

THE HUTTERITES

‘A way OF life’ or ‘A way TO life’?

Whilst recently preparing a video on ‘Christian Science’ for posting to the ministry YouTube site I picked up on a reference in it to ‘**The Hutterites**’. This prompted me to start thinking about this particular grouping, some of whom in the 19th century left Europe and went to America and who since then have increased numerically and have established colonies/communities in both America and Canada.

To give some historical background and detail to the type of communities that they have established in North America I would invite you to watch the following TV documentary that was made back in 1984. From this you will see that ‘**separation from the world**’ is very much to the fore in the thinking that underpins the ‘**way of life**’ that ‘**The Hutterites**’ see as being the way Christians should live. They deem it to be essential especially for young people as they prepare for baptism which appears to be their belief on how one enters their church.

The link to this video (complete with a 3-4 minute advert break in the middle) is

<http://youtu.be/VbJLtKLEBtA>

Another article that sheds helpful light on the history of

‘**The Hutterites**’ can be found by going to this link

<http://www.ephrataministries.org/remnant-2013-07-the-hutterite-mission-machine.a5w>

A number of striking features emerge from this documentary that shed light on ‘**The Hutterite way OF life**’. The communities are solidly structured and compared to ‘the outside world’ are stable with no mention of crime of any sort or violent disagreements. There is a ‘chain of respect’ – people for the elders, wives for their husbands and children for their parents. They recognise the value of good education and right discipline. They are industrious and not sluggardly – they are like the wise and hard-working “ant” of **Proverbs 6:6-9**. They have much room for reverence for God in community life and follow very much the traditions that have been established and handed down over the centuries since their formation. All of these commendable features, for the most part, are vital ingredients of what **The Hutterites** perceive to be the Christian ‘**way OF life**’.

In John chapter 5 we read (verse 1) of the Lord going up to Jerusalem to attend one of the major Jewish feasts held annually there (unlike the identification in 2:13 and 6:4 of ‘**Passover**’; the identification in 7:2 of ‘**Tabernacles**’ and the identification in 10:22 of ‘**Dedication**’ or ‘**Hanukkah**’ John makes no specific reference as to which feast was being celebrated at this time).

In verses 39-40, having earlier made plain His claim to be **“The Son of God”** (see especially verses 21 and 25) the Lord says the following to the pious and religious Jews He was speaking to –

“(Ye) search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me. And (yet) ye will not come to me that ye may have life”.

In John chapter 10 the Lord warns in verse 8 of how people who are not **“the sheep”** (His people – see verse 7) can fall victim to **“thieves and robbers”** who believe they know **“some other way”** to get to heaven (see verse 1). But His words in verse 9 reject any **“other way”** when He says **“I am the door; BY ME if any man enter in, he shall be saved and shall go in an out and find pasture”**. There are strong echoes here of what He later says to Thomas in John 14:6 **“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but BY ME”**.

Going back to John 10 the Lord contrasts ‘the fate’ of those who are led astray by **“thieves and robbers”**, who proclaim **“some other way”**, with ‘the fate’ of those who find Christ to be **“the way”** and enter into God’s Kingdom **“by HIM”** who is **“the door”**. We read these words of Christ in verse 10 –

“The thief cometh not, but for to steal and to kill and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”.

This verse is all to do with ‘spiritual realities’ and not ‘material realities’ as some deceiving so-called ‘Health and Wealth Gospel’ preachers would (falsely) teach. To have **“life”** and to have it **“more abundantly”** means to have **‘spiritual life’** as opposed to being spiritually **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1) which is the natural ‘spiritual state’ of everyone born into this world since the sinful fall of our first parents in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:16-17).

Everyone born into this world is **“born of the flesh”** (see John 3:6) but to be ‘spiritually alive’ requires a ‘second birth’ – a ‘spiritual birth’ – as the Lord explained to the pious and religious Jew, Nicodemus, in John chapter 3 – **“Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (verse 3); **“that which is born of the spirit is spirit”** (verse 6); **“Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again”** (verse 7).

Nicodemus was a zealously religious man who would have been well acquainted with what the Old Testament scriptures said and yet it appears to me that he must have had a look of sheer astonishment on his face when the Lord stated the absolute necessity of someone needing to be **“born of the spirit”** or **“born again”** in order to possess true spiritual “life”. I draw that conclusion from the Lord’s words to Nicodemus in verse 7 - **“Marvel not”** – don’t be so astonished by what I’ve just said.

This reaction of astonishment or **'marvelling'** is common amongst people who think that their perhaps pious and religious **'way OF life'** is a guarantee of the **'way TO life'**. Nicodemus, and no doubt perhaps many of his fellow Pharisees (see John 3:1), were most likely trusting in their often slavish adherence to the many religious traditions that had sprung up over the centuries since the time of Abraham (their spiritual **'father'** – see John 8:39; 52-53). They believed that having a **'flesh'** relationship to Abraham as they expressed in John 8:33 **"We be Abraham's seed"** and an observance of all the Jewish religious **'traditions'** would guarantee an entry into heaven for them.

