

# EPHRATISM AND SHAKERISM

## FALSE CONCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIAN SEPARATION

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The New Testament clearly teaches separation from this present evil world on the part of the Christian. A classic example of this teaching is II Corinthians 6:17, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you." A study of the context of this passage shows that this separation involves both doctrine and practice. The true believer can have no part with the unrighteousness and darkness of this world. Paul's question in the passage, "What part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" implies only a negative answer. Our Lord set forth this teaching when He asserted that His followers had been chosen out of the world (John 15:19). Thus they were expected to be separate from it and overcomers with respect to it. The Apostle John spoke of true believers as those who are overcomers as far as this world is concerned (I John 5:4-5). The appeal of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments is to the effect that God's children should be holy even as God is holy, clearly implying separation.

It is inconceivable that those who have received the life of God in their souls should continue to be enamored of this world and its sinful tendencies. They have a new outlook. It is upward toward God and the things of God. They ought to be living the risen life looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of their faith as the center of their interest and the goal of all their hopes.

Recognizing the truth with respect to the matter of separation, it also remains true that there is a fanatical interpretation given to it which is wholly apart from its correct meaning. Some have emphasized the physical aspects of separation to the practical exclusion of the spiritual. Thus we find in the early days of the church a sizable group of individuals who took such a dim view of the world and what was transpiring in it that they "left" the world to live in caves and similar places of isolation in order to preserve their holiness and to show their hatred of the world. The cases of Paul of Thebes, and Antony of Alexandria, and Symeon the pillar saint are representative of this attitude. Paul is said to have lived in a cave for ninety years. A spring and a palm tree nearby provided him with sustenance until his death in 340 A.D. and, according to tradition, during his later years a raven brought him daily half a loaf, as the ravens ministered to Elijah. More fabulous in his zeal for holiness was Antony who after 285 first lived in a sepulchre; then for twenty years in the ruins of a castle; and last on Mount Colzim, some seven hours from the Red Sea, a three days' journey east of the Nile, where an old cloister still preserves his name and memory. He pursued ascetic practices unceasingly. He ate only once a day, generally after sunset, and even then seemed ashamed that an immortal spirit should need earthly nourishment. His wardrobe consisted of a hair shirt, a sheepskin, and a girdle. He rarely left his solitude. At such times he seems to have made a profound impression on both Christians and pagans with his hairy dress and emaciated, ghostlike form. In spite of his many privations, he lived to be a hundred and five years old. He influenced many to look upon seclusion from the world as the true way to holiness.

Perhaps the most spectacular among this type of folk was St. Symeon, the Stylite, who may be called the original flagpole sitter! Failing to find the perfection he was looking for as a hermit

upon a mountain, he invented, in 423, a new means for attaining holiness, that of sitting for thirty-six years upon a pillar which was raised in height from time to time as he approached heaven and perfection. There he stood through the years, "exposed to the scorching sun, the drenching rain, the crackling frost, the howling storm, living a life of daily death and martyrdom, groaning under the load of sin, never attaining to the true comfort and peace of soul which is derived from a child-like trust in Christ's infinite merits, earnestly striving after a super-human holiness, and looking to a glorious reward in heaven, and immortal fame on earth."<sup>1</sup> He impressed a host of people with his separation. Some almost worshipped him. Such self denial was looked upon as a sure path to holiness.

There always have been within the church throughout its history those who have been possessed with the martyr or ascetic spirit, who have sought the disapprobation of the world so as to gain the favor of Christ. In times of persecution, such as under the Roman emperors who inflicted the ten great persecutions, individuals of this sort have found ample opportunity to manifest their self denial or separation. But in times when persecution has been relaxed, ones such as these have invented ways to manifest their ascetic tendencies. During the Roman persecutions there were many who actually sought martyrdom in order, as they thought, to gain the martyr's crown of life and to demonstrate their willingness to be separate from the world. This obsession to become martyrs became an unhealthy epidemic in the second and third centuries. With the cessation of persecution from the outside those possessing the martyr complex were given to finding ways to afflict themselves such as did Symeon Stylitis.

It is certainly true that every believer in Christ ought to be willing to die for Christ if it is needful. In the centuries of which we have been speaking it was true that many did need to die for Him. Otherwise they would not have been true to Him. But that is a different matter from looking upon martyrdom as an end in itself and something to be desired above everything else. The first attitude is Christ-centered. The second is self-centered. The first is to be approved; the second is to be frowned upon. The one represents the true spirit of separation or otherworldliness while the other is a pseudo-separation.

Down through the years various groups and individuals have assumed false ideas on how to gain perfection, or holiness, or separation, or whatever you may call it. The writer has been impressed with two movements which appeared in our own country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of this character: namely, Ephratism and Shakerism. These two groups have practically ceased to exist and with no loss to our country. They were basically humanistic. Thus when the human leaders passed off the scene, they withered away.

