

Mennonite Attitudes to Property

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Mennonite Silence on Property

The ability of human beings to enjoy life on this earth is threatened at all times, in all places, by a simple fact: each human being must have access to the earth's limited physical resources. For this reason, questions of property — who has a right to own what and under what conditions — are fundamental ones for every society. Any community concerned about economic justice must come to some decision about the proper allocation of resources among its members. Since physical resources are essential not only for human survival but for the growth of human personality — for the enjoyment of life — the proper division of property rights remains an important problem even for relatively prosperous societies.

Despite what would appear to be the uncontestable nature of such an assertion — that property rights are fundamental to the exercise of justice in any community — little attention has been given to the just distribution of property in Mennonite communities. One searches in vain in Mennonite literature, including journals and books dealing with social and economic issues, for a discussion of this important problem. There are, of course, many possible explanations for this. An important explanation is undoubtedly to be found in recent Mennonite experience. In the last few centuries most Mennonites have settled, and prospered, in countries where the prevailing ideology has favoured private property. Challenges to private property rights in such societies are considered subversive. Mennonite theology is not supportive of overt political subversion. Ironically and tragically for Mennonites the most subversive type of challenge to private property emanated from the revolutionary teachings of Karl Marx. Ironically, because Marxist teachings had

their greatest impact on Russia, where many Mennonites were living, and tragically, because thousands of Mennonites lost their lives and their property. These experiences made a profound impression on Mennonites world-wide, and may alone account for much of the Mennonite silence regarding property rights.

However, this article explores another possibility: that Mennonite attitudes to property, and the failure of Mennonites, particularly in the last few centuries, to examine the justice of existing property rights, have been determined by a long-standing tendency of Mennonites to substitute charity for justice. Economic issues have been considered important, but critics of economic practices within the Mennonite community have focused almost entirely on personal attitudes and practices within the existing economic structure, and not on the structure itself (see Vogt, *JMS*, 1983). By and large, it appears, Mennonites have been encouraged to be more “charitable” in their economic dealings, but not necessarily more just.

To clarify this contention it is necessary, first of all, to distinguish between justice and charity. This distinction is then applied to the issue of property rights, after property itself has been defined. Finally, these definitions and distinctions are used to examine Mennonite attitudes to property as they have developed over several centuries.

Justice, Charity and Property

In defining “justice” and “charity” for purposes of this article a basic distinction is made between the social and structural character of justice on the one hand, and the personal, volitional character of charity on the other. A society may be said to be organized justly if it structures itself, through laws and institutions, so that its members are able to use the resources of that society for their sustenance and enjoyment without undue reliance on the goodwill of others. From this perspective economic justice requires above all a just property system, meaning organizational and legal structures which distribute resources in such a way that they can be used by all members of society for personal survival and growth. In such a society no person should have to rely on the personal generosity or “charity” of another to receive a just distribution of resources. The society is just if it structures itself in such a way as to virtually guarantee that a fair distribution of resources will take place. (“Fair” and “just” are sometimes used interchangeably in this paper. However, as indicated below, it is also useful to distinguish between them).

In contrast to justice, **charity** may be defined as a personal, volitional act, whereby a person attempts to alleviate a perceived unfairness in the situation of others. Charity may be seen as an attempt to restore fairness after unfairness has occurred, while justice involves attempts through appropriate structures to prevent the occurrence of unfairness. In terms of access to the earth’s resources, charity returns to people what a just economy would have given them in the first place.

However, charity differs from justice not only in terms of timing — correcting unfair situations after the fact rather than before — but also in its approach to appropriate types of solutions. It redistributes resources without altering the existing system of property rights. It counts on the generosity of individuals, but does not alter

the fundamental conditions which give rise to injustice, such as the existing property structure.

What is property? While property has to do with "things," modern property theory focuses not on the things themselves but on the kinds of rights required to control their use. Property is therefore defined as a bundle of rights pertaining to the use of things. The things over which property rights are sought include productive resources, such as land, labor, and capital, and personal goods such as food, clothing, and shelter. The focus of this article is on productive resources.

