

## continuous conversion

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### Isolationism is not a Christian virtue!

One recurring theme in Christian thought is the idea of living separated from the dirty old world. Especially in times of religious fervor, a substantial number of Christians want to live apart from the temptations and evils of unsaved people.

Although I have entertained such thoughts at various times in my life (I wanted to be a nun when I was 15, although the only nuns I knew of were Roman Catholic and I was not), I always come to the same conclusion:

*Christians are called to be in the world.*

Jesus gives us the example of having a very public ministry. He moved among sinners, scandalizing the virtuous and alienating the righteous. (I know there are arguments that Jesus lived a hidden life till He was in His 30's but "hidden" doesn't mean "hermit"; it means he could have been doing anything He wanted, but we just don't know about it).

St Paul often enjoins Christians to be aloof from sin and the appearance of sin, so it may seem logical to withdraw from a sinful world. But I see three reasons not to live in isolation, either as an individual or as a community of believers:

1. *You lose the chance to influence those very sinners you're supposed to be evangelizing.*



If your lifestyle is conspicuously "pious," people who need to know Christ may find you priggish and snooty.

I used to work in a church-related institution where I had to sign a pledge not to drink alcohol. I signed, and tried to keep my word, but

found that my friends (many of them Christians) were annoyed and offended at my implication that having a beer or glass of wine was wrong.

If you hang around exclusively with Christians, talk Christian-ese, home-school your kids to avoid the sin-drenched public schools, don't have a TV or go to movies, censor the radio, and so forth, you may feel smugly good about yourself. But to others you may look conceited and exclusionary, not qualities that are Christlike.

You may feel virtuous when you avoid the company of sinners, but if you don't tell sinners about Christ, who will? I once knew a sincere Christian who was angry at her husband's parents for buying a bottle of wine when they came to visit. She made it an issue and ruined the visit for everyone. Her beliefs told her that wine was sinful. But in her anger, she overlooked the God-given opportunity to be kind to her in-laws, whom she said were "unsaved." She focused on the wine rather than the people, and isolated herself from her in-laws.

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## Isolationism (continued from p. 1)

### 2. *You may raise kids who are socially inept and often rebellious.*

This happened to the Puritans, who were unwelcome in their original church, the Church of England, because they had the habit of standing up during services and denouncing the priest.

They moved to heathenish Holland (the Netherlands), where there was no established state church, and religious freedom was protected. In Holland, the Puritans found that their kids were not inclined to adhere to the restrictions of their parent's dogma; the second generation was falling away from the "true faith."

The 1620 move to the Eastern coast of North America was, in part, a strategy to keep the kids away from worldly temptations. Yet the same thing happened in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (a Puritan theocracy)--the 2nd generation was weak and the 3rd generation had little interest in the strict Puritan lifestyle.

The isolationism the Puritans sought did not prove helpful when raising their own children, who didn't want to imitate that lifestyle.

### 3. *You can't do it, anyway.*

I tried in my 20's to be socially isolated from a culture I found too materialistic and warlike to suit my interests and values. I lived in a little cabin out in the boondocks, with no electricity or running water (remember, I grew up in KY so this wasn't as outrageous to me as it might

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have been!), no telephone and as little contact with the bigger world of Watertown, NY, as I could manage. But guess what? I had to enter a local hospital for major surgery and was very grateful, indeed, for all that technology and medical help. So much for my self-imposed isolation.

I am completely convinced that Christians must be the most connected, full-out committed members of their society. They have no excuse to stand on the sidelines and criticize. They must be involved in trying to right the injustices they see around them.

This applies to the Christian as an individual, as a citizen and as a world inhabitant. Isolationism (personal or political) has no place in the life of Christ as we see it in the Gospels, nor in the lives of the apostles, all of whom spent their time being among all kinds of people, and demonstrating that a Christian is one who lives a life with meaning and purpose, caring for others as much as he or she cares for God and for himself/herself.

The kind of social and political isolationism, the duplication of educational systems, the relentless attacks on Christians with other viewpoints that characterizes some American Christians is damaging and pathetic. Christ died for everyone, not just a few "holier-than-thou" types who confuse asceticism with virtue. So remember, when you are inclined to withdraw from a sinful society,

### *Jesus is Inclusive*

He loves everyone, even sinners!



### *No man is an island*

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

**John Donne**