

SEPARATION AND NONCONFORMITY

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What is the value of having surveyed the history of separation and nonconformity? We need to recognize that history not only describes, but also directs in that many churches reflect something of a historical tradition. At its best historical tradition offers accumulated understanding and stability. It represents time-tested solutions and helps successive generations avoid many mistakes by building on the wisdom and experience of earlier believers.

But tradition can become confining and suffocating. It can become stuck in time and offer solutions that better served a different era. Tradition can become so pervasive that tradition itself becomes the point rather than the application of principle. We must recognize that in the application of separation and nonconformity, most of us do represent some degree of historical tradition. We should appreciate the experience and wisdom it represents, the stability it offers, and not be too cavalier in assuming we suddenly have full and sufficient insight for rapid and radical new applications. A complementary historical value is perspective. Perspective allows us to view our understanding and practice in a larger context. It may reveal the cause for some peculiarity, show the consequence of certain choices, suggest the validity of other options, confirm the wisdom of present practice, or indicate relative importance.

What can we learn and apply from this brief survey of separation and nonconformity in Anabaptist history? I suggest five dimensions of a historically informed doctrine of separation and nonconformity.

Biblically Based

While Anabaptism arose in a particular political and social context, it was primarily a spiritual quest predicated on the Bible (Estep xi-xiii). Has Anabaptist/Mennonite separation remained rooted in deep spiritual soil, or is it primarily nourished by ethnicity and sociology? Granted, spiritual

beliefs and values need to be applied and lived out in social and cultural contexts. But separation and nonconformity driven by anything less than its Biblical base is certain to crash into dissention, dysfunction, disuse, or misuse. To the degree that Anabaptist people over the centuries rooted their separation in Scripture, they were one in essence with those who signed the Brotherly Union in 1527, in regards to the basic meaning of Biblical separation.

The Biblical basis for separation and nonconformity, properly grasped and taught, brings both legitimacy and understanding to the issue. It answers the question of “why?” Why must we scrutinize our culture and live counter culturally in so many different ways? Because all cultures are permeated by the world: “the secular order of society, together with thoughts, beliefs, interests, motives, attitudes, practices, institutions, and systems that are contrary to God’s will” and under the control of Satan, God’s enemy (Proceedings 55). Those who are of the world are outside of the saving grace of God’s Kingdom. Believers who love the world and have friendship with the world are committing spiritual adultery and have no claim to the promise of a saving relationship with God (1Jn. 2:15; Jas. 4:4, 5; 2 Cor. 6:17, 18).

However, separation and nonconformity, deprived of its Biblical basis, becomes an instrument for which it was not intended, and a tool to supplant the Gospel of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ. Separation is not a means to

salvation, a way of upholding a standard of meritorious righteousness (Rom. 3:20-22; Phil. 3:4-9; 1 Pe. 1:18-19). We also need clear thinking that while conversion results in works of righteousness, which a life of separation and nonconformity reflects, and this walk of obedient righteousness must be undertaken seriously and conscientiously, we are ever dependent on the righteousness which comes by faith in Jesus Christ rather than on one which is through

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meticulous and scrupulous separation and nonconformity to the world (Rom. 4; Gal. 2:14-21).

Neither is separation and nonconformity a means to achieve holiness of life. Holiness is the result of the work of God in cleansing us from sin and separating us unto Himself (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 4:24; Tit. 3:4-7). The progressive aspect of holiness in a believer's life is "simply" the practice of that which God has so graciously brought about in our lives. Holiness is perfected in the sense that as we walk with the Lord, with all that entails, we grow more into His likeness. It seems that sometimes in our history we have used various standards of separation and nonconformity as a benchmark for God-approved holiness by which to judge the spirituality of others. While there is room for honest differences concerning the merits and wisdom of specific applications, and while unity of thought as well as submission are essential elements of church life, separation resulting in holier-than-thou attitudes and acrimonious church splits (sometimes over the minutest of details) has lost its way. A Biblical basis for separation and nonconformity guides its application. The point is not to be social nonconformists, arbitrarily distinctive, or even to set up marks of separation. Rather, we are to be as separated and non-conformed as obedience to Christ and His Word makes us, and as being cleansed from all "filthiness of the flesh and spirit" takes us (2 Cor. 7:1). Employing such devices as amoral cultural, linguistic, and geographical fences for purposes of separation from the world raises the question of whether one is trying to achieve isolation rather than separation from the world (also see Acts 15:19).

Positively Framed

In an address to the Fourth Mennonite World Conference (1948), entitled "The Limitations of Nonconformity," Paul Miner observed that nonconformity, being entirely negative in its meaning, "does not furnish any general or specific guidance to the individual or the church in the development of the Christian life or in meeting moral and spiritual problems. The principle says 'do not' but gives no suggestion as to the direction in which one ought to go" (Proceedings 57). What shall we make of the negative character of separation and nonconformity?