Dozens of different rights pertaining to the use of productive resources have been identified by scholars, but these can be usefully combined into three basic types of rights.

1. **User Rights:** Rights to determine how a thing will be utilized. In the production process this includes the right to decide on the relative use of productive factors, such as capital and labour, and the conditions under which labour will be employed.
2. **Income or Enjoyment Rights:** The right to determine who gets what from production in terms of wages and profits, and other forms of income.
3. **Disposal Rights:** The rights to buy and sell a thing, like land, machinery, or a factory, including the decision to cease production or to transfer it elsewhere.

Owners of property are assumed to have most or all of these rights. It is important to note, however, that the rights may be dispersed among different groups and individuals, so that in effect they become shared rights (i.e. the total bundle of rights is shared among different people). For example, in the modern corporation shareholders are the legal owners of the corporation, but several of the basic property rights identified above are exercised primarily by the managers of the corporation, who may or may not themselves be shareholders. Most corporate managers effectively exercise the user rights of the corporation, and have considerable influence on decisions affecting income distribution and the disposition of company assets. In effect, then, corporate managers share property rights with the shareholders.

The fact that property rights are often dispersed, and therefore shared by a number of different groups, has considerable implications for our later discussion of Mennonite attitudes to property

Economic Justice and Property Rights

It has already been suggested that justice requires structures which fairly distribute property rights among all members of society. But what constitutes a fair distribution of property rights, and what kind of structures are required to achieve it?

Standards of fairness are notoriously difficult to formulate. However, when one considers fairness in the distribution of property rights, several standards or

principles of fairness spring to mind almost immediately. The first principle arises from the fundamental fact that all human beings need some control over the earth's resources in order to survive and to realize their full human potential. As a first principle of fairness, then, all human beings must be accorded some property rights. This implies that in any situation where property rights are exercised, some dispersion of rights must take place.

In our society the property right of all members to such basic personal things as food, clothing, and shelter is well established. There is much less agreement, however, about the degree to which property rights involving productive resources ought to be dispersed and shared. To be sure, user rights, as previously noted, have been delegated by shareholders to managers in most corporations, and decisions affecting wages and other working conditions ("enjoyment rights") are often made through collective bargaining between workers and managers. However, such dispersion and sharing are primarily the result of economic expediency (how could hundreds of shareholders make daily operational decisions?) and power struggles (e.g. union bargaining rights) and seem seldom to have been prompted by considerations of fairness. Nevertheless, one often finds in the ideological defence made of private property in our society an implicit commitment to the principle of broad dispersion and sharing of property rights, even with respect to productive resources.

There is wide adherence in our society to the belief, enunciated long ago by St. Thomas Aquinas, that productive resources are used more effectively when they are controlled by individuals rather than by collective bodies (see Parel and Flanagan, 1979). This conviction is the basis for frequent attacks on state-controlled property. Strangely enough, it is also used on occasion by private property holders to protest the granting of property rights to a larger number of individuals, such as workers, even though it is ill suited for this purpose. A rather humorous example of this is found in the autobiography of the head of Chrysler, Lee Iacocca. He recounts that when, in his attempts to save Chrysler, he sought the support of workers by recommending that the head of their union, Douglas Fraser, be appointed to the Chrysler Board of Directors (where, presumably, the property rights of workers would be enhanced through their greater ability to shape corporate decisions), he was roundly condemned by his business colleagues for violating basic principles of a free enterprise system. As he observes, "The business community went wild....Until then, no representative of labor had ever sat on the board of a major American corporation. But it is pretty standard in Europe. And in Japan they do it all the time. So what's the problem? It's that the average American CEO is a prisoner of ideology. He wants to be pure. He still believes that labor has to be the natural, mortal enemy" (Iacocca: 236-37).

It would appear from this that many supporters of individual private property are not so much in favour of a **society** based on private property as they are of a tight little oligarchy of private owners to which they happen to belong. The case for private, individual ownership of property is surely an argument in favour of the broadest possible dispersion of individual rights, and therefore reinforces our first

principle of fairness.

