Letters to the Dukhobors

by Leo Tolstoy

To the Dukhobors of the Caucasus

Dear Brothers, who suffer for Christ’s teaching:

Our brother, I.P.N., called on me on his way home, and I wanted to write to you that not I alone, very many people in Russia and abroad know and think of you and are concerned about you. God willing, we will send you, your children, women, old men, and invalids such help as we can; but as to spiritual help, all of us, both here and abroad, receive that from you, and we beg you not to forsake us with that help. This help consists in you being the first to show an example of walking on Christ’s road, making it easier for the rest of us to follow in your footsteps. Christ said, “They have persecuted me, and they will persecute you,” and so it is. I am sorry for the young and the old, and still more sorry for the persecutors – they know by this time that they are not persecuting you, but Christ, the one who came to save them. They see their sin, but are so deeply mired in it that they cannot get away from it. They do their evil work; God help them to come to their senses and to join us. I.P. told me how your brothers, who suffer for their refusal to take part in the deeds of the devil and in murder, have acted toward those who have not withstood the persecutions and have consented to serve. If those who themselves suffer for Christ’s sake have begged forgiveness of those who did not withstand the persecutions, which they bore at the instigation and instruction of their brothers, how must I, who have not been made worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake, ask the forgiveness of those to whom my words and writings have caused any suffering!

He who suffers for Christ’s sake, not at the instigation of men, but because he cannot act differently before God, is in no need of human consolations and encouragements. He who acts, not for God’s sake, but for the sake of human glory, has a hard time and needs consolation and support, and his forgiveness has to be asked if he suffers through us. And so, brothers, do not persist in your refusal to do service for the state, if you do so in order not to be accused of weakness. If you can do what is demanded of you, do it, and save your feeble, your wives, your children, your sick, and your old men from sufferings. If Christ’s spirit has not taken His abode in you, keeping you from doing what is contrary to God’s will, every one of you ought to renounce what he did before and submit for the sake of the love of his own people. No one will condemn you for it. You ought to act thus, if you can. But if Christ’s spirit has taken His abode in you, and you do not live for yourself, but for the fulfillment of God’s will, you would gladly do all you can for your suffering relatives, but you cannot do so, just as one man cannot lift forty hundredweights. If this is so, Christ’s spirit, which is opposed to the works of the devil, will teach you how to act, and will console you in your own sufferings and in those of your relatives.

I should like to tell you much and to find out much from you. If God wills it, we shall see each other.

1897
To the Dukhobors of the Canada

Dear Brothers:

I send you the money collected. I think that it would be well for you to regard this money, like all the other means which you receive from good people and working brothers, as your common possession, and not to divide it up among yourselves. Give most to him who needs most. Your old people, together with your friends, will help you distribute it.

I have heard that you have suffered much want. May God grant that you bear your trials in the same Christian spirit of submission to God’s will, in meekness and brotherly love, in which you lived in the Caucasus, showing people an example of Christian life. All worldly affairs – joys, sorrows, wealth, and poverty – pass without leaving any trace. But our deeds – the good or the bad – leave an eternal trace both in the world, aiding in the establishment of God’s kingdom, or interfering with it and with our souls, bringing them nearer to God, or removing them from Him.

May God save you for your good.

November 6, 1899.

To the Dukhobors of the Canada

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Those of us who profess the Christian teaching and want our lives to harmonize with this teaching must help one another. The most necessary help is to point out to one another our sins, particularly those sins and offences into which we fall without noticing them. For this reason I, too, asking my brothers to help me in my sins and offences, which I do not see, regard it as my duty to point out to you, dear brothers and sisters, the offence into which I hear some of you are falling.

