apply the principles of moral maturity, action and thought to three issues (conversion, baptism, church membership covenants) currently facing the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America. These issues will be reexamined and (hopefully) resolved by consensus in a summer 1989 study conference in Normal, Illinois.

Christian Nurture: Parents, Christian Education, and Moral Growth

All concerned will agree with Wadsworth in "Prelude:"

> What we have loved
> Others will love
> And we will teach them how.

Expectant parents and new parents must

Elias Wiebe is a retired education professor from Fresno Pacific College.

be immediately surrounded by a supporting group of parents from the covenant community. They will be nurturing a generation in the Christian faith.

Parents, with support from the church, help to build sensitivity to others in the child. A foundation of faith includes experiences which develop trust, courage, hope and love. This happens as they follow the instruction of Deuteronomy (11:18, 19):

> You shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, ... you shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, when you are walking by the way, or when you lie down and when you rise.

Nurture includes keeping children in check by loving restraint and ongoing relations of trust and care. Caution must be exercised to refrain from restraint which will hamper exploration and native curiosity. Properly channeled, exploration and curiosity result in constructive activities. Discipline is nurture when it is exercised to inhibit experiences which may later produce guilt. A good grounding at the "law" level is prerequisite for living later at a principled level. Parents can trust God that the external will be internalized and become a part of a new life style. That is, conversion (a turning or commitment to the living God) translates into changed living.

The beginning point in Christian nurture is the life experience of the individual. How important then that the child experience in cradle roll and in the nursery that this is a good place, here I am surrounded by persons who love me and care for me and who love my parents. Children's church continues this loving atmosphere of caring.

The experience of the child is influenced in the sanctuary by objects and symbols which introduce or reinforce Christian nurture. In the sanctuary of the College Community Church: Clovis Mennonite Brethren, a number of symbols interpret the faith. The building itself is in the round — we know and see each other — representing fellowship. The Bible is given a highly visible place in the sanctuary; the baptistery is in front and leads to many significant questions and answers. Above the baptistery hangs a cross which, in different seasons of the church year, is appropriately covered by works of art or banners representing the church year. The communion table has

a chalice and a bread tray pointing to the fellowship of the saints with Christ and one another. Correctly interpreted these symbols all give occasion to discuss conversion, baptism, communion, and the nature of the church.

Moral education is most effective when elements of moral reasoning, personal experiences, and stages of faith are considered as a whole. The child must be given the opportunity to consider genuine moral problems, moral dilemmas, and to experience real social and cognitive conflict. The teacher's task is to stretch moral reasoning, aiding the student in perceiving issues, reasoning, and making moral decisions. The teacher will be constantly guiding the discussion to real issues of the gospel and will help the discussants to be challenged by the gospel in their responses and solutions.

In early adolescence youth is moving from the "good-boy nice-girl" level of affirmation to a greater need for self-identity. Reciprocity and mutual respect are sometimes in jeopardy. To be or not to be oneself is especially critical for the females who are in a struggle with what results in acknowledgement of femininity or acceptance of anonymity.

Beginning in the final childhood stages and on into adolescence, youth are able to reason more logically. They enter a period of questioning. Conclusions once accepted are no longer satisfactory. The church and parents often find this a very disconcerting period. In this period the individual members of the church must give support to parents by becoming "significant others" to those who are in a questioning stage. Concurrently they may be experiencing identity confusion. They are surrounded by peer pressure while confronting differences in what they have been taught and what they are experiencing. Conversion can be the logical answer to these dilemmas.

Hopefully our children and adolescents in the church will experience conversion, be baptized and become active members of the church. Within the church and in Anabaptist congregations in particular, the emphasis on freedom of choice introduces the possibility of making the wrong choice. But given the option would we want our children's participation in the faith life to be a matter of psychological conditioning or can we allow freedom to choose not to obey? Should parents try to prevent a cleavage between themselves and their child by creating a relationship where the child remains

essentially dependent upon the parent? Similarly, is there not a risk for the church that a person may find the church wanting, and that she/he not return but become estranged?

Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image of man. Human dignity demands that people act according to a free choice. How else can we move from conditioned response to full maturation? Response to God's invitation to a practicing Christian faith must be freely made. The nature of God and people — made in his image — express themselves in authentic freedom. We must refrain from coercive action and from persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy. If the highest level of moral reasoning is the principled level and if the highest principles are justice and love, and if justice and love are to be informed by free choice, choosing God's truth will make one truly free.

The church must be both the defender of the faith, as well as the instrument which liberates the individual. The church and parent do all they can, but we must be prepared to risk our children's faith and future into the hands of God: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6).

Applications of Moral Maturity to Issues in Church Life

CONVERSION AND MORAL MATURITY

Persons must be born again (John 3:3). The meaning of conversion is broad. Some believe that being born into a Christian family and participating in the life of a vital congregation does not and cannot make a person a Christian. They contend that everyone must experience a crisis conversion. Others argue that a child may be nurtured into the faith, moving from one level of commitment to another. It may be helpful for the child or adolescent to identify a moment of conversion as a reference point of adult commitment to Christ. Adopting a rigid formula may thwart the faith-building process (Schmidt, 51). It is wrong to deny childhood conversion and to deny the child a valid place in the faith community. Children can know Jesus and are capable of responding to the Holy Spirit as He guides them toward maturity. But childhood conversion is not adult conversion. It is made at a certain level of moral reasoning and must be carefully supplemented by the

Church through nurture and invitation to higher levels of moral and faith responses.

