

Against Isolationism: The Church's Relation To the World

by Edward W. H. Vick

Is there such a difference between the world and the church that if we are faithful to the church we can have nothing to do with the world? Can we say that the world is the sphere of ignorance and the church the sphere of knowledge, that the world is the sphere of darkness and evil, and the church the sphere of light and goodness? Can we say that persons in the world are outsiders and we are insiders, that they are the lost and we are saved?

Let us take as our point of departure that this position of radical division between believer and nonbeliever is based on the proper and necessary insight that there is some important sense in which the one is different from, even opposed to, the other. There is separation between believer and unbeliever. But that is only one side of the matter, only half the truth. There is also community between believer and unbeliever. That side of the matter is important, too. The question we need to ask is: *In what sense* separation, and *in what sense* community?

First, we must sort out what we mean by "world," since the term is used in apparently opposite ways. When we look at the world's

beauty, we sing, "This is my Father's world." When we look at its sin and ugliness, we call Satan the "prince of this world." Jesus himself said his disciples were to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. They were to be worldly (in-the-world) and not worldly (of-the-world) at the same time. Is there, then, more than one meaning of the term "world" and of the corresponding adjective "worldly"? It will help if we go briefly to the New Testament and clarify how the expression "world" is used there.

The New Testament uses the term "world" in several senses. We shall distinguish three of these.

1) "World" stands for *the whole created order*. God created the world, that is "the heavens and the earth," the totality of what is. Jesus, according to John 17:5, shared the glory of the Father "before *the world* was made." "World" here simply means "creation," that which is other than God but which was brought into being by God, and continues to be dependent upon God. In this sense, the term "world" is neutral as far as evil is concerned.

2) The term "world" may also mean *men as they group themselves in social unities and institutions*. The clan or the nation would be examples. It is as men live in such social unities that the demand of God is made on them. They may respond either positively or negatively. Jesus said, "I have come as light into *the world* that

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whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:47). This is the world of human relationships, united and structured in specific ways. Again, this is a neutral sense of the term. It is the world in which, by virtue of being human, we necessarily participate.

3) When the rejection of Jesus Christ has taken place, the world becomes *the realm hostile to God and independent of him*. Evil permeates the structures of society, human life becomes alienated from God. "World" now comes to mean man unbelieving, man at war with God, man hating and resisting good. In this sense,

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"world" means sin and sinfulness; it is to be shunned by the disciple. Says the author of First John: "We know that we are of God and the whole world is in the power of the evil one" (5:19). He also writes: "Little children, you are of God . . . they are of the world" (4:4, 5). Here the term is no longer neutral. World is evil.

This brief reference to certain New Testament passages (and the evidence could be much more extensively examined) indicates that we cannot simply say, "The Christian has nothing to do with the world." We must say this in a certain sense, and yet at the same time we must urge that Christians should participate in the world, again understanding what it is that we are saying.

Why must the believer share in the world's work and participate in its activities? The fundamental theological answer is: "Because it is God's world; He is its creator and goal; there is goodness here." If we ask, Why must the Christian separate himself from the world? the

theological answer is: "Because and to the extent that the world is opposed to God, resists his demands and refuses his revelation." When "world" represents what is opposed to the Kingdom of God (the third sense listed above), it stands for all that should be shunned by the believer. It is then simply equivalent to evil.

As for the former senses of "world," we must remember that whether we are Christian or not we live in the sphere of human relationships. We share in the structures of the world. Unless we live in an artificial subculture our own religious community has created, we have to work in the world in order to live. Not only that, but we *all* willingly share, indeed take for granted, the benefits which the modern world has handed down to us: cars, time-saving devices, medicine, communications, etc. Moreover, we are citizens of this country or that. We pay our taxes and we vote or we refuse to vote, either way participating in the structures of society. We cannot escape our social involvement. To do nothing, to refuse to recognize our involvement, is also involvement, even if it is negative.

So it is extreme, indeed, to hold that believer and nonbeliever have nothing in common. The Gospel says something to our *human* condition, and that is a condition we go on sharing after faith is born.

We shall now briefly expound the implications of the following propositions:

Sin is in the believer.

The believer is in the church.

The church is in the world.

The world is sinful.

The world is in the church.

The church is sinful.

No believer has to be reminded that he has difficulty in doing good. But we may need reminding that the reason for this is that we find it easy to respond to sin, that sin, so to speak, dwells *in* us (Romans 7) *wherever we go*. One of the places we find ourselves is in the believing community, in the church. This means that, as elsewhere, sin manifests itself within the church. So, bearing in mind the different meanings of the term "world," we cannot say simply: world sinful, church holy. And it is naive to think we can diminish or eliminate temptation by withdrawing from the world. By withdrawing, we simply change the context of our sinfulness. We need to remember these words written to the

early Christians, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 John 1:8).

Sin takes particular forms in different contexts, but a change of context does not eliminate sin. Indeed, the forms it takes inside the church whether in the individual or in the religious community as a whole, will have striking parallels to those of the worldly community from which we may have tried to flee. Pride, selfishness, lovelessness, unreasonableness, thirst for power, neglect of the feelings of others, injustice, lack of charity, prejudice, greed, monopolizing, cowardice, lust, failure of nerve, indolence, egoistic introversion, self-centered extroversion. They are the same sins wherever they show up.

And sin is no less sin because done by believers. What is the difference between adultery in a believer's bed and adultery in a non-believer's? What is the difference between a believer's and a nonbeliever's failure to respect the person of another? What is the difference between the corporate selfishness of a business concern and that of a church community that takes an interest in politics only when its own interests are threatened and has no real care for the wider claims of man for justice, for dignity, or for food?

The New Testament does not endorse the distinction between the church without sin and

the world as sinful, even if it might seem to do so upon a superficial reading of the more familiar passages. In the New Testament, the church is constantly to guard itself against its *own* sinfulness. The community's need is to put on Christ, to cast off the works of the flesh—and not to stand aloof in prideful isolation from other men. The world (sin) is in every believer. The world (sin) is in the church. And that is the point of the constant warnings. The church has to fight its own sin!

The danger, then as well as now, is that of making a too-simple distinction between church and world. It is a danger because it leads us astray in two ways: first, to a wrong assessment of where the threat to the church is coming from, and second, to a wrong assessment of how the church is to engage itself in the world in order to make its witness effective.

The question is not whether the church should be in the world or not. The question rather is *how* we are to be there. Once we have overcome the temptation to isolationism, the temptation always to think how we can avoid contact, how we can shape our community so that it never knows how to be among men in a creative and intelligent manner, then we can focus our energies on genuinely creative encounter and participation.