You suffered and were exiled and even now suffer want, because you wished to lead a Christian life, not only in words, but also in acts. You refused to commit any violence against your neighbor, to swear, and to do police or military duty. You even burned your weapons, that you might not be tempted to defend yourselves with them. And, in spite of all the persecutions, you remained true to the Christian teaching. Your acts became known to men, and the enemies of the Christian teaching were confused when they heard of your acts. They either locked you up and deported you, or exiled you from Russia, trying in every way to conceal your acts from men. But the followers of the Christian teaching rejoiced, triumphed, loved and praised you, and tried to emulate you. Your acts have done much toward the destruction of the kingdom of evil and the confirmation of men in the Christian truth. Now I learn from the letters of our friends that the life of many of you in Canada is such that the very followers of the Christian teaching are confused, and its enemies rejoice and triumph. “Here are your Dukhobors,” the enemies now say of Christianity. “The moment they settled in Canada, a free country, they began to live like all other people, hoarding property for themselves. They not only do not share with their brothers, but even try to get as much as possible for themselves individually. Thus, whatever they did before, they did by command of their head men, without understanding well why they were doing so.”
Dear brothers and sisters, I know and understand the whole difficulty of your position in a strange country, amidst strange people, who do not give anything away for nothing. I know how terrible it is to think that our friends, feeble people with families, will remain without means and without help. I know how hard it is to live in a commune, and how provoking it is to work for others, who are careless and waste what has been acquired by the labor of others. I know all these things, but I also know that, if you want to continue to live a Christian life and do not wish to renounce everything for which you suffered and were exiled from your country, you cannot live in a worldly way, collect property each for yourselves and for your families, and retain it separately from the rest. It only seems to us that it is possible to be a Christian and have property and retain it separately from the rest, but that is impossible. People need only recognize this, and very soon there will be nothing left of Christianity but words – nothing but insincere and hypocritical words. Christ said that it is impossible to serve God and mammon. Either you hoard property for yourselves, or you live for God. At first it seems that there is no connection between the rejection of violence, the refusal to do military service, and the recognition of property. “We, the Christians, do not worship external gods, do not swear, do not go to court, and do not kill,” say many of us, “but our acquiring property through labor, not for our enrichment, but as a provision for our dear ones, not only does not violate Christ’s teaching, but even helps us to fulfill it, if we help the needy from the surplus.” But that is not so. Property means that I will not only refuse to give that which I consider to be my own to anyone who may wish to take it, but will also defend it against him. But to defend what is mine from another, I must use violence, defending it by means of a struggle, a fight, and even murder. If it were not for these acts of violence and murder, no one would be able to retain property.

But if we retain property without using violence, it is only so because our property is defended by the threat of using violence against the people around us. Our property is not taken from us, even if we do not defend it, only because it is assumed that we would defend it like anyone else.

And so the recognition of property is the recognition of violence and murder, and you had no reason to refuse to do military and police service if you recognize property, which is maintained only by means of military and police service. Those who do military and police service and enjoy property do better than those who refuse to do military service and do not do it, and yet still wish to enjoy property. Such people do not serve themselves and want to make use of somebody else’s service for their own advantage. The Christian teaching cannot be taken in small bits; it is either all or nothing. It is all inseparably connected into one whole. If a man recognizes himself as a son of God, love of his neighbor follows from this recognition, and the rejection of violence immediately follows from the love of his neighbor, as do the rejection of the oath, the rejection of service, and the rejection of property.

Besides, the bias for property is a deception in itself, and Christ discloses it to us. He says that a man should not trouble himself for tomorrow, not because there is any merit in it, or because God commands it, but because such a care leads to nothing, because it is impossible, and because he who will do so will be doing something foolish, since he will try to do the impossible. A man cannot make himself secure, in the first place, because he is mortal, as is shown in the Gospel parable about the rich man who built barns, and, in the second, because it is never possible to find the limit of the necessary security. For how long a time must we make ourselves secure? For a month? For a year? For ten years? For thirty? And shall we make ourselves alone secure, or also our children and grandchildren? And how? In regard to food, or also in our apparel and habitation – and what apparel, and what habitation? He who will begin to provide for himself will never come to the end of his providing, and will only lose his life in vain, as it says, “He that shall wish to keep his life shall lose it.” Do we not see rich men who live in
misery, and poor men who live joyously? Men do not need to provide for themselves, just as Christ has said that He is provided for by God for all times, and just as the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field are provided for.

“Yes, but if that is so, people shall all stop working, plowing, and sowing, and everyone will starve to death,” is generally said by those who do not understand Christ’s teaching in all its true significance. But that is only an excuse. Christ does not forbid a man to work, and not only does not advise us to be idle, but, on the contrary, commands us to work all the time. But we are not to work for ourselves; we are to work for the sake of others. The Gospel says, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28), and “The worker is worth his keep” (Matthew 10:10). A man must work as much as possible, but he must retain nothing for himself. He must not regard what he has earned as his own, but give it to others.