### THE EPHRATA MOVEMENT

Ephratism or the Ephrata Movement derives its name from the place in southeast Pennsylvania, Ephrata, Lancaster County, near which it flourished from 1734 onward toward the end of the eighteenth century. The location is today called the Ephrata Cloister and is being restored by the Pennsylvania State Historical Commission in order to recall an interesting and unique chapter in early American history. The people who composed this movement are often referred to as the Seventh Day Baptist Society.

Conrad Beissel was the founder of the Society. According to A. Monroe Aurand, Jr., who has written a pamphlet entitled "Historical Account of the Ephrata Cloister and the Seventh Day

Baptist Society," he was a mystic and a native of Eberbach, in the Palatinate, Germany. The same author states that he had been "a 'Presbyterian,' (i.e., probably a member of the German Reformed Church), who fled from the persecutions of his day in Europe."<sup>2</sup>

Upon coming to America Beissel settled at Germantown in 1720, being about thirty years of age. He became an apprentice to Peter Becker in the weaver's trade. Becker was the leader of the first Brethren or Tunker group that came to America in 1719. Through him Beissel became acquainted with the Brethren. He remained with Becker for about a year and then moved farther west into the Conestoga country of Pennsylvania. When Peter Becker and others from Germantown made a missionary tour through this territory in 1724, they baptized a number of converts in Conestoga Creek and organized a congregation of believers in this vicinity. Among those baptized was Conrad Beissel, although pride with which he was generously afflicted made it difficult for him to submit himself to the extent of letting someone else baptize him. With undue haste the new congregation laid the hands of ordination upon this young man and chose him as the minister of their group.

For a short time things went well at Conestoga, for Beissel was a man of marked ability and possessed a winsome personality. He was a good speaker and able in argumentation. He was also quite a musician, being the author of 441 printed hymns, according to the Chronicon Ephratense. In Scott's Scrap Book there appears a portrayal of Beissel sitting at a table with quill in hand. Beneath the cartoon there is the following inscription: "The first original music composed by white men in the western hemisphere was a book of Dunkard hymns by Johann Conrad Beissel.--About 1750." But it was not long until it was evident that his views were at variance with the recognized leaders of the church. He leaned strongly toward the Old Testament as compared with the New. He declared the seventh day as the God-ordained day of worship, not the first. He seemed to prefer the law to the grace of God. He advocated a monastic order of life, stressed the celibate state, and otherwise showed himself out of harmony with the beliefs and practices of the church he had joined.

Earnest efforts were made by leaders of the church to get him to conform to the regular beliefs and practices of the church, but to no avail, and in 1728 he took things into his own hands and withdrew from the Brethren movement by giving back the baptism which had been ministered to him by Peter Becker. He did this by having one of his followers baptize him thrice backwards in contrast to the regular forward movement. Immediately after this he was baptized three times forward and so became the leader of a new sect. George Falckenstein, one of the early Brethren pastors at Germantown, Pennsylvania, calls this a "babyish act" and deserving of being laughed at had not the results been so tragic.<sup>3</sup> He thus separated himself from the true evangelicals of his day and embarked upon a novel scheme to achieve holiness for himself and those who would follow him.

Beissel proceeded to organize his followers upon a monastic and communal basis. At Ephrata was developed the first Protestant monastery in America. "Here is still something of the middle ages set down in the new world, the ideal of monastic life, a belief that seclusion from the world is the means of saving one's soul," so says John H. Flory in his Flashlights From History.<sup>4</sup> At this place he built a self-contained community of about three hundred members who lived in separation from the world, and gave themselves to definite spiritual exercises to produce spiritual maturity, as they thought.

Beissel recognized three classes of members in his community: household members or those who had been married; solitary brethren, who took vows to live single, chaste lives; and spiritual vir-

true marriage is of a religious sort, a complete devotion of the soul to the service of God. Succumbing to such fallacious teaching there were such instances as that of Christina Sower, the wife of Christopher Sower, the printer of the famous Sower Bible, who left her husband and their only son to live at Ephrata for fourteen years completely under the mystical spell of Beissel. At long last through the means of a letter written by Christopher Junior on his birthday to his mother was she persuaded to return to her home and her lonely husband. It can readily be understood, therefore, why the Beissel movement caused so much sorrow and embitterment. Being clearly anti-Scriptural but claiming to be thoroughly Christian, it caused a great deal of trouble, confusion, and disharmony in the church.