A second principle of fairness involves the concept of equality. In general, the principle of equality seems to have broad acceptance as a standard of fairness in most societies. In the running of a race, for example, it seems intuitively fair to everyone that all the runners should begin at the same point. Runners trying to get a jump on the others are immediately put back in their place. People, in other words, should be given equal starting points. Applying this principle to the distribution of the earth's resources means that everyone should be given equal control over those resources.

While fairness seems to require an equal distribution of property rights, a qualifying note is in order. As suggested earlier, the earth's resources are necessary both to sustain and to enhance life. In the course of a society's development it may be discovered that the life of most if not all members can be enhanced most effectively through an unequal dispersion of property rights. Some persons are better at assuming entrepreneurial risks than others, some are better coordinators of production than others, and it is in the interest of everyone to give such people a disproportionate control over resources, particularly over production resources. A too-radical commitment to equality may impede the enhancement of life.

Our second principle of fairness might therefore be formulated as follows: within limits required for the most effective use of a society's resources, the rights to control those resources ought to be distributed as equally as possible.

There is a third requirement for fairness, and that is a set of institutions whose function it is to monitor and adjudicate the behavior of individual property units to ensure that they act in the interests of the whole society. Fairness requires individual control over resources, but it also necessitates a check on individual behaviour. Individuals must have control over resources to be able to act in their own best interest, but while this is a necessary condition for social justice it is not a sufficient condition.

The economics profession is one of the strongest supporters of the notion of "spontaneous order," meaning that social welfare is most likely to be maximized when individuals are given the means and the right to pursue their own self-interest, but even this profession recognizes limits to this notion. For example, it is widely acknowledged that individual economic activity produces "externalities," such as pollution, which will go unchecked if no limits are placed on the autonomy of individual producers. Further, the time-horizon of individual producers is likely to be too short to protect future generations against the depletion of non-renewable resources. For these and other reasons social justice requires the establishment of institutions which have the power to act in the name of society by formulating and enforcing economic policies in society's interest and by curbing the autonomy of individual producers.

Institutional Requirements for a Just Distribution of Property

The preceding analysis indicates that two types of institutions are required to assure a just distribution of property rights. First, at the top so to speak, there must

be a body capable of enacting laws and policies which limit the possibility that individual producers will act against the interests of society. Second, there must be individual producing units in which property rights are dispersed as widely and as equally as possible.

Our own society has found it difficult, though not impossible, to create at least some of these conditions. Based on the doctrine of **eminent domain**, taken over from British Common Law, the principle is well established that the government, acting in the name of all the people, has a primary claim to property. If private citizens doubt this, they need only to try and stop a government from claiming their land to build a highway, or something else that is considered socially necessary, in order to test it. Constitutional guarantees of private property, such as exist in the United States and Germany, compel governments to compensate private owners fairly for confiscation of property, but they do not prevent such confiscation. In legal theory, and in fact, private ownership of property in our society is a secondary form of ownership, dependent on the agreement and support of the state. Though the state may not always seem to be fair, fairness requires a body like it, to curb the autonomy of individual producer organizations in the interest of society. In secular societies such a body is the state; in religious communities it may be religious authorities who are deemed to act in the interest of the community as a whole.

Within production units, where most property rights are effectively exercised, principles of fairness require that decisions affecting the use, enjoyment, and disposal of productive resources be distributed widely and equally. In practice, the dispersion of rights in our society appears to be neither broad nor equal. That was not always the case. In pre-industrial society, peasants had considerable rights over the use and disposal of land (less so over the income derived from the land), and craftsmen determined things like working hours, the quality and price of their product, and most other aspects of the production process. Modern industry created a major division between managers and employees, and property rights became synonymous with managerial rights. In the modern corporation the shareholder-owners have delegated most of their rights to managers, and workers are able to make inroads into management rights only in selected areas, like wage determination, and usually only through a confrontational form of collective bargaining. It has been difficult for workers and managers alike to see how any other kind of arrangement could work. For example, how can workers be given rights over the use and disposal of resources without jeopardizing the effective operation of their company? It appears that the efficient operation of modern industry — which has done much to enhance our life — inevitably places serious limits on the broad, equal dispersion of property rights. And it appears also that many people are willing to accept such unfairness in property distribution in order to enjoy the benefits that it seems to produce.