Perhaps the greatest example of this is found in the Apostle Paul's testimony of his own Pharisaic **'way OF life'** prior to his encounter with and conversion to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:3-6). In his letter to the Philippians in chapter 3:3-6 he wrote –

"For we (Christians) are the circumcision (those spiritually cleansed from sin by Christ and not through any religious ritual – see Colossians 2:10-11) **which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh** (our 'way OF life'). **Though I might also have confidence in the flesh** (my 'way OF life'). **If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh** (his 'way OF life') **I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee. Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless"**.

There we have a very graphic description of an extremely zealous and religious man who was trusting in his **'way OF life'** to gain him favour with God and acceptance into God's Kingdom. However, as we know from his own testimony, everything changed after his encounter with and conversion to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul describes the change in verses 7-9 of Philippians 3 with these words –

'But what things were gain to me (all those supposed plus factors he mentioned in verses 5 and 6) **those I counted loss for Christ** (because he now knows they previously stood in direct opposition to coming to faith in Christ alone for salvation), **Yea, doubtless and I count** (now view) **all things** (his previous **"confidence in the flesh"**) **but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count** (now view) **them but dung** (his previous **'confidence in the flesh'** was as worthless as common waste) **that I may win Christ. And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law** (adhering to a strict 'way OF life') **but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith"**.

Paul knew what it meant to be clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ that He effected/established when, as a substitute for His people, He lived a life of total obedience and sinlessness, so that His perfect righteousness would be credited to those trusting in Him alone for their salvation – just as Paul wrote in Romans 3:21 and 2 Corinthians 5:21

“Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe”... “He (God) made him (Christ) to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”.

Those who find Christ as their Saviour enter into **“life”** and have it **“more abundantly”** (as we read earlier from John 10:10). What exactly does it mean to have **“life... more abundantly”**? I believe it means to possess the knowledge of being spiritually alive with sins fully forgiven (see Colossians 2:13-14; Psalm 32:1; Ephesians 1:7), to be eternally accepted by God the Father (see Ephesians 1:3-6); to possess permanent peace with God (see John 14:27; Romans 5:1); to be no longer viewed by God as **“ungodly”** (see Romans 5:6) as **“enemies”** (see Romans 5:10); to be completely reconciled to God by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (see Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20). To know that the wrath of God no longer rests upon you because it fell upon Christ, your substitute and Saviour when He died for His people on the cross (see John 3:36; Romans 5:8-9).

In some small way I have attempted to summarise the **“life... more abundantly”** that those **“born again”** and converted to Christ experience but I am sure other believers reading this could perhaps add some extra thoughts to this subject.

Two things however are certain – the person converted, who has found the **‘way TO life’** will see the world through totally new (spiritual) eyes and those near to him or her, but as yet unconverted themselves, will find it all very unnerving and perhaps even threatening to their **‘way OF life’**.

This actually happened back in the early 1990’s when God moved spiritually in the hearts and minds of a number of the ‘Hutterite’ community located at Flat willow in Montana. A TV documentary (**‘How to get to Heaven in Montana?’**) was made concerning these events and I want now to invite you to watch what was broadcast – I recorded most but not quite all of it so it does end rather abruptly but just as a very relevant scripture has been quoted.

The link to this video is
<http://youtu.be/ddlxHNJ38mk>

Just as a follow-up to this video there is an interesting ‘testimony’ from a former Hutterite (**Terry Miller**) located on <http://www.mapministry.org/news/former-amish-testimonies/2004/08/14/terry-miller> and in it he makes reference to the video and to his own experience of what happened to him and others when they too were ‘born again’.

Whilst Mr Miller feels that things are now on a ‘better footing’ with what he refers to as **‘the old order Hutterites’** the experience of a lady called **Mary Stahl** has been somewhat different. I feel sure Mary would not mind me posting in this article what she herself posted on Facebook on 2 January 2014 (Link <https://www.facebook.com/groups/304920146261646/permalink/564437813643210/>) -

I have thought long and hard about what I am going to post here. I feel if we are not going to speak up for the elderly now, who will. I just cannot be silent anymore. I can see when young people leave the Colony they can fend for themselves but when it comes to the elderly who have given their all to the system, and are being pushed out for daring to question the leadership where they have to leave with nothing. In my opinion I feel enough is enough; it is long overdue that this problem needs to be addressed.

