

In the World but not of the World  
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May 11, 2008 PM

There is a true story of a young man Chris McCandless, who once hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the vast wilderness. Four months later his partially-decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters. Why did he do it? Why did this well-liked, successful, young college graduate sacrifice his life in such a bizarre manner?

Chris became increasingly estranged from the world around him. After graduating with distinction from college, one day he simply disappeared. Taking his car and a very few belongings, he journeyed far and wide across America. But even the freedom of the road was too constraining for Chris. Possessions and relationships were just too entangling. So he set his sights on Alaska, a place as far from civilization as a young American could reach. After a hair-raising trip north, he walked out into the Alaskan wilderness woefully unprepared. According to one of the last people who saw Chris alive, "Said he didn't want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody else's help

With ingenuity and determination he managed to survive for four months. But after eating some poisonous roots he became ill and began to lose the strength required for self-preservation. His last journal entry read: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!"

This is a strange story about separation from the world. As tragic story about isolation. Yet how often as Christians do we end up doing something similar. We get so wrapped up in Christian activities that we end up isolating ourselves from the world. We have no meaningful interaction with nonbelievers.

One phrase that is popular in Christian circles is the concept that we are in the world, but not of the world. This phrase come to us from John 17, it is a summary of a portion of Christ's prayer for his disciples.

John 17:13-19

<sup>13</sup>“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the

world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. <sup>14</sup>I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. <sup>15</sup>My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

Within this prayer we have a fine balance. The balance between protection and participation. The balance between avoiding the evils of the world while at the same time interacting with it.

Jesus's prayer indicates that we are to participate in the world

Verse 15 "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world"

Jesus' desire for his followers is not that they isolate themselves from the world. We are not to follow the example of this young man who set off to the Alaskan wilderness. We are not to cut ourselves off from society.

In fact Jesus indicates that he has deliberately sent his followers into the world.

Verse 18 "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."

Our lives should reflect the exact pattern of Christ. When we consider that Christ left the community of heaven, the intimacy of presence with his father and came down to earth to take on human form we recognize that for God, loving mission is a greater priority for God than intimate communion. God has the intense desire to include others in the beautiful relationships that he enjoys. God was completely self sufficient. He did not need to create this world. He did not need to save this world, yet because of his love, he chose to create and to redeem a people for himself.

Perhaps it is not fair to say that loving mission is a greater priority than intimate communion, because the goal of mission is to include people in worshipful communion. Perhaps we should say that God's heart is so big that he wants all people to experience the joy of a loving relationship with him.

But the point remains, that as the Father sent the Son into the world, so the Son has sent his followers into the world to accomplish the same goal.

If we are to truly model the character of God, we cannot settle for splendid isolation. We cannot be satisfied with worship, rather we need to be so satisfied with worship that we desire to include others in the same joy.

But there are many examples of Christians who have intentionally and accidentally isolated themselves from the world into which Jesus has sent us.

We can think of communities like the Amish or remote monasteries devoted to contemplation and prayer. Sometimes these are set up as ideals. A world free from distraction, where followers of God can enjoy communion with God. But why do these sorts of communities exist, if it is clear that Jesus prayed not that we would be removed from the world.

The rationale or separation comes from the other aspect of this prayer. For in this same passage Jesus also reflects on the fact that his followers do not belong to this world and need to be protected from the evil one.

Verse 14 "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world."

This world hated Christ. It hated him enough to send him to the cross. Jesus was not a product of this world and did not value what this world valued. He was a foreigner and he was rejected. And this same hate, which the world has for Christ is applied to us who follow him. Being renewed spiritually, we too do not belong to this world. We are aliens and strangers here.

And when you take this seriously and add to it verses like James 4:4, you can see that there is a strong calling to be separate.

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.

It is usually the desire to be pure which motivates the Christian to isolate himself from the world. And this is a noble cause. We in fact ought to

protect ourselves from evil. We ought not be conformed to the pattern of this world as we are instructed in Romans 12:1. We do not want to be enemies with God, so we need to protect ourselves from becoming too friendly with the world.

