

The Back Door

~Jeff Jarmon

More than twenty years ago, I received an unsettling phone call. The caller was a Mennonite minister that I had met earlier during some church meetings. He shared that he had just concluded a conversation with a group of church brethren in which he had mentioned that a non-Mennonite couple in Pennsylvania had just been baptized into a conservative Mennonite church. The remainder of their conversation was rather short and ended with one brother flatly stating “Give the couple three years and they will be gone.” My minister friend continued our conversation, but my mind kept returning to the statement “Give them three years and they will be gone.” Trying to keep the tone of my voice calm, I asked if I could know who it was that had made the comment. He replied; “I will be very happy to give you his name and his phone number in four years.”

Why do so many church members from non-Mennonite background leave conservative groups? Why do those who so joyfully enter the front doors of our churches, exit with sorrow via the back door? Each person would doubtless have unique reasons for their departure, but some patterns emerge.

“We joined this church, but were very disappointed when we discovered that it was something very different than what we thought it was...” people become disappointed as a result of unmet expectations. Doubtless, some people come to the Mennonite church with unrealistic expectations. No congregation is able to meet every expectation of all of its members. Seekers are often very enthusiastic to place their membership in our congregation. Many members are glad to oblige. Wise church leaders will allow ample time for both the congregation and the prospective member to gain an honest and realistic understanding of each other. Too often, painful insights are gained only after membership is established. Seeking souls come to our services and hear messages that are solidly based on God’s Word. They observe the solemnity of our worship and see the congregation at its very best.

They hear us “talk the talk,” and have enough faith to believe we mean what we say. When they observe someone who does not “walk the talk,” they are initially confused and then discouraged. In a well intentioned effort to encourage this “seeking family” to become a part of “God’s family,” do we portray an accurate picture of our congregational life? To pretend that everything is as it should be, while deliberately avoiding mention of our needs sets new believers up for disappointment and points them to the back door.

“We joined the church, but soon discovered that we would always be viewed as different. We would forever be the ones who were not born Mennonite...” it takes a strong person to be different. Many of those who seek association in our churches understand what it is to be different. They are different from the rest of their family. They are different in their recreational pursuits. Many of them are different in their view of education and child training. They dress differently; they speak differently, and live differently from their neighbors. True seekers understand and accept this reality as a part of the Christian life. The one area that they long to be “the same as” is in their relationships with other Christians. A congregation that continues to emphasize the dichotomy of backgrounds reinforces the message that “you are different” from the rest of us. Some people seem to think that it is better to be born into a Mennonite family. They believe that it somehow makes it easier to follow Christ. The early training of a Christian home is invaluable, but does being raised in a

Mennonite family make it harder “to be different?” While many who have been taught to apply scriptural principles from childhood find it hard to be different from the world, few of those coming into our circles from the world share that struggle. They have purposed by the grace of God to be different from the world, but the same as God’s people. To magnify the differences in culture, education, or experience will continue to portray to our brothers and sisters that they are somehow different. is it any wonder they head for the back door?

“We joined the church, but could never seem to gain acceptance with some of the people in the congregation. Why do congregations who strive to be “seeker friendly” often fail in keeping first generation members? This is a complex problem. Many churches experience a “seeker cycle” which slowly but surely erodes their intentions to reach out. The cycle begins with a vision for reaching out to those from non-Mennonite background. Some in the congregation become very enthused, while others may have fairly strong reservations. Those with a heart for the work make contact with seeking souls and begin to build strong relationships. There is a refreshing newness in sharing with an individual or family interested in Anabaptist church life and a close relationship with Jesus Christ. Others in the congregation may feel overwhelmed or threatened by the challenges these new believers bring to the church. If membership is indeed established, one part of the church rejoices and another says “give them three years and they will be gone.” The sad truth is that some of them will indeed be gone. They leave for various reasons, but the result is often the same. Those who had reservations feel vindicated in their reserve, and those who extended love and acceptance are devastated by the loss. The first group is now even more closed. The second group is now a bit more cautious. They do not want to repeat the pain of dissolving a relationship they cherish deeply. They are slower to form the strong personal bonds needed to establish someone in a conservative church. The next seeker will visit a congregation that is a little slower to show the love and acceptance required to build a lasting church relationship. What will our Lord have to say to those who have refused to accept these babes in Christ, who by His command have rejected the acceptance of a sin-sodden society?

In fairness, some first generation Mennonites have struggles that overwhelm the local congregation’s ability to minister to their needs. Despite the churches support, prayers, and loving encouragement; the individual opts to leave. We must always remember that church membership is voluntary. But Jesus tells us that reaching out to the lost is mandatory. Have we allowed ourselves to be convinced that a certain amount of back door exits are inevitable? Do arms and legs fall off of a healthy body? One individual offered 1 John 2:19 as the reason that new believers leave our churches. He declared; *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”* perhaps we would do better to remember the words of Jesus in John 17:20-22; *“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one...”* It will be this focus that best keeps first generation Mennonites faithfully serving Jesus Christ and His church and far away from the back door.

~ Barnett MO
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