First, we do poorly to unhitch nonconformity to the world from its teammate, conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:19; Col. 3:10). These are simply the negative and positive aspects of progressive sanctification. John C. Wenger captured the fact that separation is part of a larger purpose by the well-stated title of his book, *Separated unto God*. Positioning separation and nonconformity as a necessary part, but only a part of a larger whole brings understanding and appreciation for its role in living a holy life.

Secondly, the validity of separation and nonconformity is not diminished by its negativity. Six of the Ten Commandments, we will recall, are stated negatively. And Paul, in light of the promise of God to be our Father and the privilege of us being His children as a consequence of separation, exhorts us to "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Cleansing ourselves from worldly contaminants of body and soul – negative actions – produces the positive result of growth in Godlikeness.

Thirdly, while we need not feel apologetic for a negative doctrine, knowing its Biblical basis and positive good, the doctrine of separation and nonconformity is well served by framing it in terms of liberation rather than in terms of restriction only (Col. 1:13, 14; 2 Tim 2:24, 26). A positive focus on separation as liberation from the enslaving and degrading values and practices demanded by conformity to the world should enhance appreciation for this fundamental Biblical teaching and stimulate a more genuine and consistent practice among Anabaptist believers.

Fourthly, while separation and nonconformity are negative terms, must its application only be negative? Might a given church address the implications of being in the world but not of the world holistically; not only in terms of what is restricted but also what is recommended or required? As we have seen, this approach has been taken at times in Mennonite history in regard to dress, beginning at least in the 19th century. But it finds very little reach outside of dress. Interestingly, while not a mandate for New Covenant practice, the Old Covenant reflects the same phenomena: prescriptive separation targets personal appearance.

Comprehensively Applied

Over the centuries, has the Anabaptist/Mennonite conception of worldliness been too narrow? Has separation and nonconformity been conceived primarily in terms of personal appearance? Have we focused on a few boundary markers while overlooking where we may have imbibed worldly values and attitudes resulting in more conformity to the world than we might care to admit, and inconsistencies which onlookers find both perplexing and amusing? Certainly a lot of focus over the centuries has been on dress. The personal nature of dress, and the motives associated with personal appearance readily lends attire to be an indicator of the heart. Since we all wear clothing and it's so easy to use clothing as a means of self-expression and identification, the concentrated attention on separation and nonconformity in personal appearance is understandable. Yet the historical record shows the church addressing issues of worldliness beyond clothing and accessories.

The early Anabaptists probably conceived the scope of separation and nonconformity more clearly than has been the case of some of their spiritual descendants. They had no Mennonite culture to carry them along, no long-standing established Anabaptist norms to support them. They understood the reality of the world, which included the state and the established churches. For them, separation from the world was not primarily an issue of attire but of applying Scripture in a way they had never done before to the realities of their lives, socially, politically, culturally, ecclesiastically, and economically. Over time as the Anabaptist movement aged, with some people withdrawing and become more secluded and isolated, and others receiving greater tolerance and acceptance as members of society, the forces that come with time had their effect. On the one hand, general patterns of belief, thought and practice became established and indicated a path to follow. On the other hand, as Anabaptists/Mennonites became more able to function freely in society, the world no longer stood out in such bold relief; the lines between the world and the Kingdom of God became blurred in some people's thinking and practice. Then present too was the inevitable spiritual battle each Christian must wage, and the lure of the world to which some, both individually and corporately, succumb, while still retaining Mennonite identity.

Those have been continual dynamics over the centuries as Mennonites have lived in the world but have had a greater or lesser sense that they were not to be of it. Consequently the level of comprehensiveness and consistency has varied. The historical record shows the church wrestling with and addressing issues beyond personal appearance. The 1951 publication of *Separated Unto God* by J. C. Wenger is an outstanding example of a broad-based approach to separation and nonconformity. How well conservative Christians in the historic Anabaptist tradition relate all the dimensions of their lives to being separated unto the Kingdom of God is another matter, and begs the question, how can the church comprehend and embrace the Biblically based, broadly applied, and culturally fitting life that the reality of living for God in the sphere of Satan's world demands? Of particular challenge to 21st century North American Anabaptists is recognizing and responding to worldly beliefs and values. To the extent these are imbibed, the fruit may have a ruby glow but the core is rotten.

Consistently Practiced

If separation and nonconformity is conceived too narrowly, or if social, cultural, and ethnic forces become dominant, however subtly and unconsciously, the result will be inconsistency. After reviewing some of the action and reaction to uniform plain dress in the (Old) Mennonite Church, Melvin Gingerich makes this observation: "Unfortunately, the

struggle over bonnets, neckties, and 'plain coats' often partly obscured the underlying principles of the issue. Behind the struggle were the issues of nonconformity to standards not set by Christian idealism, modesty, and simplicity of life" (153).

