



# The Hutterite Mission Machine

*The Marine Corps of the early  
Anabaptists*

By Dean Taylor

A few issues ago we published an article entitled “The Moravian Mission Machine” in which we highlighted the mission activity of the Moravians of the 1700s. We used the label “mission machine” to describe their particular type of church structure, where the church community utilized everything they had—their lives, their homes, and particularly their businesses—for the propagation of the kingdom of God.

Since then, my studies of early Anabaptist churches have led me to discover another group that was anointed in nearly the same way almost 200 years earlier: the Hutterites. Birthed out of the “Radical Reformation” of 1525, the Hutterites combined an unusual dedication to the words of Jesus with a decidedly organized missionary outreach.

As with all the Anabaptist groups of their day, evangelism and church planting had to be done in secret. Martyrdom was a frequent end for many missionaries and evangelists. Because of this persecution, things like strategy and organization were difficult. The temptation to hide and be the “quiet of the land” was strong. But apparently Jesus’ command to “go into all the world” was even stronger. When I started to read the history of the early Anabaptists, I saw that just about all of the groups fought this spiritual war valiantly and died bravely. But in particular I was impressed when I read about the tenacity, determination, and—especially—the systematic approach the Hutterites had for missions and evangelism. Based on the number of converts and court testimonies, it is assumed

that most of the early Anabaptists were active in evangelism and mission work. However, when it comes to actual recorded history from this time period, compared to the early Hutterites nothing even comes close.

## Where did the Hutterites come from?

In the early 1500s radical Christianity was at a peak. Martin Luther became an overnight celebrity when his 95 theses were translated to German and spread all over Europe. With this act the Protestant Reformation officially began. In Switzerland, another zealous reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, began reforming the city of Zurich. Soon after arriving in Zurich, Zwingli began preaching through the Bible in the common language. As people heard the Word of God preached, revival broke out and many had their lives changed in powerful ways.

Another important aspect of this revival was that the New Testament was being published in the common language for the first time. Eventually this personal reading of the Bible produced another wave of the Reformation that historians have called the “Radical Reformation,” from which sprang the “Anabaptists.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Anabaptists

The Anabaptists were birthed out of a group of young converts who were studying the Bible with Ulrich Zwingli. Felix Manz, George Blaurock, and Conrad Grebel were among these zealous young converts. The young converts prospered for a time, but as they studied the New Testament, they soon found a big sticking point over the concept of a state church and the way their teachers were treating the words of Jesus. As the Reformation went forward, they felt that the words of Jesus were getting neglected or explained away. The young converts objected to this sharply. For example, Conrad Grebel, a natural leader among the young converts, objected in a letter arguing this point to an estranged friend. In this letter Grebel wrote something that I think encapsulates the whole Anabaptist movement in one sentence. He said:

The teaching of the Lord has been given for the purpose of being put into practice.<sup>2</sup>

It wasn’t long until the new group started believer’s baptism, rebaptizing adults on the profession of their faith. In their day rebaptism was a capital offense. Even in Zu-

1 To this day the Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, and even many of the Church of the Brethren would claim this history as their origin. Many newer groups also throughout the centuries have shared the same convictions and therefore would have shared the “Anabaptist” name.

2 Get your highlighter and mark this quote. It is a core gospel concept.

rich the Protestant Reformers issued the death sentence for these who practiced it. It was from this practice of rebaptism that the Anabaptists got their name: their enemies called them “Anabaptists,” which simply means “re-baptizers.” From the start, persecution poured out on the new Anabaptists from both the Catholics and Protestants. Many were imprisoned and soon the Anabaptist sealed their beliefs with martyrdom, beginning when the Protestant Reformers drowned Felix Mantz in the Limmat River.

### Jesus said “Go”

In the days of the Reformation, the Protestants did not have a developed teaching on evangelism and missions. In their thinking, most new Christians entered the church as infants, and proselytes were usually made by converting the king of a country or province. In contrast, the new Anabaptists were trying to look at the Bible as a blueprint. Because of this, their view of missions flowed naturally out of the way they read the New Testament. The Anabaptists saw Jesus’ teachings on missions and evangelism not as mere historical notes, but as commands.

Within days after the birth of the movement, with death sentences still over their heads, the early Anabaptists went into neighboring cities with remarkable success. In one account, Conrad Grebel went north to St. Gall and interrupted an Easter parade with the preaching of the kingdom of God. By the end of the day over 500 new believers repented and believed. Following Grebel’s lead, the new converts actually left the procession and were baptized in the river flowing past their town.

