

# GODWARD or WORLDWARD — WHICH?

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## **GODWARD OR WORLDWARD — WHICH? FOREWORD**

“Godward or Worldward — Which?” was written in 1953 by the late John L. Stauffer at the request of The Executive Committee of The Mennonite General Conference for The General Council on which Brother Stauffer then served as a member.

It was the conviction of the publishers that the article conveys such a profound prophetic warning and challenge that it should be published for distribution.

Slight revisions have been made, related particularly to illustrations used by the author. A sixth point on “What Can Be Done” has been added.

The basic principles of the article remain unchanged. May the worthy influence of this article and its author never die.

## **GODWARD or WORLDWARD — WHICH?**

The Mennonite Church in America today is facing one of the greatest spiritual tests in her history because of the tolerance and democratic privileges extended by our Government toward minorities. This tolerance tends to disarm us and make us believe that the world is not as evil as the Bible pictures it. Instead of standing out as non-participants in the affairs of this world, we are being Americanized more and more. We are living in a century of great change, and our application of Scriptural principles are being greatly challenged. The principles themselves have not changed and we have a responsibility to preserve the principles in our generation. Furthermore their preservation depends upon practice in daily living.

What I have to say is the result of observation, experience, testimony of others, and the record of history.

To be conformed or not conformed to the surrounding nations was Israel's problem number one. Divine ownership carries with it the right of the owner to give direction as to the use of His purchased property (or people). God gave definite instructions to Israel regarding intermarriage with the heathen, social intermingling, worship, and attire. The things that happened in Israel are types or ensamples for us today (1 Corinthians 10:6–11). We can tempt Christ as they did, we can become spiritual adulterers with the world as they were fornicators with the heathen and we can murmur against the standards of God's Word as they did and thereby 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 that God wanted to teach them and consequently they became "not my people." They were forsaken of God and dispersed among the nations. While Israel never went back into Egypt, except an insurgent minority at the time of the Babylonian captivity, yet "in heart they turned back into Egypt."

The New Testament teachings on separation from the world and conformity to Christ were clear to our Anabaptist forefathers. They had no difficulty to understand the following Scriptures and to make a practical application of them to daily life, even though their belief and practice cost them their homes, the loss of all things earthly, 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 religion is to be true and pure from 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 was God's will that the death of Christ should liberate us from this present evil world.  
Galatians 1:4
6. We are no more a part of this world after regeneration than Christ was 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 shorn. 1 Corinthians 11:1–16

These Scriptures cannot be believed and lived without an outward expression in our conduct, speech, and our appearance. Our Anabaptist forefathers so believed and so lived. I am considerably disturbed by the much talk about the Anabaptist vision where there is little inclination to follow the Anabaptist practice of these principles in daily life. The practice of Bible principles always results in the development of a pattern of life that affects our words, our deeds, and our appearance. To defend Anabaptist principles and live like Protestants, who live 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 shall 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 fellows 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 ornamented with gold, pearls, immodest, costly or fashionable attire of the world (1 Timothy 2:8–10; 1 Peter 3:3–4). We are to go forth unto Christ without the camp, bearing His reproach (Hebrews 13:13). We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

## OUR PRESENT STATE

It is not hard to find brethren who will agree that we are on skids toward worldliness, but it appears no one knows what to do about it, or where to take hold of 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. There are those who are more interested in the sports and the progress of the big leagues than they are about things spiritual. There are those who are more interested in organized Mennonite congregational ball teams than they are in Mennonite revival. We have brethren and sisters who ornament themselves with gold rings, and other jewelry, all of which bespeaks a proud heart and a desire to be up-to-date in their appearance with the world. We have sisters who disregard the Scriptures and cut their hair, paint their lips, and patronize the beauty parlor. Laxity in teaching the devotional covering and the practice of wearing it only for public worship is now paying off in our sisters adopting the worldly styles of hairdressing of all types that makes them acceptable in the eyes of the world, while the attachment of a small covering in times of worship appears as a ridiculous appendage or afterthought, rather than an ordinance of God. Is the covering a sign of Divine headship only in times of public worship? The practice of wearing it only in our own services makes the covering appear as a denominational rather than a Scriptural requirement. The protective headgear must be that which will complement not only the wearing of the veiling but the Christian's total separation unto God.

We have many members who are lovers of pleasure and who frequent worldly places of entertainment, some even justify the dance and the social glass. Many of our men and women are so conformed to the world in their attire that they pass for the elite, the politicians, or the sporting men of the world. No one would suspect them to be the spiritual descendants of the Anabaptist. We can easily understand why people so attired have no testimony for God. They do not want to expose themselves to the world as Christians or to speak to the world about the so great salvation. To do so, living as they do, would either alarm or amuse the world. The practice of some of our preachers and evangelists telling stories about some plainly dressed hypocrite is rapidly paying off to the discrediting of the

nonconformity garb. There are communities where members express themselves as though all laymen who wear a distinctive garb are hypocrites. On the other hand, any conduct that is inconsistent for a professing Christian who wears a distinctive garb is equally wrong for those who profess to be Christian although conformed to the world. How many stop to think that a hypocrite in a garb of nonconformity is in reality a testimony to the integrity of the garb, but a severe indictment of those who oppose it. Hypocrites always seek the best cover obtainable.