If Gingerich is suggesting that sometimes people contended for practices without adequate attention and appreciation for the principles which gave rise to them, he is articulating a perennial problem in the practice of separation and nonconformity, one which fosters so much inconsistency of practice be it in personal appearance or in other areas. The question is, how can the reality of separation and nonconformity to the world permeate a believer's spiritual worldview and seep from all his pores as he lives his life? Too often, it seems, a few issues become paramount and symbolic, diverting attention away from the real issues and principles, thus leading to inconsistency of practice. The inconsistency may involve embracing a form for practicing separation but the function of which fails to address the worldly issue that called for a non-conformed response. It may also involve appropriating some marks of nonconformity while other values and practices reveal a life still gripped by worldly mindedness.

According H. S. Bender, the three-pronged fork by which separation and nonconformity has been carried forward in Anabaptism over the centuries has been tradition, indoctrination, and discipline (Nonconformity 891). Tradition and indoctrination in particular are relevant to a consistent practice. Tradition by itself is wholly inadequate and easily contributes to inconsistency as time separates practice from principle. Paul Mininger gives a warning word regarding tradition when he writes, "where the emphasis is primarily upon the externals of the Christian life, the group tends to perpetuate these outward forms by a process of social conditioning rather than through giving insight and understanding with the purpose of securing voluntary acceptance. This blind conformity to the social group, even though it is the church, cannot but result in stagnation and sterility (Proceedings 58).

Yet tradition is not without merit in that at its best it can represent accumulated wisdom and provide stability. To be effective, the accumulated wisdom of tradition needs both to be refreshed and respected. It is refreshed by successive generations appreciatively thinking through what has been handed to them, holding to what is good, adding their godly wisdom, and making it their own through thought and not mere convention. It is respected by recognizing that those who have walked this life with God before us may have something of value to contribute to our own walk. And respect for tradition, in turn, is enhanced by the refreshing

process. Indoctrination, thorough and convincing teaching, may be both the greatest challenge and the greatest mechanism for the church to promote consistency. It's a challenge because we are so easily blinded to inconsistency, especially if we're steeped in thoughtless tradition. Through the work of the Spirit, thorough and convincing teaching is the church's greatest resource because commitment based on comprehension and conviction orders a person's life.

Intentionally Transmitted

While there seems to have been ebb and flow in Anabaptist understanding, commitment, and practice of separation and nonconformity over the centuries, the fact remains that separation and nonconformity are imbedded both in Scripture and in Anabaptist conviction. That means that Biblical Christianity in the historic Anabaptist tradition must include teaching and applying this foundational doctrine in whatever geographical and cultural setting. It is not a distinctive doctrine and cultural tradition peculiar to North American Mennonites of Swiss heritage but irrelevant elsewhere. Rather the spiritual reality of two kingdoms in opposition is a Biblical truth that all believers everywhere need to reckon with; what does that mean for me, for us as we walk with the Lord "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil. 2:15 NKJV)?

The spiritual heritage that those who have embraced conservative Anabaptism enjoy does not guarantee that successive generations will value and practice separation from the world in any comprehensive and consistent way. Parents who simply assume their children will follow after them, and churches that naively suppose the next generation will continue on in paths of faithfulness, without giving thought to the perils along the way, may find themselves disappointed. Sometimes one is amazed at how quickly an entire church jettisons separation and nonconformity. Is it possible that such a seemingly rapid collapse takes place from having lived off the interest of spiritual heritage while the capital was being squandered? How can we avoid losing the knowledge of this truth, and the blessing of its practice which has been sustained to a greater or lesser degree since the rise of Anabaptism?

Four enduring threats to separation are inadequate teaching, the effect of wealth, ineffective churches, and the pressure to assimilate into society. Our teaching must start with the spiritual reality of two, and only two, spiritual kingdoms. Christian conduct, when rooted in that understanding, becomes meaningful beyond obedience to assorted commandments of God and principles of Scripture. Wealth is a subtle competitor to God for our hearts (Mt. 6:19-21, 24; Col. 3:5). One of its subtleties is that we can think we are pious Christians when in fact wealth is corrupting us, our

affections, values and life-styles. The effect of wealth is reflected in the Concept of Cologne, cited earlier, which spoke of "the growing inclination of the merchant class toward temporal greed and the vanity of ostentatious clothing, which imitate the world rather than displaying the humility of Christ." Effective churches are fertile soil for producing holy living, of which separation and nonconformity are a vital part. Churches have the potential to be effective when a committed community of believers who have received life through the Gospel are living out Christian discipleship and brotherhood discipline loving and holistically. Separation and nonconformity find stony soil in the hearts of those young people who have found what to them is meaningless law and condemnation where they should be learning grace and discipleship as it flowers and fruits amid congregational teaching and life. Finally, the lure of the world along with the pressures that come from being out of step with the society always confronts those who would heed this call: "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters" (2 Cor. 6:17, 18a NKJV).

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