My name is Mary Stahl. Thirty seven years ago my husband and I chose to leave the Hutterite Colony and start a life of our own. I have been reading all the posts of all the Hutterites for and against the nine having written about their personal accounts of treatment they received at their given colonies after they accepted Jesus as their Savior. I have my own story but I want to focus on this one in particular, my Aunt Anna. She was a 74 year old lady, an invalid from the waist down and on a wheelchair most of her life. **From birth till 58 years old she was a dedicated Hutterite, believing that living in the colony following all the rules and regulations of the colony religion was going to secure her a place in Heaven.**

Then she decided to commit the unthinkable sin, learning about Jesus and accepting Him as her Savior. She started openly talking about Jesus, sharing her faith, openly reading her German and English Bible. Then her two brothers who were colony ministers found out about all of this activity, started harassing her and alerted 30 elder Colony ministers to come and deal with this grave sin of accepting another religion.

She was called before the counsel and interrogated about her faith in Jesus Christ. She was asked if she believes that people outside the colony can go to heaven to which she said, yes they can. She was challenged about putting all of her faith in Jesus Christ and where does that put the Gma (gemeinshaft – Cecil. I understand this to mean 'the community'). She was accused of having a different religion or Uberglauben.

She stood her ground and confessed Jesus as her Savior and said the Gma doesn't save me it is Jesus. They asked, when you sin where do you take your sins? She said, I take my sins to Jesus. They said to her, du tust die gma (gemeinshaft) verlaugnen, (Cecil - I understand this to mean 'you have no longing or desire for the community') du glaubs du kannst huren in ganzen tog und auf der nocht konnst du dir deine sind abetten (you believe you can fornicate all day long and at night you can pray your sin away.)

This and more is the kind of rhetoric they accused her of. They concluded she could no longer be considered a sister or member of the Hutterite Church. They determined that she had an uberglauben or different religion. **They told her the only way she could ever get back in the good graces of the Hutterite Church she would have to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ, to which she said no and that marked her as a heretic and an outcast.** Her fellow colleagues in the colony were told to shun her and have nothing to do with her till she comes to her senses. My sisters from other colonies were not allowed by their ministers to take turns to come and care for her. Thank God my mother, her sister, was living with her at the time and was also considered a nonmember because of her faith in Jesus Christ (this is another story) cared for Aunt Anna till mom died.

In the interim my sister, (Miriam Waldner's mom) and I who had already left the colony after gross injustice (another story) came to visit Aunt Anna who now had to fend for herself with my brother Andy looking in on her periodically. Our intentions were to visit with Aunt Anna, spend the night and leave the next morning. We no sooner entered the house when my uncle, then minister of the Colony came with his elder bench to tell us to leave or else he will call the police.

My uncle gave us an hour and again told us if you are not leaving the police will be here to take you away. We didn't leave and you guessed it, the police came and said the president of this organization wants you off this place. We said we were not leaving as Aunt Anna wanted us to stay the night with her. The police said, then we will have to arrest you. I said; go ahead arrest us we will just see what the headlines will read the next morning. When the police seen we were not leaving they suggested to us to go to the County Attorney and see if we could get a court order to come and visit Aunt Anna.

We left that night at 10:00 leaving this crippled lady, my Aunt Anna in tears, we were crying and embracing each other promising her we will do everything we can to remedy this situation. You have to remember this happened in 1991 in the United States of America. This atrocity unfolded right in front of our eyes. We did go to the County Attorney and found that to be a long road and dead end. As my sister and I drove home that day it was with heavy hearts and tears thinking what we could do to help this 74 year old crippled, helpless lady who we basically considered our second mom, who lived in our house and we grew up on her lap. The only humane and Christian thing to do was to take her out of this environment which my husband and I did. We cared for her and she lived with us till 1997 when she went home to be with her Lord.

The reason I am posting all this now is that there are still people alive that can attest to the fact that this story is true. So please do not come back with all your comments saying lies, lies, lies. It is 23 years later and these atrocities are still happening in some Hutterite Colonies. None of the leadership came to Anna's defence or remedied the problem back then and the same thing is still going on today.

Since then my husband and I have retired and live in Lethbridge AB right in the middle of Hutterite Country. To date I still see elderly grandmas and grandpas and whole families being harassed, interrogated and ostracized (that's putting it mildly) to the point where they give up and just leave. Nobody and I mean nobody from the leadership extends a hand to help remedy the problem that still exists in all three sects.

Whilst the experience of **Terry Miller** after his conversion appears to have been a lot less traumatic than that of **Mary Stahl** and others that she mentions in what she wrote, both do highlight the opposition faced from 'traditionalists' within the **Hutterite** communities who see their '**way OF life**' as being the only '**way**' of getting to heaven.

Terry Miller wrote 'Although our fathers certainly taught a salvation experience, many Hutterites today rely more on their baptism coupled with living "all things common" like the early Church, which the hardliners certainly consider a "Biblical necessity" and I have highlighted some portions in red of what **Mary Stahl** wrote that basically convey the same message.