We read of wolves in sheep's clothing, but never the reverse. This pressure against distinctive attire is leading people to speak of it as a ministerial garb. A ministerial garb would be a distinct denial of the Anabaptist principle of brotherhood. They made no distinction between a minister and a lay-brother as far as distinctive attire was concerned. If we go the clerical garb way, it is only a question of time until it will be generally discarded, as some of our ministers have already done. If our leaders conform themselves to the world, it will only be a question of time until our sisters will feel they have as much liberty as their leadership assumes. Many have already demonstrated this type of thinking. The labor union pressure is heavy and we have members who would rather violate the principle of nonresistance than lose their job, and out of pity for them, the church continues them as members in good standing. What shall I say about radio influences that put strange religious voices and ideas into our homes? It provides fun and foolishness for our children. And still worse, some of our people who are not yet bold enough to install television in their own homes, have no conscience about going to their neighbors and looking at the things that the world, the flesh, and the devil have to offer them through this modern device. I have also learned that television is actually installed in some communities among the membership in some conferences. Will we waive our standards against movies, prize fights, murder scenes, etc., now that television has come into some of our homes? It chills me to say Mennonite ball players, Mennonite card players, Mennonite movie goers, Mennonite dancers, Mennonite pool players. I fear if we must become accustomed to such terms, we will soon discover that the other works of the flesh also accompany this quest for pleasure.

What shall I say about attendance at spiritual meetings, unless it be on Sunday morning? Meetings where there are pictures or other social

features seem to bring out the crowd. Mission meetings, prayer meetings, and other meetings of a spiritual nature are limping in attendance with a general absence of young people. What about worship and the reading of the Word and prayer in our homes? What about our gifts for mission and relief work as compared with the earnings of our people as a whole? What about the amount of money that is constantly being spent for extravagant cars, automobile and house furnishings, and other items that are not consistent with people of the simple life who are “pilgrims and strangers” in this world. What about conducting church fairs and auctions to supplement the treasury of the Lord?

What about the trend away from congregational singing and pressure for instrumental music in worship? Our admiration for the beautiful and aesthetic is fast leading us down the road that other denominations have gone before us, until we care more for the aesthetic than for the celestial. Youth must be trained in piano and other musical instruments in order that they may be accomplished in culture; and who is creating a conscience that will keep this acquired skill in the field of entertainment, and not admit it into our worship service within another decade or before?

Where are the warning voices of past decades, and what has become of our church standards against worldly amusements? Are we satisfied as ministers of the Gospel to allow our people to continue worldward? Have we forgotten that we are 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 spirits for God who feared not the face of men nor the opposition of the devil. We need fewer Eli's who could compromise with evil rather than face a showdown.

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

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

This is a practical question at this time. One thing is certain, this worldward drift will not correct itself. It will not spend itself through people getting tired of their course and then 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.

One of the first requirements is an awakened conscience regarding the Word and will of God and about our departures from them. The Scriptures quoted in the beginning of this discussion are the Word of God and we have no assurance that they have become obsolete, or that the Lord will overlook our failure to subscribe to them. This awakened conscience must first appear in our preachers. Without the support and conviction of our preachers, doubtless 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.

In the second place, a program of dynamic preaching by men of God endowed with heaven-approved conviction will produce results. Through the introduction of Bible conferences at strategic places and with definite teaching on the nature of the Christian life relating to faith and practice, our conferences could be revived and come back to a conservative position including plainness of attire and simplicity of life.

An illustration as to what can be done when our people are awakened and conviction takes hold of them is demonstrated in reference to nonresistance. The Second World War taught us that nonresistance was approximately 40% gone, but continuous peace conferences, and the production of literature on the subject have produced results not only in this country, but also abroad.

While we have increased conviction for nonresistance, we have a growing disregard for separation and the inconsistencies will eventually

lead our youth away from the doctrine of nonresistance, because nonresistance is in reality a phase of nonconformity to the world on the issue of warfare and violence. The F.B.I. has difficulty at this time to reconcile conscientious objection to war with the worldly practices of some of our young brethren 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 who 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 organ 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 say twelve lessons on the nonconformed life would also prove helpful in congregations. These could be made available and advertised and I feel sure that many congregations would be interested in giving study to this important subject.

In the sixth place, the church should renew her emphasis on the church’s responsibility to provide regulation for her members in line with Gospel principles and exercise gentle but firm discipline. The Bible teaches and the records of history show that it requires both a conviction of Bible truth and a church discipline to hold Bible truth in practice effectually. When the church surrenders her God given authority to give guidance to her members according to that “which becometh Godliness” the sensual and immoral designers of fashion will provide regulations which will result in indecency, immodesty, moral degeneracy and general apostasy.

It appears we are at the forks of the road on this question of nonconformity to the world. If the Mennonite Church does nothing, then the associating together of congregations from the East and West, the

North and the South will mean that the present drift will continue unchecked. Those conservative congregations scattered throughout our conferences will ultimately be smothered by the increasing tide of worldliness through these contacts, through our student bodies, through summer camps and institutes, and the various other meetings and conferences. We will find others who will continue the Anabaptist testimony of the separation of the church from both 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

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