

Two Watchwords...

Separation and Engagement

by Paul H. Yoder

Can we have these two watchwords at the same time? Do we need to exclude the one to be faithful to the other? Perhaps one or the other of the words in the title have, either consciously or unconsciously, become a kind of watchword for us, as both can be scriptural or both can be far off base. The watchwords affect our thinking and decisions. Neither word will satisfy our longing for God. Life in Christ Jesus gives meaning to either one, or both, though they seem contradictory.

Consider separation as we have known it historically. The Israelites, as descendants of Jacob and of Abraham, were separated from the Gentiles, and were forbidden to mix with heathen nations. *You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.* Lev. 20:23,24 (NIV) Israel was called as a nation to demonstrate God's ways among heathen nations.

A distinct kind of separation is implied in New Testament scriptures. We are "in the world, but not of it" (John 17:14-17) *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.* James 4:4 *"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."* 2 Cor. 6:17 *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Rom. 12:2 (NIV)

In Reformation times Anabaptists suffered severe persecution from some churches, and from the State, as they loyally lived out their understanding of the scriptures. There has been persecution in varying degrees in our past. We became the quiet in the land. We became close within the congregations and detailed in expectations of the believers. We meant to be God's people.

As with Israel, we were separated from the ungodly. A by-product of close congregational life was the possibility of tensions about details of application, which too often resulted in splits. Historically we thought of separation as being aloofness from social and cultural influences and events in society around us. We developed practices that became traditions. We felt a protection, security, and safety in our withdrawal. We did not become freely involved in community events. We meant to be separated unto God in all of life. We saw changes as drifting towards the world. We saw involve-

ments in the cultural events of our society as exposure to evil influences and as poor stewardship of time. In many cases it would have been considered a violation of the principle of separation. Is it not true that separation could become a substitute for a living faith in, and relationship with Christ?

Engagement as a watchword brings us to another aspect of the separated life. Cultures vary, change, and fail. The Gospel is eternal and is to be presented in every culture. Christ came to minister to all peoples. People in any culture can become God's people. The Gospel accepted in a culture needs to be lived out in that culture. Missionaries try hard to find ways into the community and cultural events of the culture in which they live. They seek to make friends and develop relationships. It is true that many people are won to Jesus by friends who take following Jesus seriously.

Engagement includes accepting and understanding the cultural activities of the people. To do this requires some mingling and interaction with the people. It puts engagement into a different light. Engagement is being on the front line, at the cutting edge. Some believers may not be safe there. Relating on the cutting edge requires knowing what one believes and having strength to stand alone. Is it not true that engagement could become a substitute for a living faith and relationship with Christ?

A living relationship with Christ comes through a living faith in Christ. A living faith implies an acknowledgment of one's own personal helplessness, and of the all-sufficient death of the Son of God. Living faith in Christ accepts him as SAVIOUR and LORD, and following Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit becomes the priority of life.

How can the believer embrace both words? Scriptural engagement means exposure to much evil but it never weakens the call to holiness of life. It will never nullify the call of Jesus to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and the fact that the believer is bent for heaven. Wandering away from the light of God's word is still drifting. God still looks for holy living in the midst of an ungodly generation, an unashamed following of Jesus and all that that means. We are stewards of the everlasting gospel "and are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." Ephesians 2 :20 Can we be faithful stewards of the lasting Gospel among the changing cultures in our world and also know the meaning of scriptural engagement and scriptural separation. I think we must. **BB**

Paul H. Yoder is a retired CMC minister and lives in Grantsville, Maryland. He attends Maple Glen Mennonite Church.