Karl Marx predicted that the unequal distribution of property rights in modern capitalism would lead to its destruction. Evidently he was wrong, although workers have revolted often, and in many places, against their lack of access to property. The question remains: is it necessarily true that a fair distribution of property rights must

be sacrificed for economic efficiency? Several West European countries, led by Germany and Austria, have demonstrated that it is not true. Through the creation of a system of co-determination, whereby workers are given substantial, effective property rights, through worker councils and participation on the boards of directors (without robbing shareholders of their formal ownership rights), these countries have shown that a fairer distribution of property is quite compatible with efficiency. The structural reforms they have initiated in the post-war period are the type of reforms that any society should be willing to undertake if it wishes to move beyond charity to justice in its distribution of property. It is against this background of principle and practice that Mennonite attitudes to property need to be examined.

Anabaptist-Mennonite Principles of Justice and Property

Anabaptist concepts of justice and property were derived from the Bible and from the late medieval ethos in which Anabaptism arose. The Bible allocates primary property rights to God but delegates to human rulers some of the divine prerogatives, even to the point of recognizing the property claims of a secular Roman state. It also grants extensive property rights to individuals. Both the Old and New Testaments condone private property and individual decision-making, and most Anabaptists therefore did likewise.

The Bible, however, places severe limits on the autonomous use of property and explicitly advocates its wide and equal distribution. The celebration of a Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) was meant to reverse the unequal allocation of property that inevitably occurs in society. There is no evidence that a radical restructuring of property rights ever occurred in Israel, but three important principles emerge from the teachings that one finds in Leviticus and elsewhere.

1. Private, individual property rights are permitted.
2. Such rights are limited rights, limited by a responsibility placed on property owners to redress the inequalities that emerge over time.
3. The redress of unfairness is not accomplished adequately through charity. It requires a re-structuring of property rights.

All in all, severe limitations are placed in the Bible on the private, autonomous exercise of property rights.

Christian teaching in the late-medieval period, as evidenced most clearly in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, gave similar qualified support to private property. It acknowledged that people take better care of things that are their own and they work harder for themselves. However, Christians must always consider such private rights to be conditional, limited by the principles of equality and universality, which Aquinas called "liberality." "Liberality" he said, "creates an attitude of indifference towards one's own possessions...which enables one to use one's property properly, both with respect to oneself and others"(A. Parel: 105; also H. Rempel:2).

The idea of liberality appears to be very close to some of the central themes

of Anabaptism, especially to the concept of *Gelassenheit*. Among most Anabaptists to be “gelassen” meant to cultivate an attitude of detachment to property. The Hutterites carried this even further by insisting that it meant the rejection of all private property (Barbara Gingerich: 253). Certainly, it seriously qualified all individual aspirations to the ownership of property. As Peter J. Klassen observes, “Common to Anabaptism, whether among the Swiss Brethren, the Dutch and South German Anabaptists, or the Hutterites, was the firm conviction that the church was composed of committed disciples who were united in a bond of love. In this relationship there could, in the strictest sense, be no individualism” (Peter J. Klassen: 26). Such autonomous notions as “ownership” emerged only very slowly out of the medieval world and were quite foreign to the ethos of Anabaptism. Anabaptism must thus be judged to be quite inconsistent with an unqualified or uncritical commitment to the kind of autonomy that is usually associated with private property.

In terms of shared vs. individual decision-making in production the Anabaptist position is difficult to describe and has resulted in numerous controversies among historians. Klassen observes that “almost from its earliest days, Anabaptism included in its ranks those who wished to establish a community of believers in which private property would be abolished, and in which control of all temporal possessions would be surrendered voluntarily by the individual. There would be a communism of production and of distribution, in which all property would belong to the group and would be used as needed for the welfare of the community” (Peter J. Klassen: 50. Also, James Stayer: in Hans-Juergen Goertz:21-49). Numerous biblical examples and citations were advanced in favor of this position, including the practices of the Levitical priesthood in the Old Testament and the notion of interdependence which is contained in the allegorical reference to Christ as the vine and the members of the church as branches. However, of greatest significance was the fact that some members of the early church chose to have all things in common (Acts 2:44 and 4:32). These biblical references had a profound impact on Anabaptist views of property. Small wonder that even such a careful church historian as Preserved Smith, in his *The Age of the Reformation* (1920), referred to the Anabaptists as “those Bolsheviks of the sixteenth century” (Peter J. Klassen:21).

