

Godward
or
Worldward

Which



Editor's Note:

The serious changes that have crept into the Mennonite Church since this tract was written in 1953 lend even greater urgency to this prophetic message. In every generation, direction determines destiny.

GODWARD OR WORLDWARD—WHICH?

The Mennonite Church in North America today is facing great spiritual tests because of the tolerance and freedoms extended by our government. This tolerance tends to disarm us and lead us to believe the world is not as evil as the Bible pictures it. Instead of standing apart as nonparticipants in the world's affairs, we are absorbing more and more of the culture around us. We live in a time of great change, and our applications of Scriptural principles are being greatly challenged. But the principles have not changed, and we are responsible to preserve them in our generation. To preserve them, however, we must practice them in daily life.

To be conformed or not to be conformed to the surrounding nations was Israel's number one problem. God instructed Israel specifically regarding intermarriage with the heathen, social intermingling, worship, and attire. Divine ownership carries with it the right of the owner to direct His purchased property or people. The things that happened in Israel are examples for us today (1 Corinthians 10:6-11). If we tempt Christ as they did, if we become spiritual adulterers with the world as they were fornicators with the heathen, if we murmur against the standards of God's Word as they did, we also incur God's displeasure. Too many of our people today are satisfied with an intellectual assent to the will of God without a consistent and joyful obedience.

Israel refused to learn the lessons God wanted to teach them and consequently became "not my people." God forsook them and scattered them among the nations. While Israel never returned to Egypt, except for an insurgent minority at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, yet they "in their hearts turned back into Egypt."

Our Anabaptist forefathers understood the New

Testament teachings on separation from the world and conformity to Christ. They applied the following Scriptures to their daily lives, even though their belief and practice cost them their homes, their property, and even their lives. They sacrificed all things earthly because they knew they had in Heaven a more enduring substance.

Note the following Scriptural testimony:

1. We are not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2).
2. Our way of life is to be free of worldly spots (James 1:27).
3. Friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4).
4. We cannot love the world without forfeiting God's love (1 John 2:15-17).
5. It is God's will that the death of Christ should liberate us from this present evil world (Galatians 1:4).
6. As true believers, we are no more a part of this world. We have been translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son (John 17:14-16; Colossians 1:13; Ephesians 6:12).
7. We are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers lest we forfeit the right of membership in the family of God (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).
8. It is a shame for a woman to have her hair cut (1 Corinthians 11:1-16).

Our Anabaptist forefathers believed these Scriptures could not be embraced without a practical expression in conduct, speech, and appearance. We agree. Much talking about the Anabaptist vision where there is little inclination to follow the Anabaptist practice in daily life is disturbing. Defending Anabaptist principles, but living like the world, is a strange mixture indeed.

We are forbidden to walk as other Gentiles walk (Ephesians 4:17). We are not to concern ourselves about what we will eat, drink, or wear as the Gentiles do (Matthew 6:31-33). We are not to fashion ourselves according to our former lusts in ignorance (1 Peter 1:14). The Gentiles will think us strange if we do not follow them, but who wants to share in

their destiny? (1 Peter 4:3-5). We are not to be externally adorned with gold, pearls, or immodest, costly, or fashionable attire of the world (1 Timothy 2:8-10; 1 Peter 3:3-4). We are called to bear the reproach of Christ (Hebrews 13:13). We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

OUR PRESENT STATE

Many brethren will agree our denomination is skidding toward worldliness, but it appears no one knows how to remedy the problem. Too many seem to shake their heads in despair and say it is no use.

Today there is a speedy departure from nearly every distinctive principle and practice held by the Mennonite Church. We have members today who think more of money than of the riches of grace in Christ Jesus. Some are more interested in sports than in things spiritual. Some are more interested in organized Mennonite ball teams than they are in Mennonite revival. Some Mennonites wear gold rings and other jewelry, which bespeaks a proud heart and a desire to look like the world. Some Mennonite women disregard the Scriptures and cut their hair, paint their lips, and patronize beauty parlors.

Laxity in teaching the devotional covering, and the practice of wearing it only for public worship, has resulted in worldly hairstyles. Attaching a small covering during worship misses the intent of this ordinance of God. Is the covering a sign of divine headship only in times of public worship? That makes the covering appear to be a denominational tradition rather than a Scriptural requirement.

Many Mennonites pursue pleasure and attend places of worldly entertainment; some even justify dancing and social drinking. Many look so much like the world that no one would suspect them of being the spiritual descendants of Anabaptists. They do not want to expose themselves to the world as Christians or to speak to the world about our great salvation.

Some preachers tell stories about plainly dressed hypocrites in a way that undermines conviction for nonconformity. In certain communities laymen who avoid the fashions and wear distinctive clothing are

assumed to be hypocrites. But isn't an inconsistency by a professing Christian in distinctive clothing just as wrong for a professing Christian dressed like the world? We read of wolves in sheep's clothing, but never the reverse.

This pressure against distinctive attire leads some to call it ministers' garb, a distinct denial of the Anabaptist principle of brotherhood. The Anabaptist ministers did not dress differently from other members. If we go to clerical garb, it is only a matter of time until it will be generally discarded. Some Mennonite ministers have discarded it already. If our leaders follow the world, members will soon feel they have as much liberty as their leaders assume. Many have already reached that conclusion.