### Dangerous work

As the work continued, the early Anabaptists started to organize. In August of 1527 a group of about 60 missionaries and leaders met in Augsburg, Germany to divide up the different regions and to discuss strategies for spreading God’s kingdom. The meeting is known as the Martyrs Synod because after five years, out of those 60 ministers,

only two were left!<sup>3</sup> The persecution was brutal. Some recanted and gave up; others hid or moved to remote areas. Regardless of the persecution, evangelism and mission continued. In spite of the persecution, Anabaptism was quickly popping up in all parts of Switzerland, south Germany, Austria, Moravia, and even Holland.

### To Moravia

After a few years of hard persecution, a break came for some Anabaptists. Lord Liechtenstein of Nikolsburg opened up Moravia to the Anabaptists. Testifying to the evangelism activities of these early Anabaptists, 12,000 spiritual refugees took up Liechtenstein’s offer and moved to Moravia. For a while the region around Nikolsburg

was almost completely Anabaptist. Liechtenstein himself was even re-baptized. Unfortunately, however, the peace was short lived. The Muslim leader Suleiman the Magnificent had pronounced a holy war—Jihad—on Christian Europe. Inadvertently, these Moravian Anabaptists found themselves on the front line. With the fear of enemy attack and pressure from superior nobility, Liechtenstein ordered all citizens to wear the sword and be ready to defend the country at all times. Sad to say, most of the Anabaptists of this first wave consented



**58 out of 60 missionaries who attended the Anabaptist “Martyrs’ Synod” in 1527 were martyred within five years.**

and picked up the sword.

### The few

However, a small band of approximately 200 refused to compromise. Meeting together and upholding Jesus’ teachings on things like the sword and radical views of economics, the little group began experiencing difficulty from their former brethren. Feeling the pressure from his superiors, Lord Liechtenstein ordered them out of the country. It was tough. Hardly a year had passed since most of them came to Nikolsburg, now they were heading into the wilderness armed with nothing more than the Word of God and zeal to follow the Lord anywhere He led.

<sup>3</sup> “Direction: Anabaptists and the Great Commission in the Reformation,” Hans Kasdorf, <http://www.directionjournal.org/4/2/anabaptists-and-great-commission-in.html>.

Once out of the city, the group stopped to evaluate their situation. Surveying the sick and weak among them, they covenanted to stick together and help each other to the very end. The Hutterian Chronicles records the moment happening in the spring of 1528.

These men then spread out a cloak in front of the people, and each one laid his possessions on it with a willing heart—without being forced—so that the needy might be supported in accordance with the teachings of the prophets and apostles.

The small band petitioned the ruler of Austerlitz, Moravia if they could occupy one of his old burned-out farms. The lord enthusiastically accepted them. Starting out poor and weak, the brethren in Austerlitz modeled themselves after the book of Acts and set up a little settlement with full community of goods.

Amazingly, right from the beginning the little group started following Jesus’ command to reach out. The Hutterian Chronicles records:

As the members of the church began to increase in number, their zeal and divine grace moved them to send brothers out to other counties, especially to Tyrol.<sup>4</sup>

Growth came with challenges. The first year was rocky. Leadership struggles and discipline issues tempted the community to lose focus. However, their evangelism paid off. Eventually an anointed missionary and preacher from

Tyrol named Jacob Hutter joined the brethren. His leadership skills were quickly recognized, and Hutter helped to give the new group much needed organization and vision. Many noticed his influence, and soon the brethren were being labeled after his name—“The Hutterites.”

Actually, Jacob Hutter was a leader for only two years

(1533-1535). But what he accomplished in that time was substantial. Perhaps the most significant thing that Jacob Hutter contributed to the movement was a laser sharp vision, with the organizational skills to back it up. Jacob

ended his life heroically. Being sent out on a mission trip to his home area of Tyrol, Austria, Jacob fell into the hands of his persecutors. In February of 1536 Jacob was taken to Innsbruck, where he was severely tortured and interrogated. When they saw that Jacob would not deny the faith, he was taken to the city square and burned at the stake.<sup>5</sup>

Following the lead of Jacob Hutter, a new type of leaders emerged in the Hutterites with an even greater zeal to spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. The high ideas and rare dedication to the words of Jesus attracted gifted men from all around Europe. This infused this new movement with talent and exceptional leadership.

### Get organized

These were tough times. With the Muslims advancing from the south, Protestant and Catholic fighting to the West, and death threats and warrants posted in every land, the persecution was strong and effective. In many places the Anabaptists were forced into hiding. The Hutterites had every reason to hide out and play it safe in Moravia. But they didn’t! The Hutterites felt that Jesus’ words about evangelism were not just suggestions, they were commands; and they were dedicated to obeying Him in everything. They organized themselves into a society devoted to putting the words of Jesus into practice.

