

## THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

In his parable of the tares, Jesus said "the field is the world; and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:38).

Across the ages there has often been confusion as to just what should be the relationship of God's church and the world. Jesus did not endorse the world as sufficiently good, nor did he condemn it as totally evil. He lived in the world but continually worked to reform it by bringing men back to God and the divine standards. It is our duty to reflect the same attitude toward the world as did the Son of God.

### Christ Intended For His Church To Live In The Midst Of The World

"He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; and the field is the world, and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom..." (Matthew 13:37-38). Clearly Christ has placed us in the world for a divine purpose. At his departure, his final charge to his disciples was, "Go ye **into all the world**, and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). They were to be his witnesses unto the "uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Disciples and congregations have always been tempted to withdraw from society into a controlled environment of their own in order to escape from the wicked world. In the early centuries, thousands of sincere but misguided disciples turned to monasticism; living in caves and in the desert; dwelling alone on pinnacles to escape temptations. Their heirs are yet seen in Catholicism's monasteries, the Amish and other groups which live lives of separatism. The Shakers were a flourishing group of "reclusive" worshipers in the 1800s. Their total reclusion from the world was their ruin. The last Shaker died in 1920. Today, their communes are preserved as museums to their memory.

We of the Lord's church are not totally immune to this temptation. Frequently we encounter a stained glass mentality: that views the church as a fortress with high walls, our mission being to keep our people away from the world and the world away from us. However, the early Christians did not pursue such a course. The great Tertullian of Carthage wrote to this point, who are not Brahmins or Indian devotees who live naked in the woods or recluse in exile from other men. We avoid not your forums, your markets, your baths, your shops, your forges, your inns, your fairs. We are one person with you in all worldly commerce".

While the Lord has stationed us in the world, we must not partake of the sins of the world. Jesus said in his prayer, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world: (John 17:16). The Lord's church is not a worldly kingdom like our United States, nor does it use worldly methods to accomplish its goals (John 18:36). We have a definite purpose for being here. The Lord said "I chose you, and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16). Like Legion whom Christ healed, we must "Go to (our) house unto (our) friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for (us) and how he had mercy on (us)" (Mark 15:19). So our task in the world is to preach the gospel, gather in the converts and plant colonies of disciples in every community. We must maintain his standard of living before the lost world and glorify his holy name (Matthew 5:13-16).

### The Church Is Against The Wicked World

Many people of the world will hate God's people. Our Lord taught us, "If the world hateth you, ye know that it hath hated me before it hated you... because you are not of the world... therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). Since our true citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20) we must view ourselves as pilgrims, strangers and sojourners in the world. "Such things make it evident that we are seeking after a country of (our) own" (Hebrews 11:13-14). As pilgrims we will "abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul... having (our) behavior seemly among the Gentiles..." (I Peter 2:11).

A third century disciple wrote an **Address To Diognetus** which beautifully describes our relationship to the world:

"For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country or speech or customs. For they do not live somewhere in cities of their own or use some distinctive language or practice as peculiar manner of life. They have no learning discovered by the thought and reflection of inquisitive men, nor are they the authors of any human doctrine,

like some men. They live in Greek and barbarian cities, as each man's lot is cast and follow the local customs in dress and food and the rest of their living, their own way of life which they display is wonderful and admittedly strange. They live in their native lands, but like foreigners. They take part in everything like citizens, and endure everything like aliens. Every foreign country is their native land, and every native land a foreign country. Like everyone else, they marry, they have children, but they do not expose their infants. They set a common table, but not a common bed. They find themselves in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They remain on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the established laws but in their own lives they surpass the laws. They love all men, and are persecuted by all men. They are unknown, and they are condemned; they are put to death, and they are made alive. They are poor, and they make many rich. They are in need of all things. They are dishonored, and in their dishonor they are glorified. They are abused, and they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless. They are insulted, and they do honor. when they do good, they are punished as evildoers: when they are punished, they rejoice as though they were being made alive. By the Jews they are warred upon as aliens, and by the Greeks they are persecuted, and those who hate them cannot give a reason for their hostility.

To state it briefly, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is scattered through all the parts of the body, and Christians are, through all the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, but it is not of the body; Christians also live in the world, but they are not of the world... The flesh hates the soul and wars against it, though it is done no wrong, because they oppose its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh which hates it, and loves its members, and Christians love those who hate them. The soul is shut up in the body, but itself holds the body together; and Christians are kept in the world as in a prison, but themselves hold the world together. The soul, though it is immortal lives in a mortal tent, and Christians live as strangers in perishable ones, waiting for immortality in heaven. When the soul is badly treated in food and drink it is made better; and Christians when they are punished increase the more in number every day. To so high a station God has appointed them, and it is not right for them to refuse it."

We must continually remind ourselves that "we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one: (I John 5:19). The world' sinful lusts and pleasures are forbidden to us. "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: (I John 2:15). Friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4). As light and darkness are antagonistic to each other, so is the world and the church. Each has a different lord (I John 5:19). The allegiance of all men is sought by each. The lifestyle and philosophy of each are mutually antagonistic.

At times the world will manifest different attitudes toward the church. It may militantly persecute or it may only scorn and ridicule. It may treat the church as archaic and unworthy of notice as sinners create their own worldly, evil environment. Such is common today in America. The world may seek to take over the church as did Constantine or as Communism did the Russian Orthodox Church. Some worldlings would manipulate the church for their own purposes and ends. Rarely does the world allow the church to function unaccosted. When the church finds itself at peace with the world she had best heed the warning of her Lord: "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For in the same manner did their fathers to the false prophets". (Luke 6:26).

Not only must we abstain from the sins of the world, we must cry out against them (Ephesians 5:11-12). It is a tragedy when the church absorbs the values of the world and defends the sins of the world. Many denominational churches were chief supporters of slavery and later segregation and sadly so did some of ours. Liberal Protestant churches openly promote abortion, defend homosexuality and the panders of sexually explicit movies, magazines and books. Catholicism proudly engages in the liquor and gambling business. Have they not read Paul's admonition, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21)?

### **The Church Must Serve The World On Christ's Behalf**

When the apostles competed for station and honor, Christ showed them "whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 20:27). \* Our principle service to the world is to proclaim the gospel plan of salvation to all men (Matthew 28:19-20). "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God was entreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:20).

\* We demonstrate by our lives the superiority and desirability of the Christian way. "In the midst of a crooked and perverse generation... (we) are seen as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

\* We minister to the needs of suffering people in the world doing "good toward all men, and especially toward them of the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:10). When we meet the needs of our fellowmen, we do it unto our Christ and shall be so rewarded (Matthew 25:34-40).

\* We serve as a moral conscience to the world, prompting men to do the right and accusing them when they do wrong. Like Jesus, the world will hate us when we testify of its evil works (John 7:7). Thus it is essential that our manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27).

\* We constantly seek to permeate the world with our Christian influence. We flavor our society as salt does meat (Matthew 13:33).

\* Whether we be teachers or craftsmen, businessmen, homemakers or students we are priests of God on service in his world "showing forth the excellencies of him who called (us) out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9).

In closing I offer this challenge from Paul, as rendered by J.B. Phillips: "Don't let the world around squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds..." (Romans 12:1). May the church of today not forget its proper place and duty in the world.

\*The author is indebted to Dwight Stevenson's book **The Church What and Why** for the thoughts of this lesson.