In some cases church members affected by labor unions would rather violate the principle of nonresistance than lose their jobs; and out of sympathy for them, the church allows them to continue as members in good standing.

The radio puts strange religious voices and ideas into our homes and provides fun and foolishness for our children. And still worse, some members who are not yet bold enough to install televisions in their own homes have no conscience about going to their neighbors and looking at what the world, the flesh, and the devil have to offer them. It chills me to say "Mennonite ball players," "Mennonite card players," "Mennonite moviegoers," "Mennonite dancers," or "Mennonite pool players." If we must become accustomed to such terms, I fear we will soon discover that other works of the flesh will also accompany this quest for pleasure.

What about church attendance? Entertainment and other social activities bring out the crowds. But attendance slumps at mission or prayer meetings and other spiritual meetings. And young people are generally absent. What about worship and the reading of the Word and prayer in our homes? What about gifts for missions and relief work as compared with our people's earnings as a whole? What about the money being spent for extravagant cars, house furnishings, and other items that are not consistent with people who are "pilgrims and strangers" in this world? What about conducting church fairs and auctions to sup-

plement the treasury of the Lord?

What about the trend away from congregational singing and the pressure for instrumental music in worship? Admiration for beauty is fast leading Mennonites down the road other denominations have gone, until there is more interest in the aesthetic than in the celestial. Youth are being trained in musical instruments to be culturally accomplished; and who is developing a conscience that will keep these skills out of worship services?

Where are the warning voices of past decades, and what has become of our church standards against worldly amusements? Why are ministers of the Gospel satisfied to allow their people to continue worldward? Have they forgotten to watch for their souls as they that must give an account to the Chief Shepherd? We need men of conviction like the Prophets Ezra, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos, bold men of God who did not fear the faces of men or the opposition of the devil. We need fewer Elis who would compromise with evil rather than face a showdown.

Are we after quality or quantity in the kingdom of God? Can we hold nonresistance and other precious truths and give up nonconformity to the world? The Quakers, the Church of the Brethren, and parts of the Mennonite Church could not do it—neither can anyone today.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

One thing is certain: this worldward drift will not correct itself. People will not just get tired of their course and return to a more Scriptural practice. It is late, my brethren, but not too late if we will rise up in the strength of the Lord. It cannot be by might nor by power, but must be by the Spirit of the Lord who will lift up a standard when the enemy comes in like a flood.

The first requirement is an awakened conscience regarding the Word and will of God and our departure from them. This awakened conscience must first appear in our preachers. Without their support and conviction, very little can be accomplished. We hear

a good deal about the crucifixion of the flesh, but the Bible requires the crucifixion of the world as well, and this enemy has not received much attention in recent years. The Scriptures quoted in the beginning of this discussion have not become obsolete, nor will the Lord overlook our failure to follow them.

In the second place, a program of dynamic preaching by men of God endued with Spirit-prompted conviction will produce results. Through Bible conferences at strategic places and with definite teaching on Christian life and practice, our conferences could be revived and return to a Biblical position including simplicity of life and plainness of attire.

While we have increased conviction for non-resistance, there is a growing disregard for separation. These inconsistencies will eventually lead youth away from the doctrine of nonresistance, because nonresistance is in reality an aspect of nonconformity to the world. The F.B.I. has difficulty reconciling conscientious objection to war with the worldly practices of some young Mennonites in their quest for sports, worldly amusements, and an evident lack of spirituality.

In the third place, several teams of brethren of conviction on this subject could be made available to help conferences that desire to return to a more conservative and consistent position on nonconformity to the world. Unless we are “pilgrims and strangers” in heart and practice toward the world, we will become “strangers and foreigners” to the things of God.

In the fourth place, our official periodicals could promote more vigorously this lost conviction through a definite discussion regarding the world, the course of this age, the benefit of the simple life, the faith and practice of the Anabaptists and early Mennonites, the snares and tricks of the devil, and other fundamental and related truths.

In the fifth place, a series of lessons on the non-conformed life would also prove helpful. Congregations could study this important subject in Sunday school or Wednesday evening Bible studies.

In the sixth place, the church should renew her

responsibility to provide regulation for her members in line with Gospel principles, and she should exercise gentle but firm discipline. The Bible teaches and history shows that both a conviction of Bible truth and a church discipline are needed to preserve Scriptural applications of Bible principles. When the church surrenders her God-given authority to direct her members according to that “which becometh godliness,” sensual and immoral fashion designers will provide regulations that will result in indecency, immodesty, moral degeneracy, and general apostasy.

It appears many Mennonites are at the forks of the road on this question of nonconformity to the world. If the Mennonite Church does nothing, then the present worldward drift will continue unchecked. The conservative congregations scattered throughout our conferences will ultimately be smothered by the increasing tide of worldliness. Others will continue the Anabaptist testimony of separation from the state and the world.

Shall the Mennonite Church continue to be a world-denying and nonconforming church, or shall we surrender to the world and go with the crowd—now, and in the day of judgment?

—J. L. Stauffer, *adapted*