When I started reading the Hutterian Chronicles, I was very surprised to find this organized mission activity. Community of goods I expected to see. But an organized mission society surprised me. Organized missions were unheard of in these days. The Hutterites were centuries ahead of the rest of the Protestant world in this. Hutterites are usually remembered for their community living. But as I studied the early Hutterites, it became clear to me that their community living wasn’t an end in itself. Their goal was following Jesus and spreading His kingdom no matter the cost. Their communities were strategically arranged to do this very thing.

Immediately following Jacob Hutter’s death, Hans Amon and Peter Riedemann took on leadership roles. In turn these men were followed by still another wave of zealous men such as Leonhard Lanzenstiel and Peter Walpot. These men were fashioned by the Holy Spirit for the work. Walpot, for example, was exposed to harsh spiritual battle from his early childhood. While only eight years old he stood in the city square as they burned George Blaurock at the stake.<sup>6</sup> These men were exceptional or-



Plaque in Vienna, Austria, placed as a memorial to the execution of Jakob Hutter.

4 Hutterian Chronicle, Vol. 1, p. 82.

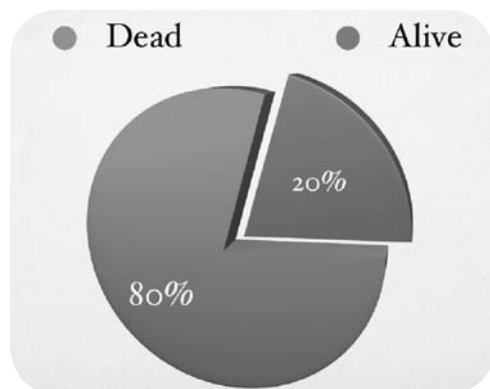
5 Ibid. p. 145.

6 Ibid. p. 53.



ganizers, teachers, and zealous Christian soldiers. It was under their leadership that the Hutterites became a *mission machine*.

The survival expectancy of these Hutterite missionaries was only about 20%.<sup>7</sup> When I read of what these



Four out of every five Hutterite missionaries were eventually killed on the field.

brethren endured for the faith, I was inspired. All the early Anabaptists took part in missions in some way. But when I read about the dedication, tenacity, untiring zeal, and particularly their organized systematic approach, it

caused me to call the Hutterites of this time period *The Marine Corps of the Anabaptists!*

## What did the Hutterite mission machine look like?

Several areas of early Hutterite missions stand out. Perhaps the most significant thing is the way they structured the communities to continue missions even when it wasn't convenient. To accomplish this they instilled several biblical principles into the everyday running of the community.

### Dedicated ministry

In obedience to Scripture, the Hutterites felt that a local congregation's ministry is only complete when *all* parts are working together. The Scriptures say:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. Ep. 4:11-13

<sup>7</sup> Statistic by Anabaptist historian Robert Friedmann, *Hutterite Studies* (MacGregor, Man.: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2010), p. 43.

The word that we use in English for "apostle" is a transliteration of a Greek word that means "sent out" or "sent away." The German word is *sendboten*. In the time of the Reformation this office was much neglected. The early Hutterites realized that to keep the proper focus in the church, they would need to revive this position. Without this office, mission work could become neglected.

### Peter Riedemann

While imprisoned for his missionary activity, Peter Riedemann was called on by the authorities to explain the faith of the Anabaptists. In reply to their questions, Peter Riedemann wrote two books during two different imprisonments. Both are gems of early Anabaptism.<sup>8</sup> His second work has now been called "The Hutterite Confession of Faith."<sup>9</sup> However, the title is somewhat misleading. This book is more than just a dry denominational treatise. Riedemann goes into detail about many aspects of Christian living and doctrine. This book is one of the earliest books written during the beginning years of the Anabaptists. Incidentally this book is still considered the official "Statement of Faith" for the Hutterites today.