To provide for himself most securely, man needs one means, and this means is that which Christ teaches: to work as much as possible and to be satisfied with the least. A man who will act thus will everywhere and always be provided for.

The Christian teaching cannot be taken in small bits – a part to be taken and the rest discarded. If men, accepting Christ’s teaching, have renounced violence and war, they must also renounce property, because violence and courts are needed only for the purpose of maintaining property. But if people retain property, they must have violence and courts and the whole worldly structure.

The offence of property is the most grievous offence, the harm of which is very cunningly concealed from men, and thus very many Christians have stumbled over this rock.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, in establishing your life in a strange country, after you have been expelled from your country for faithfulness to the Christian teaching, I see clearly that it is in every way more advantageous for you to continue to live a Christian life than to change it and begin to live a worldly life. It is more advantageous for you to live and work in common with all those who shall wish to live the life you lead than for each of you to live separately, hoarding only for yourselves and your families, without sharing with the others. In the first place, it is more advantageous to live so because, by not hoarding for the future, you will not waste your strength in vain by providing for every contingency, which is an impossibility for mortal man. In the second place, you will not waste your strength in a struggle with others, in order that each of you may retain his properly distinct from his neighbors. Thirdly, you will work and earn incomparably more by working in common than if you worked in separately. Fourthly, living in a commune, you will spend less on yourselves than by living separately. Fifthly, living a Christian life, you will evoke in the people surrounding you love and respect instead of envy and hostility, and they may even try to emulate you. Sixthly, you will not ruin the cause that you have begun and with which you confounded your enemies and pleased the friends of Christ. Above all else, it is more advantageous for you to live a Christian life because, living such a life, you will know that you are doing the will of Him who sent you into the world.

I know that it is hard not to have anything of our own. It is hard to be prepared to give up what we have and need for the family to anyone who may ask for it. It is hard to submit to the chosen leaders, when it seems that they are making an unjust distribution. It is hard to bear one another’s faults. It is hard to abstain from the habits of luxury, meat, tobacco, and wine. I know that all that seems hard. But, dear brothers and sisters, we live today and tomorrow we shall go to Him who sent us into this world in order that we may do His work. Is it worthwhile – for the sake of calling things our own and being able to manage matters, for the sake of a few pounds of flour or a few dollars, for coats or a pair of oxen, for the sake of not giving the things that we have earned to those who do not work, for the sake of a word of insult, for the sake of pride, for the sake of a dainty morsel – to go against the will of Him who sent us into the world, to not do
what He clearly wants us to do, and to not fulfill what we can fulfill only in this life? It is but very little that He wants of us: that we should do to others what we want for ourselves. And He wants this not for His own sake, but for our sake, because, if we all agreed to do so, we should all live as well as possible upon this earth. But if even the whole world lived contrary to His will, no individual who understands why he has been sent into this world has any cause to do anything else but that for which he was sent into this world.

To me, an old man on the brink of life and standing aside, this is clear. Dear brothers and sisters, if you shall consider it calmly, casting aside the temptations of the world for a time, even you will see clearly that no man will lose anything, but that each will only gain on all sides if he shall live not for himself, but in order to do the will of God. It says, “Seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Any man may verify the truth of it. But you have already verified it, and you know that it is the truth. As it is, we are seeking all these things, property, and worldly pleasures, and, when we do not receive them, we lose the kingdom of God.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, hold firmly to the life that you have begun, or you will uselessly lose what you had and will not find what you seek. He who sent us into the world knows better than we what we need, and He has arranged the world in advance in such a way that we receive the highest good, both in this and in the future life, not by doing our own will, but His.

I do not dare to give you any advice as to the way you have arranged your communal life, since I know that you, especially your old men, are experienced and wise in such matters. All I know is that everything will be well, so long as each of you remembers that he did not come into this world by his own will, but by the will of God. He sent us into this short life for the fulfillment of His will, which is expressed in the commandment of love. But to collect property individually and to retain it separately from the rest is to act contrary to the will of God and His commandment.

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