What then is left of the Ephrata Movement and of the fanatical dreams of Conrad Beissel? Only a few dilapidated buildings which the Pennsylvania State Historical Commission has sought to restore so that curious folk may look at the remnants of an extinct effort of a deluded man to arrive at holiness in this life. One Peter Miller, the supposed author of the *Chronicon Ephratense*, a graphic account of the Movement, sought to carry on where Beissel left off but under him the effort began to fade until ere long it was but a memory of misguided zeal. A few other establishments such as that at Snowhill near Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, aped after the Ephrata community. But they too are just ghosts of their former manifestations. The history of the movement corroborates the fact that any movement built upon mere man shall fail, and that separation from the world and unto God, while it has its physical aspects, is mainly a spiritual matter. Running away from the world and mere denial of the flesh are not equivalent to living for God. There is far more to the Christian life than these negative aspects. It specializes in the positive manifestation of the graces of the new life and the fruit of the Spirit.

### THE SHAKER MOVEMENT

And now let us turn our attention to a second movement in our country which is representative of a false, unscriptural idea concerning the attainment of separation or perfection. I refer to Shakerism which appeared in this country the latter part of the eighteenth century and continued with diminishing influence well into the twentieth century. The Shakers, according to Marguerite Fellows Melcher in her recent book *The Shaker Adventure*, "were rooted in revolt: revolt against smugness and bigotry in religion, revolt against social and economic evils, revolt against the uglier side of human nature. The Camisards in France, who are usually considered the spiritual ancestors of the Shakers, were the direct result of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685."<sup>6</sup>

The Shakers at first received this name in derision on the part of those who observed their peculiar shaking motions in connection with their ceremonial dances which were for the purpose of shaking off evils and trampling sin under foot. Later they seemed to approve of this title, turned it to their own use, and conveniently found passages of Scripture which they applied to themselves. An example of such passages is: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts" (Hag. 2:6-7). They also call themselves "The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing." Some of their leaders preferred the name "Alethians," for they considered themselves children of the truth.

In many respects they represented a strange slice of humanity, though they were unquestionably very sincere in their beliefs. They never numbered over six thousand and were confined to

about nineteen societies located in New England, New York, Ohio, Kentucky, and one society in Indiana.

As mentioned before, the ancestry of these folk may be traced to the Camisards in France who had some connection with the persecuted Huguenots of that country. Some of these folk escaped to England where Ann Lee became the leader of this separatist movement. Like Joan of Arc, she had visions and prophetic dreams. Mother Ann, as she was affectionately known by her followers, had a passion for saving and purifying mankind. This passion became more and more restricted in succeeding years to her faithful followers.

By special revelation, Mother Ann and her adherents came to America in 1774. They called themselves by this time the Millennial Church or the true Believers as against the "world's people." They were the one true church.

The aim of these people was to attain perfection in their lives. Their strict manner of living was for this purpose. They saw eye to eye on four cardinal principles, namely, confession of sins, celibacy, separation, and common ownership of property. The working out of these principles tended to solidify them more and more into one body and to separate them from the rest of society. They came to denounce marriage as an evil of mankind. Sex, they said, was responsible for most of the sins of the world. Therefore they should live apart from this thorn as much as possible. Mother Ann, or Ann the Word as she was also called, subjected herself to an early marriage by which she had four children. Since all of these children died in infancy or early childhood, her previous convictions were confirmed, so that she thereafter denounced marriage and separated from her husband, Abraham Stanley, in spite of his earnest entreaties to save their marriage. Her followers perpetuated her attitude toward marriage. Producing no children of their own, they maintained their number by the adoption of some of the "world's" children and bringing them up in their own ways.

In their every day living they withdrew from the world and lived in their exclusive colonies. While absent from home they were not to engage in unnecessary conversation with the "world's" people, and they were expected on their return to report all conversations to the elders. In every possible way they were to avoid the contamination of the world.

They practiced community of goods, borrowing their idea from the New Testament. Everyone considered his property as belonging to the common cause and so was to be separated from the worldly attitude of grasping after material gain. It should be remarked in this connection that they lived well among themselves and developed a number of trades such as furniture making, weaving, seed culture, leather work, and building crafts to such an extent that some of their products became the envy of outsiders.

Their separateness from the world was indicated by their manner of living in isolated families of thirty to ninety individuals. Each family had its own house, the stories being divided between the men and the women. They gave no place to adornments in the way of pictures or other works of art. In their prescribed mode of dress for men and women, they also protested against the fashions of a vain world. They cultivated the virtues of sobriety, prudence, and meekness. They took no oaths, deprecated law, avoided contention, and repudiated war. They held that the kingdom of heaven has already come and therefore they sought to live in harmony with this belief.