In the section entitled "*Differences in the Offices*," Riedemann explains the necessity of having a dedicated ministry designed for outreach. Writing from prison, he said:

In the church, Paul says, "God has first appointed apostles." These are the ones who are sent out by God and His church in accordance with the command of the gospel, to go throughout the country and establish the obedience of faith for His name's sake. This they do by teaching and baptizing.<sup>10</sup>

After the section on "apostles," Riedemann goes on to explain the role of shepherds, helpers, elders, etc. To the early Hutterites, only when all the offices were present was the local congregation's ministry considered complete. He explains that each office has a different purpose and calling. The ministerial offices should flow together, but their roles are quite different. This was insightful. The

<sup>8</sup> Peter Riedemann, *Love Is Like Fire: The Confession of an Anabaptist Prisoner* (Plough Publishing House, 1993). Available for free download at <http://www.plough.com/en/ebooks/1/love-is-like-fire>. The second, larger work is: Riedemann, Peter, and John J. Friesen. *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith*, Herald Press, 1999. A Kindle edition is now available at a reasonable price.

<sup>9</sup> In German it is titled *Rechenschafft unserer Religion, Lehrer und Glaubens*

<sup>10</sup> Riedemann, Peter, and John J. Friesen. *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith*, Herald Press, 1999, p. 113.

temptation for the local church pastor to be heavily involved in shepherding and thus neglect foreign missions is great.

## Evangelism and pastoral care

The local bishop of a congregation is commissioned to care for the local congregation. He has been given a natural bias for the holiness and purity of his flock.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, his bias is characteristically inward focused. The Hutterites understood this. They saw that without the office of “apostle” as part of the local congregation’s ministry, the bias of pastoral ministry would shy away from outreach.

This system worked great for the Hutterites. The Hutterites found that the pastoral and outreach ministries actually complement each other brilliantly. Riedemann wrote in his confession of faith:

Let us note carefully what we are commanded. Christ gives us a twofold command. First, we should gather with Him, as those who have been sent by him. Second, we should do our utmost to keep those who are gathered, so they do not again become scattered and torn apart by wolves.<sup>12</sup>

The character of these early missionaries was inspiring. They had a simple faith. One of my favorite quotes from the Hutterian Chronicles gives a glimpse of what some of these early Anabaptist apostles were like by describing a missionary:

Another servant of the church of God, George Fasser, was sent by the church to Poggstall in Austria because of the fervent longing in a number of people. He did not know the alphabet, but preached the gospel with power. Even though he had just returned from prison in Modling (near Vienna), he set joyfully about the Lord’s work, gathered the believers, and established a church community in accordance with God’s command.<sup>13</sup>

11 Acts 20:28

12 Riedemann, Peter, and John J. Friesen. Peter Riedemann’s Hutterite Confession of Faith, Herald Press, 1999, p. 185.

13 Hutterian Chronicle, Vol. 1, p. 161.

Notice the basis on which the missions were founded: it was “in accordance with God’s command.” The Hutterites had radical views on economics. To this day that is what the Hutterites are known for. However, the early Hutterites saw Jesus’ command to “go into all the world” just as important as the command “do not store up treasures on the earth.” Disobedience to any teachings of Jesus will always cause imbalance and disorder somewhere.

Interestingly, still remaining to this day, when a Hutterite minister takes his vows during ordination, he is asked to answer this question:

I ask you, my brother, how do you stand? Are you willing to be obedient and allow yourself to be used, inside or outside of the country, as needed whether or not the time suits you, however God the Almighty may lead?

Indeed, the lives of these early missionaries were inspiring. Undoubtedly, the ability of the early Hutterites to recognize the biblical model of having “apostles” in the ministry team was pivotal to the success of the early Hutterites.

## Dedicated areas

Like any good military campaign, the missionaries didn’t just wander aimlessly. Each Hutterite missionary had specific area assigned to him. The Hutterites strategically divided up the globe and assigned regions to the different missionaries. The area they covered was vast. It was recorded that brethren went out to all parts of Germany (Bavaria, Württemberg, Hesse, Thuringia, Rhineland, as well as Silesia and Prussia), to Switzerland, to Poland, and in two cases also to Venice, Italy. A few even went as far as Denmark and Sweden.

The following is an example of these geographic assignments, recorded in the Hutterian Chronicles from an entry in 1540:

To build up the house of God with His chosen, God gave his servants the courage and eagerness to send brothers out in various directions. A burning zeal for the truth was now kindled among people through the witness given ... who bore the cross as a sign of victory on their bloodstained banner ... In this same



**Peter Riedemann wrote two excellent confessions of faith while imprisoned, to explain to the civil leaders what they believed.**

year of 1540, the assembly of the Lord sent brothers out on mission journeys. Leonhard Lanzestiel was sent again to Tirol, Christoph Gschal to Styria and Carinthia, and Peter Riedemann to Hesse. Hans Gentner was sent to lower Swabia and Wurttemberg. From all these places God led many people to His church, which spread widely throughout Moravia.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of sending out missionaries was odd for both the Protestants and the Catholics. They were baffled by the Anabaptist concept of missions. When a missionary was captured, their theology of missions was, notably, one of the common things that they were interrogated about. A few entries that I found from the Chronicles that testify to this questioning from their interrogators:

