

Faith Pulpit

What Became of Personal Separation?

1 John 2:15–17 “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

Not long ago as two pastors were in conversation one asked the other if he could think of any practice not specifically forbidden in the Bible, that we avoid simply because it is worldly. Neither could think of one. We have come a long way.

Baptists used to be separatists, meaning primarily separation of church and state, but also separation of the church from apostasies, and separation of the believer from the world. In recent years separation of church and state has seemed to cloud in our thinking, and the humanists have used the slogan to exclude the faith from government education. As to separation of the church from apostasy, we are under intense pressure to ignore doctrinal absolutes and to make common cause with sacramentalists, pietists, liberals and pagans. Even churches that have not been swept into association with such types are using their music and seem to be regarding biblical doctrines as options.

As to personal separation of the believer from the world, our great shift in the last half century has probably come from several causes, but people old enough to remember must agree that a great shift has taken place. It is as if the old standards were once on the table, and now the table top has tilted, and everything has slid off. Probably a key reversal has been the astonishing acceptance of Hollywood, this generation's discovery of redeeming social values in the movies. Report has it that yet another Baptist college has abandoned its stand against such, and one may wonder whether from shift in convictions or from weariness in trying to enforce them. But if any influence can be called worldly, which one more than the output of Hollywood? Unless it be the tube, which medium has been more successful in planting the world's ideas and values in Christian minds? If the movies do not represent the world,

what does? To find causes for the current shift, we probably have not far to look.

1. Cooling of the love for God

Scripture puts the love for the Father in inverse proportion to one's love for the world. By a kind of spiritual law as one increases the other goes down. While we may wonder in this case which factor causes the decline in the other, it would seem evident that love for God has diminished along with the yearning after holiness and the love of the Bible. Even those pulpits that avoid feel-good sermons seem to be long on moralizing and short on the doctrinal basics. In churches that rely on fun to get people in, yearning after God in devotion, including self-denial, does not seem to be a goal.

2. Addiction to pleasure

One might suppose that "Who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17) is the only verse in the Bible. Some eighteen centuries ago Tertullian remarked that those who reject our religion are more often turned away by dangers to their pleasures than by dangers to their lives.

If it is hard to recruit young believers to life service, especially to the mission field, little wonder. It seems common to think of pleasures as something to which we have a right. A generation ago the Modernists tried to hold their young by bringing jukeboxes into the church activity room. Now comes the report of a Fundamentalist church bringing in wide-screen TV so that the saints can watch Sunday afternoon football. How many Fundamentalist churches would look askance at the idea?

3. Media brainwashing

About 1925 came radio, and about 1947–52 came television, ten years later in color. Any serious analysis must reveal that their net effect has been subversive of the gospel. The advertisers understand the principle that ideas are dynamic and tend to express themselves in action.

The Christians have barely grasped that principle and flatter themselves on their ability to watch and not be affected by all they see and hear. But what else has done more to explain the Christians' love for what their parents rejected out of hand?

4. A distorted view of legalism

I class as a separate cause that whole school of preaching that deplores what it regards as legalism. Any divine command is sooner or later going to affront Adam's nature. Some, however, have discovered the convenient slogan-word "legalism," to label anything that conflicts with their desires. This word then opens new vistas to professed believers who are uneasy about their love for the world. A certain mind-set asks, "As a Christian, how far from God can I live without actually lapsing my fire insurance

policy?” Acts of devotion, sacrifice and self-denial are irksome to the flesh, and now to call those things by a bad name can convey that there is something morbid about living close to God. The game is to avoid asking what the word “legalism” actually means, and to assume that its true definition will still suit the purpose of rationalizing lusts and pride.

5. Infiltration

Nearly forty years ago Harold Ockenga in his famous Manifesto said that the New Evangelicalism had a strategy of infiltration rather than of separation. How well his people infiltrated the Liberal churches is a question; but they seem to have succeeded at infiltrating the Fundamentalists. A similar analysis appears in Matthew 13, where Jesus warned that the good seed would produce wheat among thorns, meaning that any harvest would be choked by the anxiety of this age and the deceitfulness of riches (Luke adds “riches and pleasures of this life”) The next parable deals with the tares, the false Christians planted among the real ones.

Jude 4 also warns against infiltrators: “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained unto this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”Indeed.

It is common to lament the ineffectiveness of our evangelism. Even the aggressive churches seem to add but few of their converts to baptized membership. Many so-called converts appeared to have made only a casual pledge of allegiance to Christ, and that without doctrinal understanding. May we not suppose that part of the problem lies in Christians whose love for the world leaves them looking so much like the unchurched they are trying to reach?

There are times in a school that a simple regulation serves a purpose. But how do we forbid worldliness? How do we eradicate lusts and pride? Do we not do better to encourage love for the Lord? Can we not then trust the expulsive power of that love, even as we continue to preach against the world’s more blatant forms and appeals? But until we find ways to renounce the world, will we not grieve the saints, quiet the voice of the Spirit in sinners, and hold off God’s blessing?

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A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.