Some of their beliefs were of a very radical character: special revelations to guide their deportment; divine revelation as a growing thing, not a neatly labelled parcel of finished truths handed out once for all in some distant past; and Christ and Mother Ann standing side by side as two manifestations of the spirit of God in man--the father and mother elements of the deity. Thus Mother Ann was the female Word as compared with Christ, the male element. Moreover, they repudiated all the fundamental tenets of orthodox Protestantism such as the infallibility of the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity, salvation through the atonement, the resurrection of the body, *et cetera*. Thus in their separation from the world, they also developed a separation from the orthodox doctrines of the Christian faith until how tragic was that separation! No wonder the movement gradually lost its appeal and now only a few societies remain with a dwindling membership. According to Marguerite Melcher, "In all four of the surviving societies there are no elders now. There is no longer a central Ministry to direct the Millennial Church. The only men left are very old. Most of the sisters are past sixty. The Shakers themselves admit quite frankly that their course on earth is nearly run."<sup>7</sup> Thus the movement is practically dead, as it should be. Its doctrinal viewpoints were not worthy of perpetuation, and its ideas of attaining perfection and carrying on God's work were perverted ideas.

In Ephratism and Shakerism we see examples of systems which not only developed doctrine which was at variance with orthodoxy, but also which employed a negative, materialistic, and humanistic type of separation from the world which is foreign to the Word of God.

The separation set forth in the Scriptures is first of all a spiritual separation. It has both negative and positive aspects. The believer in Christ is to be separated from the world, the flesh, and the Devil, taking the attitude toward them that Christ did when He was here upon the earth. But he is also to be separated unto God and the things of God. He is definitely and attractively to manifest the life of God before the world. He is not to hide himself from the world in his separation nor to put his life under a bushel. His testimony ought to be of an aggressive type. While he is not of the world spiritually, he is to recognize that he is in the world for the purpose of ministering to the world. How else can he carry out the words of the Great Commission of our Lord: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28: 19-20)? How else can he be a true ambassador for Christ, bearing witness to the Gospel in a world that is foreign to God? Believers are called to act as the salt of the earth to hinder the corrupting influences that are present in the world. If they are to perform this function, there must be the right kind of contact with the world. When our Lord Jesus Christ was upon earth, He ate with publicans and sinners, not to be contaminated by them, but to win them for Himself and out of the world. In this sense, as He was in the world, so are His followers. The Apostle Paul felt himself to be a "debtor both to the Greeks and to the barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise" (Rom. 1: 14) to give them the Gospel. In order to fulfill this obligation we find him, not repairing to caves and other places of lonely isolation, but blazing trails across the world of his day until finally he arrived at its capital city--all that he might give men the message of divine forgiveness. Moreover, believers are called to be soldiers of the Lord. This means that they must go where the hosts of wickedness are to gain conquests for Christ's sake. A good soldier is not a recluse, a hermit, or an inmate of a monastery, whiling away his time in pious ceremonies or religious exercises as the world outside plunges on toward destruction (2 Tim. 2:3; Eph. 6: 10-18).

Employing yet another bit of New Testament imagery, believers are also vessels ordained of God to bear the water of life to a thirsting world (2 Tim. 2:21; 2 Cor. 4:7). This implies aggressiveness and contact with a world in need. The vessels must be clean and emptied of self. This represents the negative aspect of separation. But they must also be wholly dedicated to God's service in a sinful world. This is the positive aspect. The latter aspect was lacking in Ephratism and Shakerism. They were so much taken up with negative matters that they had little time or concern for the world outside.

One of the tendencies of the over-emphasis on the negative aspect of separation is to develop a holier-than-thou attitude. So much attention is given to what the individual should not do and how he should not act that they tend to look down upon those who do not fit their negative pattern. There are members in the church today who are so busy hunting for conduct that does not conform to their own ideas that they have become super-critical, super-pious, and altogether overbearing in their attitude toward others who do not see eye to eye with them in some nonessential matters. Such as these very often do a great deal of injury to the cause of Christ. From such an attitude may the Lord deliver us!

There is such a thing as separation taught in the Scriptures. Every child of God has a solemn obligation to realize its true meaning and live in harmony with it. This separation has a definite, twofold aspect: separation from every defiling influence, and separation unto an aggressive living and service for God in the world. It is above all a spiritual matter and is utterly dependent upon a right attitude toward God and the things of God. This will keep it from becoming merely a legal or formal matter. "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:17).

#### DOCUMENTATION

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4. John H. Flory, Flashlights from History (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Publishing House, 1932), p. 20ff.
5. For a full statement of beliefs see Aurand, op. cit., pp. 25-31.
6. Marguerite Fellows Melcher, The Shaker Adventure (The Press of Western Reserve University, 1960), p. 5.
7. Marguerite Fellows Melcher, ibid., p. 264.

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