Taylor-Wingender suggests, "Children who are nurtured in the understanding that they are kingdom citizens and who learn to carry their childlikeness into their adult lives do not need to experience conversion... The "good news" is that Jesus accepts them and they are model citizens of the kingdom. It is vital that children learn about their status in Christ and his kingdom before they renounce it and walk away from it" (23)

When I was thirteen the conversion experience was fraught with fear and stressed "durch dringen" (struggling through). The church practice was to conduct a fall and a spring revival. Then (and sometimes even today) the revival experiences were the result of carefully orchestrated operant conditioning which was sometimes sub-Christian.

The home and the church provide a loving and caring environment for the child in infancy and early childhood. She/ he hears stories which reinforce the love and caring that she/ he is experiencing. Since the beginning point in all of Christian nurture is the life experience of the individual, "conversion" at this age will be basically a response to a loving God or a fearful God as represented by the love of the parents.

During the elementary school years the child is able to reason and to respond to whole situations and therefore is more strongly influenced by the metaphors and stories of the Bible. Especially useful in the curriculum are stories for young children. At 11 or 12, children are particularly interested in the language, lore and stories of the church community. What a treasure house we Mennonites have to satisfy that interest. Kindred and Herald Presses continue to produce many of these stories. They represent a gold mine of resources for the nurture of our children's faith.

Certainly the Bible is indispensable in Christian nurture and a major source of content. However, it too must be carefully and appropriately used. Some Scripture is appropriate for memorization, some metaphors are meaningful, but some stories require more advanced moral reasoning. The sacrifice of Isaac, David and Goliath, the three men in the fiery furnace, are dynamic models which capture the imagination and stimulate the faith of children. Miracles, for the child enculturated through television, should be reserved until later stages of reasoning because they may well be equated with magic or the

unreal cartoon world in the child's mind. Not all parts of the
Bible are equally appropriate for the Christian nurture of
children (see Richards and Pardy).

What effect does conversion have on moral development?
Rowen holds that "... the idea that conversion is a 'shot in the
arm' that accelerates one up the moral scale is tenuous"
(Rowen in Joy, 120-121). We would agree with Schmidt that
"Conversion, or any other spiritual experience will not violate
one's personhood or developmental pattern" (56).

BAPTISM AND MORAL MATURITY

In the New Testament baptism followed immediately or
shortly after conversion. This would seem a matter of conven-
tionality. Our approach to moral reasoning will account for
different understandings of the actual implications of this
ritual. The church must be aware of these differences. It must
teach the significance of baptism and its convenantal mean-
ing, especially if baptism is followed immediately by accept-
ance into church membership. Baptism is an adult
commitment in which a Christian identifies with Christ and
covenants with a local expression of the body of Christ to
follow Christ together. The maturing adult, in particular, or
those who come to faith in later adulthood will need continu-
ing and intensive nurture in order to reach Christian maturity.

Church Membership Covenants (Confession of Faith)
and Moral Maturity

The moral development of the adult or of the maturing or
matured adult has progressed through a series of "marker"
events: marriage, children, vocation, the empty nest syn-
drome, death, and grandchildren. In the experience of these
events the adult has been surrounded by a supporting group of
church members. She/he has moved from accepting church
regulations as strict social contracts and has become more and
more concerned with human life, equality and dignity. In
some, hopefully not too rare cases, she/he has found a sense of
identity and unity with God. Hopefully, mid-life has brought an
openness to enter into dialogue and to a stage of interdepen-
dent commitment. She/he has become self-reflective and self-
fulfilled.

God's purpose for his children is maturity in all ways (Eph.

4:15) including moral and spiritual development, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13). Conversion makes this movement toward Christian maturity possible. It changes the content of faith and thereby brings into focus and enhances precisely those central values which make it possible for us through the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit to organize the goals of our moral life. The church, including its pastor, contributes to the understanding and appreciation of the relevant moral and social issues and values.

Such growth does not come automatically or easily. Bellah and his associates, writing in *Habits of the Heart,* conclude that persons can move from individualism to community. Throughout American history "rugged individualism" has had a powerful influence on American society in general and on religious communities especially. Chazan describes the importance of the holy or covenant community in moving from individualism to interdependence (Chazan in Joy, 84). He says, furthermore, that "The morality of the individual is very much related to every facet of the community. The very act of being part of the covenant community is itself a value" (83).

What are some characteristics of the covenanting communities and what are the attendant moral implications? Communities have historical dramas of their own (Bellah: 55). There are stories in communities of memory (Bellah: 154). There must be "significant others" for *everyone* in the church community. Ideally there are mentors for members of the community before and continuing after baptism and membership in the church. The community members must direct their moral behavior toward children so that they might learn what it means to belong together as God's people. There are adult models, but the church community also encourages peers to display moral behavior toward each other. The morality of the individual is very much related to and is a facet of the community (Chazan in Joy: 84).

Christians should view their communities (churches) as existing in a covenant relationship with God and with one another. They come to trust others and to make commitments within the shared context of positive relations. Baptism is the symbol of this relationship and the vows taken at that time are

binding. One's commitment to the body is the measure of one's commitment to Christ, the head. Toews states that the consensus of the community and of the Mennonite Brethren Conference as now summarized in the *Confession of Faith* becomes normative for the individuals who constitute the covenanting community. Love of God can make one want to do what one is obligated to do (Bellah: 94).

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