Nevertheless, as is well known, the majority of the Anabaptists did not create structures of shared decision-making on the level of production. A significant minority, the Hutterites, did, and many other Anabaptists expressed strong support for such practices, but in the end most Anabaptists restricted the notion of sharing to acts of charity. They challenged the hearts of their members to be generous in the distribution of this world’s goods, but they refused, in the end, to enact the type of structural reforms that could be the basis for a just economic system. In brief, most Anabaptists encouraged charitable acts at the level of distribution, but they did not seek to restructure property rights at the level of production.

There are several reasons why the Anabaptists did not require a fundamental restructuring of property rights. First, because sharing was seriously enjoined on the level of distribution, most Anabaptists seemed to feel that it was unnecessary to extend it to production as well. They evidently assumed that all goods would be

generously shared in their communities. Second, Anabaptists stressed the voluntary character of their communion, and the structuring of property rights in a shared way seemed to some of them to involve coercion. They apparently anticipated — correctly, as most human history and later Mennonite history illustrates — that few people are voluntarily prepared to share property rights with others. Third, many Anabaptists were self-employed (e.g. as craftsmen), so their occupations did not lend themselves easily to shared decision-making.

In the absence of a clear commitment to just economic structures, later generations of Anabaptists (Mennonites) failed, on the whole, to establish property rights which embody the principles of fairness enunciated earlier, and which are basically contained in the Biblical principles to which the Anabaptists officially adhered. The tension in Mennonite communities between individual autonomy and obedience to God, between community and individualism, and between equality and efficiency, has been noted by many historians. In their earliest congregations in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Poland, most Mennonites either worked for others or worked for themselves on small plots of land or in small cottage crafts. It was not economic activity but congregational life that brought them together. In these congregations there were, as James Urry has recently observed, practices and teachings which simultaneously promoted both individualism and community solidarity. “In Mennonite congregations the sense of community was strong. Through baptism Mennonites entered into a covenant with God and with the community. The acceptance of faith was an individual act and the personal baptismal covenant was to follow Christ...” (James Urry: 36). In the individual Mennonite there was therefore a public covenant with the community and a private covenant to follow Jesus Christ in a personal way. Therefore, “while the public face of Mennonitism was one of homogeneous communal solidarity, religious life remained distinctly personal” (Urry: 37). Those who search for the roots of the entrepreneurial spirit, and managerial autonomy, in Mennonite communities could do worse than examine the implications of such very early developments in Mennonite congregational life.

It was in Russia that the Mennonites for the first time were enjoined to extend the notion of community life to economic organization. It was here that property rights were given a new structural form. Ironically it was the Russian government that encouraged the formation of economic colonies, which in turn fostered a new form of property sharing. It was Russian law, not previous Mennonite practices, which determined that all colony property belonged in perpetuity to the colony and not to individuals. “Families held rights to their farms and household plots and could transfer them to their descendants, but their plots could not be divided, mortgaged, or sold to anyone outside the colony” (Urry: 62). Mennonite farm households in Russia therefore received use and enjoyment rights to property but only limited disposal rights.