- Claus Felbinger, a Hutterite evangelist of Moravia, wrote in 1560: “Some have asked us why we came into the country of the Duke of Bavaria to dissuade the people from him. I answered: We go not only into this land, but into all lands, as far as our language extends.<sup>15</sup> For wherever

God opens a door unto us, shows us zealous hearts who diligently seek after Him, have a dislike of the ungodly life of the world, and desire to do right, to all such places we aim to go, and for this we have scriptural ground.”<sup>16</sup>

- Hans Kral: “He was traveling for God’s cause when he was captured ... When questioned about the mission, he said, ‘We are not sent out to harm anyone. Our mission is the salvation of men, to call them to repent and change their lives.’”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Hutterian Chronicles, vol. 1, p. 197-198.

<sup>15</sup> One may question why they did not go beyond Europe. The answer probably lies in the fact that four out of every five of the Hutterite missionaries died in the evangelizing process! This did not necessarily happen on their first trip, but sooner or later they were caught and martyred. This constant replacement was probably the biggest hindrance to going even further into all the world.

<sup>16</sup> John Horsch. *The Hutterian Brethren, 1528-1931*. (Washington, D.C): American University, 1931, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Hutterian Chronicle, Vol. 1, p. 34, see also p. 333.

## Dedicated times

We all get busy with our daily life. It was true in their day also. So to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus, they put occasions in place that caused missions to be mixed into the flow of the community. The Mennonite Encyclopedia reports the way this was practiced:

[The early Hutterites] sent brethren every year to lands near and far according to the commandments of Christ and the practice of the apostles, to teach and to preach and to gather for the Lord God’s people. In order to fulfill the task laid upon them by the Lord, the congregation semiannually (usually in the spring and fall) chose from the preachers a number

of brethren to perform a widespread missionary service in all directions, to preach the gospel in accordance with the commandment of Christ. In these early days of terrible persecution they could not start churches in these hostile lands. Therefore they usually brought these converts back

to Moravia with them.

The Hutterian Chronicles is peppered with entries that testify to this scheduled outreach. For just one example:

In this same year of 1540 the assembly of the Lord sent brothers out on mission journeys ...<sup>18</sup>

This idea of the setting aside of a specific time twice a year to send out missionaries caused their outreach to be built into the flow of the community. This is impressive. But what I found even more impressive is that the Hutterites continued this biannual sending out even during terrible persecution.

## The Thirty Years’ War

Part of the Hutterian Chronicles deals with the years of the infamous Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), fought between the Catholics and Protestants to determine whose religion would be practiced in their countries. Europe was devastated by this war. For example, Württemberg lost an estimated 75% of its population, while the average for the German states as a whole was from 25-40%. The armies

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 197.





"The Hanging," by Jacques Callot, graphically displays the miseries of the Thirty Years' War.

plundered the countryside as they passed back and forth as a part of their "pay." Unfortunately, both sides attacked the Anabaptists. In the section of the Hutterian Chronicle that covers this time period, the writer gives graphic details of the suffering that they endured. Some of the details are so bad that I had to mark warning signs on some of the pages of my copy. Whole communities were wiped out in a day. If there was any time for a community to "hide out and play it safe," it was then. But unbelievably, even through this time period the Hutterites kept the mission outreach going! Writing in the year 1620, right after describing terrible atrocities, the Chronicle records:

1620: This year too, we followed the example of our forefathers by sending out several brothers to various places in Germany. They went to seek those on fire for the truth and to call people to repentance. It amazed many people in Bohemia (where both hostile armies were encamped) as well as in Germany that our defenseless members set out during a time of such terrible danger, when scarcely anyone, whether of high or low estate, could travel in safety. But the Lord was their protector, and they relied on Him alone. When their task was completed (through the intercession of his people), He led them home again in peace and safety.<sup>19</sup>

Wow!

### Dedicated calling from God

The Hutterites knew that organization was good, but without a clear faith and the anointing from the Holy Spirit their mission endeavors would be a waste of time.

Speaking in the *Confession of Faith*, Peter Riedemann spoke on the necessity of the spiritual calling needed for the apostle/missionary:

For Christ says, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' Here we learn two things, namely, how Christ's messengers should be, and what their task is. First, as Christ, before He was sent by the Father, was filled with the Spirit, so He wants His messengers to be. They shall be blameless, and enter into and walk in the power of His Spirit. Second, their task is to gather with or in Christ and be led into the fold of grace, so that Christ's flock may be complete.