How often do we see people, especially young people, become influenced by our sinful culture and wander from the faith. This world and its thinking leads us to reject God. This world and its desires leads us to disobey God.

And so this is the fine balance. On the one side we must resist the values of this world, but on the other hand we are sent into the world to be a transforming influence.

So practically speaking how do we balance participation and separation? How do we live in this world without becoming its friend?

Recognize the sanctifying power of God's word.

Look at verse 17:

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

This word sanctify, is an important word. To be sanctified is to be made holy. Interestingly, the concept of holiness and sanctification is derived from the idea of being set apart, separated.

God is completely Holy, because he is completely set apart from all created things. There is no one like him. He alone is completely holy. Yet we are called to be holy, we are set apart from the world to belong to God. We are separated unto worship.

This idea is significant in our context because we are talking about how to be appropriately separate from the world. And Jesus prays sanctify them, separate them, set them apart by the truth.

The truth of God, which is here identified as the word of God is the mechanism by which we separate ourselves from the corruption of this world. The same idea is presented to us in Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

So for us to be not of the world, to avoid being conformed to it's pattern, to be sanctified and set apart, we need to be transformed by the truth of God which is the word of God.

The way we separate ourselves from the world is to be governed by the scriptures, which means of course that we have to read and study them.

The amazing thing is that if our mind is set apart by God's truth, the world will have no power over us. If we are set apart in our minds and hearts, no amount of participation in this world will lead us astray. We will not be friends with the world if we are first of all friends with God's word.

We can evaluate the things we read, the things we see on television and the actions of people around us and we can protect ourselves from false beliefs and values.

A second thing is that we should not create for ourselves unnecessary boundaries. The history of the church is full of lists, lists of things that Christians could not do for risk of becoming worldly. Lipstick, cards, smoking, dancing, attending movies and all manner of things have been warned against from the pulpit. Sometimes we make distinctions in the wrong way. People use cards for gambling and when they gamble they drink. Therefore we must avoid cards to show that we are set apart for God. When we do this we create artificial barriers which often only serve to separate us from people.

Back in the days when buttons were first invented, and it became the popular fashion, some Christians maintained that it was inappropriate for Christians to wear buttons, because that was a worldly fashion. The world was vain in their fashions and so Christians should not keep up with style. They became known as hook eye Baptists, because they fastened their clothes with hooks and eyelets and not buttons.

The problem is that rather than separating Christians from worldly values, these artificial boundaries only served to separate Christians from worldly

people. In our zeal to avoid the world we have forgotten that our mission is to go into the world as Christ set the example.

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul makes it quite plain that in our zeal to avoid sin we must not avoid sinners.

<sup>9</sup>I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— <sup>10</sup>not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. <sup>11</sup>But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

When we are governed by the word of truth, we will be able to associate with sinful people without embracing their sinful values.

There may be a time in your life where you do have to separate yourself from certain people and certain places. If a person is influencing you to reject God, you may have to part ways. This is often the case for new believers who are coming out of difficult lifestyles. You may need to spend some time being sanctified by the word before you are strong enough to engage the world.

Finally let me encourage you to more purposefully embrace your mission. Recognize that you have been sent into this world to be a transforming influence. As Christ left heaven to save the world, so we are to leave our comfortable church circles to influence the world around us.

This means recognizing that ministry is not defined by service within the church. You can serve God by serving in the community

This means that you should not just cultivate friendships within the church. For many of us who have inadvertently isolated ourselves, we may have to specifically decide to connect with people in the world.

My challenge to each of you in the next couple of months is to specifically connect with someone who is not a believer. Share tea, have them into your

home, go out for coffee or a meal together and build a friendship. Don't feel that you have to share the gospel with them, but talk naturally about life.

If your church involvements are preventing you from connecting with people. Slow down a little bit. Our church has a lot of opportunities to include others, but if you cannot invite someone to a church event, make an event of your own. Have a visit with someone.

I believe that our greatest danger right now is not being sucked into worldly values, but rather being isolated from the world.