The new system of “shared” property in Russia was also accompanied by new curbs on property autonomy. The involvement of higher organs, the village government, was no longer confined to a passive form of property right. The village authorities now used fiscal powers and other policies to promote the interests of the

community. For example, in the early years communal sheep flocks were established and cattle and horses were pastured by village communities. The potential was there, and was sometimes exercised, to use such community power to protect the interests of the community, especially its weaker members, against the interests of individual property owners. However, in the absence of democratic religious and political organizations the community organizations often became primarily the protectors of the rights of individual property owners rather than promoters of sharing and mutuality (Urry: chapt. 11). In the end, individual households remained the basic unit of economic enterprise and as economic opportunities increased during the course of the 19th century shared decision-making was supplanted more and more by individual control. Over time the power of the congregations and village authorities declined. Kinship ties became a primary base of community, but such ties reinforced rather than diminished the growing economic power of individual households. The advance of industrialism in the latter half of the 19th century further contributed to community breakdown, more entrepreneurial activity, both in industry and agriculture, and greater economic inequality. "By 1860 the Mennonite colonies were in crisis....While commercial practices had brought prosperity and security to many, it had resulted in hardship for others. Social inequalities became more marked, and possession of land became a crucial factor in the ability of people to secure a future for their families"(Urry: 152). Private economic opportunity virtually replaced equality in the Mennonite economic ethic. Landowners rejected the claims of the landless for land on the grounds that the latter were "inefficient." Village and congregational structures failed to support the landless in any significant way to alleviate their condition (Urry: 199, 202). It was not until the Russian government investigated the situation and ordered the implementation of new economic arrangements that a fairer distribution of property was attained.

Some of the Mennonite groups that migrated from Russia to Canada, and from there to Mexico and South America, continued to promote less autonomous economic institutions, with colony or village organizations sharing property rights with individual proprietors. To these Mennonites, as E.K. Francis observed, "the idea of the moral autonomy of the individual immanent in democratic philosophy had little appeal. They were not preoccupied with the greatest possible freedom of the individual *from* social controls, but with the freedom of the group as a whole *for* the exercise of strict social controls over each individual member" (Francis: 81-82). However, as commercial opportunities increased, more and more of the Mennonites in southern Manitoba sought, and eventually obtained, individual control over their land, and individual economic interests superseded the interests of the community. It took only a few decades for the community pattern of property control to disappear. Further migrations to Mexico and South America of those favoring the village-community organization kept the practice of semi-private property alive in those parts of the Mennonite world, but in most other areas it either never started or soon lost ground to individual interests. The co-operative movement gained a foothold in the inter-war period in some southern Manitoba communities but, as H. Dyck has noted in his study of J.J. Siemens, there was more of a secular impulse to this than

a uniquely Mennonite or religious impulse. Some individuals saw co-ops as an opportunity to compete more effectively with other privately-owned enterprises, or, as in the case of Credit Unions, to pool local financial resources in support of their own businesses because existing banks failed to offer such support.

Those Mennonites who migrated from Western Europe to the United States, and subsequently to Canada, did not create economic communities comparable to the colonies in Russia or to the village communities in western Canada. They adopted American forms of private property and supported individual decision-making in the production process. The pursuit of personal wealth was encouraged, and, as was true in many "Russian" Mennonite communities, both in Russia and in Canada, ministers were often among the wealthiest members of the community (Richard K. MacMaster: 130). The principles of *Gelassenheit* and sharing continued to be preached, and they were undoubtedly responsible for several types of institutions promoting mutual aid, but the general economic ethos was highly individualistic and geared more to personal advancement than to equality (See, for example, E. Wayne Nafziger).

The preceding analysis shows that except for brief periods of time, in a few localities such as southern Russia, southern Manitoba, Mexico, and Paraguay, where Russian government legislation in the late 18th century laid the basis for a tradition of shared property ownership, with limited autonomy, Mennonite property practices have not been structured to achieve the principles of fairness described in this article. Instead of fulfilling the structural requirements of justice, Mennonite property owners have been encouraged to practice charity.

What is to be done?

Biblical/Anabaptist principles of economic justice stress both equality and universality in the distribution of property rights, and allegiance to persons and institutions acting in the name of the people as a whole. Mennonites by and large have adopted property practices which are highly individualistic and emphasize the unique rights of owners and managers over workers. How does one bridge this incredible gap between ideal and practice?