... If anyone is to go out for the Lord, he must be chosen by the Lord and endowed with His power; he must feel that power working in him. Above all, he must let the Lord's power rule over him and lead him ... Christ will not permit a messenger to go out who is not first clothed with the power of the Spirit. Those who feel this power will heed the command of their Lord, who has sent them.

### Dedicated service

To the Hutterites, the sending out of the missionaries was a big event. In most cases the missionary was never seen again. Therefore the consecration service was a very special and solemn occasion. Hans Kasdorf, in his brilliant article "*Anabaptists and the Great Commission in the Reformation*," translated a previously unpublished ancient Hutterite commissioning service called the Graner Codex.<sup>20</sup> In this document, actual details of the Hutterite

19 Ibid. p. 678

20 The Graner Codex is found in the Brunner Archives at Goshen, Indiana. "Direction: Anabaptists and the Great

This old woodcut, taken from an anti-Hutterite book written by a Catholic in 1589, is probably a fairly accurate portrayal of Hutterite dress and housing of the late 1500s.



commissioning service were recorded. Giving the order of the service, Kasdorf wrote that:

First, the candidates told the congregation how God had called them into the mission work and to the preaching of the gospel in “other lands.” This was followed by a session of admonition in which the missionaries asked the congregation to remain faithful in their local tasks of visiting the sick and the imprisoned, of providing for the poor and unemployed, and of remembering them (the missionaries) with prayers and material provisions. Then the people of the congregation pledged their support, wished them well, and prayed for God’s mercies upon their ministry. Then they would sing.

Hans Kasdorf selected and translated several verses from a 25-stanza song used in an early commissioning service. The ancient hymn reveals the depth and passion the early Hutterites had for serving God in missions:<sup>21</sup>

As God His Son was sending  
 into this world of sin,  
 His Son is now commanding  
 that we this world should win.

He sends us and commissions  
 To preach the gospel clear,  
 To call upon all nations  
 To listen and to hear.

Commission in the Reformation.” <http://www.directionjournal.org/4/2/anabaptists-and-great-commission-in.html>.

21 I sing this to the tune of “The Church’s One Foundation.”

To Thee, O God, we’re praying,  
 We’re bent to do Thy will;  
 Thy Word we are obeying,  
 Thy glory we fulfill.

All peoples we are telling  
 To mend their sinful way,  
 That they might cease rebelling,  
 Lest judgment be their pay.

And if Thou, Lord, desire,  
 And should it be Thy will  
 That we taste sword and fire  
 By those who thus would kill,

Then comfort, pray, our loved ones  
 And tell them, we’ve endured.  
 And we shall see them yonder  
 Eternally secured.

Thy Word, O Lord, does teach us,  
 And we do understand;  
 Thy promises are with us  
 Until the very end.

Thou hast prepared a haven  
 Praised be Thy holy name.  
 We laud Thee, God of heaven,  
 Through Christ, our Lord. Amen!



Kasdorf wrote:

The commissioning ceremony was observed by the entire congregation. In most cases the missionaries were married men, leaving wife and children behind; occasionally wives went with their husbands. In the event that the missionaries would be executed by "sword and fire," as expressed in the song, the church was committed to take care of their widows and orphaned children.

### It worked!

Even in the time when persecution was strong and many were hiding out and becoming the quiet of the land, the Hutterites experienced amazing growth. Within the years 1530-1622 the Hutterites were able to plant over a hundred successful mission communities.

### Summary of an era

Discussing these "Golden Years of the Hutterites,"<sup>22</sup> it is noteworthy to see what the writer of the Hutterian Chronicles described as the reason for the success. At the end of an era, the Chronicler recorded what he felt were the ingredients that made these prosperous years possible. The Chronicles state:

They lived in the land God had provided especially for them. They were given the wings of a great eagle and flew to the place God had prepared for them, and they were sustained there as long as it pleased Him. Thus they gathered in peace and unity and preached the word publicly.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, all twelve articles of the Christian apostolic faith and all things founded on Holy Scripture was confessed and observed. Christian mission was carried out according to the command of the Lord: 'As my Father has sent me, so I send you.' ...