I would like to say that in the video '**How to get to Heaven in Montana?**' I was impressed by the calm manner of the 'traditional' **Hutterites** who showed no anger or outrage at the situation with those who had been 'born again'. Their attitude appeared to me more one of sorrow rather than anger. There were no 'knee jerk' reactions and their words were considered and measured – something that is not always very common in today's society. However I believe their 'faith' in the **Hutterite** community '**way OF life**' highlights their misunderstanding of '**separation**'.

I believe their understanding of 'biblical separation' is mistaken and does in fact represent 'isolation' which is not something that the Bible commands. To illustrate the difference between 'biblical separation' and 'unbiblical isolation' I would point to a helpful article on <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/separate/bibdocse.htm> In particular I would like to copy here what is referred to in that article as '**Proposition 6: The believer is to be separated and not isolated**'. It reads –

**Study: John 17:11,14-18; 1 Corinthians 5:9-10;
Acts 1:8; Philippians 2:15-16; 2 Corinthians 5:20.**

The believer is in the world but not of the world. The monastic philosophy which declares “to be holy you must live in a hole!” finds no basis in the Scriptures. Believers are pilgrims and strangers (1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13) and citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20; John 14:1-3) who have the privilege of representing Christ on the earth (2 Corinthians 5:20; Isaiah 43:10-12) as He represents us in heaven (1 John 2:1-2). As we represent Christ in the world we are to keep ourselves unspotted from the world (James 1:27) because we are not of the world! The Lord Jesus was our perfect example of a man “separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26). Yet He strongly condemned pharisaical isolationism (Luke 5:27-32; 7:29-34; 7:36-50; 15:1-32; 18:9-14; 19:1-10). The believer in Christ has explicit responsibilities towards all men as he represents Christ in the world.

- 1. He is to be a witness before all men (Acts 1:8).**
- 2. He is to be Christ's ambassador to all men (2 Corinthians 5:20).**
- 3. He is to preach the gospel to all men (Mark 16:15).**
- 4. He is to shine as a light before all men (Matthew 5:16; Philippians 2:15).**
- 5. He is to do good to all men (Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).**
- 6. He is to walk in wisdom towards all men (Colossians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 10:32).**
- 7. He is to pray for all men (1 Timothy 2:1).**
- 8. He is to provide things honest in the sight of all men (Romans 12:17; 1 Thessalonians 4:12).**
- 9. He is to live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14).**
- 10. He is to let his moderation be known unto all men (Philippians 4:5).**
- 11. He is to honour all men (1 Peter 2:17).**
- 12. He is to have a good report (testimony) before all men (1 Timothy 3:7; 2 John 12).**

My own thoughts are simply this – if Christians are to be **“the salt”** and **“the light”** that the Lord declared them to be in Matthew 5:13&14 then they can only be effective in dispelling the world’s spiritual ‘darkness’ and in counteracting the world’s decadent ‘corruption’ by ‘face to face’ contact and engagement with the world. Practically that can’t happen as the Lord intends if His people are ‘closeted’ away in communities.

Such communities are a **‘way OF life’** but not the Lord’s **‘way TO life’**. **Terry Miller** wrote in his article – **‘There are many genuinely born again people among them, but traditionalism has a terrific hold.’** I am in no position to dispute what **Terry Miller** has written but this I do know from personal experience. Those who have been truly **“born again”** know that salvation is not a matter of trusting in how we live but rather of trusting solely in the substitutionary life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ – or as Paul put it when he wrote to the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 2:2 – **“I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified”**.

I would like to finish by quoting two gifted Bible commentators. Firstly I’ll quote what Pastor John MacArthur said about this verse in his Study Bible and then secondly I’ll quote what Geoffrey Wilson cited in his commentary on 1 Corinthians.

Pastor MacArthur wrote

‘Though Paul expounded the whole counsel of God to the church (Acts 20:27) and taught the Corinthians the Word of God (Acts 18:11) the focus of his preaching and teaching to unbelievers was Jesus Christ who paid the penalty for sin on the cross (Acts 20:20; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). Until someone understands and believes the gospel there is nothing more to say to them’.

Geoffrey Wilson wrote

‘Paul’s only design in going to Corinth was to preach Christ; and Christ, not as a teacher, or as an example, or as a perfect man, or as a new starting point in the development of the race – all this would be mere philosophy; but Christ *as crucified*, i.e. as dying for our sins. Christ as a propitiation was the burden of Paul’s preaching. It has been well remarked that *Jesus Christ* refers to the person of Christ, and *him crucified* to his work; which constitute the sum of the gospel.

My earnest prayer in writing this article is that if any ‘old-school’ traditional **Hutterites** should happen to read this that they may take time to consider if they are trusting in their **‘way OF life’** to get them to heaven rather than the Lord Jesus Christ who declared Himself to be the **‘way TO life’**.