One must obviously begin by acknowledging that the gap exists. Hopefully this article may make a small contribution to that. More positive steps can also be taken. First, production organizations must recognize, with greater enthusiasm than they often do, that their autonomy is of necessity limited by the state. Holders of property must acknowledge the right of members of the community, including the state, to create rules of behavior and structures of property redistribution (such as a progressive tax system) so that large disparities may be overcome without resort to charity, and the external effects of property use can be treated fairly. Most of our business organizations accept the necessity of some intervention, but there are some who continue to protest and insist on their right to virtual autonomy. This "libertarian" tradition is especially strong in the United States, and is one of the chief features distinguishing American capitalism from West European capitalism. North Americans in general tend to stress a "free" market economy, by which they mean an economy in which business firms are as free as possible to pursue their own interests.

Germans, on the other hand, to use just one West European example, stress a "social" market economy, by which they mean a private enterprise system which is strongly supportive of social programmes. Americans balk at tax rates which are currently about 35 percent of GDP, while most Europeans are relatively content with tax rates averaging close to 50 percent of GDP, supporting generous welfare, medical, and educational services.

A more serious deficiency seems to exist in the decision-making process of most of our production organizations. Individualism supersedes collegiality and family oligarchies resist more shared kinds of decision-making. Part of this orientation may be attributed to the personal, highly individualistic form that our religious life has taken. In the economic realm this individualism has been reinforced by failed socialist experiments, which many of our people experienced personally. Unfortunately, some of our business leaders seem to conceive of only two types of property ownership: individual ownership or state ownership. Intermediate types, in which individually or corporately-owned firms broaden the base of decision-making through substantial worker participation, are largely ignored by our property owners.

As noted previously, a number of leading industrial countries in Western Europe have demonstrated successfully that in many modern businesses it is possible to share property rights in new and creative ways, without increasing state participation or settling for the highly individualistic forms that have contributed so much to our loss of community and collegiality. Property rights are not indivisible. In many countries workers have come to participate effectively in such major decisions as investment, management hiring, relocation, etc, while leaving other daily "hands-on" decisions to management. The modern production process is by its very nature highly social and interdependent. Detailed planning and cooperative carrying out of plans by workers and management are required. Both our principles of justice and the realities of modern production call for the creation of more shared decision-making. What is required is not occasional, charitable acts of redistribution, but fundamental property restructuring. The Christian faith states unequivocally that both equality and universality are significant elements in the Christian concept of economic justice as it applies to property. A state system of property fails to achieve this standard of justice by providing too little scope for the individual exercise of rights. A libertarian (read "North American") form of private property fails to achieve the standard by giving too little attention to equality and universality.

In brief periods of Mennonite history a wider, more equal distribution of property rights was forced on Mennonite property holders by the state. Some Mennonites began to appreciate that such shared decision-making was, in fact, quite consistent with the Mennonite/Anabaptist ethos, and tried, with limited long-term success, to make it part of the basic Mennonite economic ethic. Far from being inimical to such initiatives, the organization of modern industry lends itself well to property sharing. Unfortunately, few business organizations owned by Mennonites have advanced very far in this direction. Some have implemented profit-sharing plans for their employees, but with rare exceptions (e.g. the D.W. Friesen printing

firm in Manitoba) these do not involve any additional property rights. To qualify as *property-sharing*, as distinct from profit-sharing, a few basic conditions would have to be met. First, profit-sharing should take place at least partly through the distribution of shares with voting rights. Only thus can real property rights be enlarged. Second, such shares should be available to all employees, not just to management. Third, workers should be able to examine the balance sheets of their enterprise, so that they can determine the true profit-picture of their company, and so satisfy *themselves* (without having to trust the word of a paternalistic owner) that they are receiving the profits that were promised. Fourth, workers should be electable to the board of directors so that they can influence basic company policies. Fifth, worker organizations within the enterprise must exist whereby workers can effectively negotiate redress of grievances, working conditions, and income. These conditions already exist in most firms in West European countries such as Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, without compromising efficiency or destroying the property rights of owners.

It seems as though once again God in his inscrutable wisdom is using secular governments and business institutions to show us how to practice a true Christian economic ethic. Charity is not good enough. What we require are structural reforms which alone hold out the promise of economic justice.

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