22 The name given by historians to the era in which the Hutterites prospered numerically and spiritually.

23 Hutterian Chronicles, Vol. 1, p. 403.

Therefore, each year servants of the gospel and their assistants were sent out into the lands where there was a call. They visited those who wanted to change their lives, who sought and inquired after the truth. These they led out of their land by day and by night at their request, heedless of constable and hangman, with the result that many lost their lives for the sake of this cause. Thus they gathered God's people in a manner befitting good shepherds.<sup>24</sup>

### So what do you do with a history like that?

It is easy to dismiss a history like this as some strange historical coincidence. But the more I study history, the more I see that throughout the ages that whenever a group of

believers is willing to simply take the words of Jesus seriously, the result is similar.

Could it be any different today?

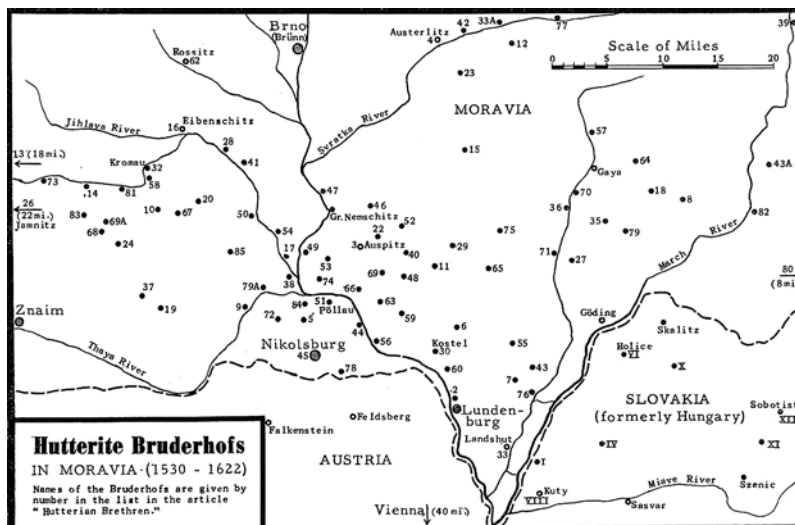
Stories like these of the early Hutterites, and others like them, show us what is possible if we are truly willing to deny ourselves and devote everything we have to serving and following Jesus. The early Hutterites were clearly at war with the world and the devil. It is true that they lost many lives to martyrdom. But when I consider how many young

people I see walk away from the faith today, losing their souls to materialism and complacency, I wonder what is worse. Perhaps the truth is that the church is destined to lose people somewhere; it's just that we have to decide if we will lose them to martyrdom or worldliness.

### So what happened?

Through the centuries there has been a few times in their history when the Hutterite church really suffered. During this time, spiritual decay and complacency prevailed and the faithful were reduced to a small remnant. Noticeably, every time this condition occurred, mission and outreach were at a standstill, and the role of apostle was either neglected or eliminated.

24 Ibid. p. 404.



### It worked!

This map shows the locations of the many Hutterite communities located in southern Moravia and Slovakia in the late 1500s, thanks to the persistent mission outreaches of the Hutterite evangelists.

In the 1700s God sent a revival to Germany,<sup>25</sup> which brought a new wave of believers to the area where the Hutterites were living. Discovering the old Hutterite writings, the new converts were inspired about by what they were reading.<sup>26</sup> With zeal these new believers desired to put the old ways back into practice again. The result caused a whole new wave of Hutterite growth and missions. It also brought in a new wave of persecution.

Over the next century, while fleeing from country to country, the Hutterites ended up in Russia. Unfortunately, there again the evangelism and outreach eventually stopped, the role of the missionary/apostle ignored, and the spiritual condition grew very poor.

However, once again God raised up faithful men on fire for the truth who desired to follow Christ in a more radical way. One of the men who brought in this next wave was Michael Waldner. Waldner led the new wave of Hutterites from Russia to America in 1874. He and other brothers at the time revived many aspects of the early Hutterites. From the beginning Michael Waldner spoke out for missions and evangelism. For example, the newly reformed Hutterites were not in America even one year until they felt the burden for others. The Chronicle records:

Michael Waldner and Joseph Waldner were sent back to Russia in 1875 to save more people from destruction and bring them to America.<sup>27</sup>

Writing to the church 10 years after they started the Bon Homme community in South Dakota, Michael Waldner rebuked the church for its lack of evangelism and then said:

The Lord has chosen us for His people, and not only for material things, but much more for spiritual reasons, that we should proclaim His gospel, and with the net of His Word fish His chosen ones out of the sea of this world. This will be the increase that we shall bring to the Lord. Whoever has saved a soul from the destruction of this world will be rewarded.<sup>28</sup>

Albeit, through the difficulty of managing the enormous task of mass migration from Russia to America, coupled with a new wave of persecution during WWI, Hutterite evangelism and missions once again dwindled.

25 Hutterian Chronicles, Vol. 2, p. 369.

26 Ibid. p. 377.

27 Ibid. p. 755.

28 Ibid. p. 760.

## What can we all learn from this?

The children of the “Radical Reformation” were made for spiritual war. After being in the Anabaptist circles for over 20 years now, I am convinced that the children of the Radical Reformation only function well as *radical* Christians—nothing less works! We either continue to move forward for the Lord or we decline. We simply were not designed to be nice, quaint little churches.

Borrowing the Marine Corps metaphor again, imagine a military brigade in which the children now grown have taken over the leadership of the base. Now imagine that these “Marines” no longer went to war, but instead just sit around and played with the weapons. You could imagine that eventually these “Marines” would hurt themselves and the people around them. It is the same for the church.

It is hard to admit when our churches are experiencing spiritual decline. To observe worldliness in mainline churches is one thing, but to see it in the children of radical believers is a travesty. This is true of all of our churches. It is the same trend that plagues the Amish and Mennonites, and it is the same plague that has been plaguing the churches I have been in the last while as well.

**They look back and think the war is over. But they are deceived; if they would live the life they would get persecuted again.**

~ Hieronymus Käls, Hutterite schoolteacher and missionary

## Are you at war?

The early Hutterites proved what could be done when genuine believers lose themselves to the cares of the world and engage the enemy for the prospering of the gospel. Reading their testimony convicts me. Oh, how I dream of being one of those “Marine Corps of the Anabaptists.” But in reality, when I take a hard look at my life I sometimes wonder if I really believe that we are at war.

Hieronymus Käls is one of my favorite early Anabaptists. He was an early Hutterite schoolteacher and missionary from the 1500s. He wrote many songs and children’s prayers that are still used today.<sup>29</sup> At the end of his life, Käls was captured while on a missionary trip between Moravia and South Tyrol. Writing a letter back to the community from prison, Käls took an opportunity to warn the brethren to keep fighting and not to grow cold. The letter convicts and inspires me to the core. I could not think of better words to end this study of early Hutterite missions.

Many in our time think the opposition has ended. They look back and think the war is over. But they are deceived; if they would live the life they would

29 Hutterian Chronicles, Vol. 1, p. 150.

get persecuted again. As long as the lion has its cubs with him he might act friendly and playful enough. But when he loses his little ones, or his prey, he cannot keep himself back. He rages and roars. He rants and he raves, as only lions can, until fire shoots from his eyes! Certainly Peter does not warn us in vain that Satan comes upon us like a roaring lion or a wolf at nightfall. But, may God be praised, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is bigger and stronger than the lion of the Philistines. He has already split the other lion's head and wounded his body. Therefore he knows that his time is short, and he will soon be overcome. Therefore he is so desperate, so angry. He sees the lake of fire into which he will be thrown. Watch yourselves, therefore, heroes of Israel! Take courage, strong men of Zion! Rejoice, oh city of Jerusalem! The time of your triumph is near. All tears will be washed from your eyes. The reward of your labors stands ready. Just hold on a little while longer! The fat cattle have already been butchered, the fowls have all been plucked. The tables stand ready and the guests have begun to arrive!<sup>30</sup>

Amen!

The words of Jesus have not changed. To this day they wait, expectantly, for some brave souls to rise up and put them into practice once again. We serve a Creator God. What we do doesn't have to be a carbon copy of the past. However, let's not forget the great cloud of witnesses that cheer us on. Those who have gone before us prove it can be done. I wonder, "Will those who follow us say the same thing about us?"

If you are like me and you are also moved and convicted by this testimony please pray with me, "Change me, Lord, and give me spiritual eyes to see the battle that is going on around me. And please, Lord, gather your people once again and glorify your name. Do it again, Lord, please do it again!"<sup>31</sup> ~

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30 Ancient Hutterite letter translated in: Peter Hoover, *The Mystery of the Mark: Anabaptist Missions under the Fire of God*. (Mountain Lake, MN) Elmendorf Books.

31 For a few pages that I jotted down from the Hutterian Chronicles that discuss missions or evangelism, please see: Vol. 1-82, 145, 150, 161, 197, 227, 241, 352, 355- 357, 359, 369, 403, 404, 430, 431, 503, 597 678, 755, 760, 765, 766, 769, 770; Vol. 2-508, 510, 601, 602, 755, 759, 760. This is not a complete list. Also see Peter Riedemann's Confession of Faith, section on "Differences in the Offices" and "Concerning the Covenant of Grace Given to God's People in Christ."