

Philips (Selection X) and the banning of Adam Pastor in 1547 for incipient Unitarianism. Among the rigorist leaders were Menno's two chief lieutenants, Dietrich Philips (cf. Selection XI, at notes 55 and 58) and Leonard Bouwens. Menno himself, however, wavered on the question of shunning a banned spouse, bed and board. Whereupon he was himself threatened with excommunication. By 1555 a schism opened on this issue with Menno leading the slightly moderated rigorists over against the laxist or mild-banner Waterlanders, who became the forerunners of the liberal *Doopsgezinden*. From the following Selection it is clear that the Anabaptists could be fully aware of the vindictive, spiteful, and otherwise uncharitable motives which might get mixed up with the religious acts of banning and shunning. Menno was much concerned to have Christ's second key turned with as much care as the first and "with vigilant love" both for the sake of the sanctity of the church and the ultimate salvation of the wayward.

The editor is tempted to take note of the antiquity of the ban as a persistent motif in religious history. The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline supplies an instructive parallel to the "Rule of Christ" (Matt. 18:15-17 = col. vi, 1).

WILLIAMS (1957)

On the Ban: Questions and Answers²
By Menno Simons

1550

THE TEXT

QUESTION 1. Is separation a command or is it a counsel of God? *Answer.* Let everyone weigh the words of Christ and of Paul [1 Cor. 5: 11]... and he will discover whether it is a divine commandment or whether it is a counsel. Everything which Paul says in regard to separation he generally speaks in the imperative mode, that is, in a commanding manner. *Expurgate*, that is, purge, 1 Cor. 5:7. *Profligate*, that is, drive out. *Sejungere*, that is, withdraw from, 1 Tim. 6:5. *Fuge*, that is, flee, Titus 3:9. Again (II Thess. 3:6): We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I think, brethren, these Scriptures show that it is a command; and even if it were not a command but an advice of God, should we not diligently follow such advice? If my spirit despise the counsel of the Holy Spirit, then I truly acknowledge that my spirit is not of God. And to what end many have come who did not follow God's Spirit, but their own, may be read in many passages of sacred history and may be seen in many instances, at the present time.

QUESTION 2. If any person should not observe this ban and yet be pious otherwise, should such a one be banned on that account? *Answer.* Whoever is pious will show his piety in obedience, and not knowingly or willfully despise and disregard the word, commandment, will, counsel, admonition,

²This is a portion of a larger series of questions and answers (*Sommige Vragen*) printed in the Amsterdam edition of 1681 (pp. 473-474) and translated into English at Elkhart, Indiana, in 1871. The present selection is adapted from the Elkhart translation compared with the Dutch. The most recent treatment of the subject is by Frank Peters, "The Ban in the Writings of Menno Simons," *MQR*, XXIX (1955), 16.

and doctrine of God. For if anyone willfully keeps *commercium* with such whose company is forbidden in Scripture, then we must come to the conclusion that he despises the Word of God, yea, is in open rebellion and refractoriness (I speak of those who well know and acknowledge, and yet do not do). For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry (I Sam. 15:23).

Since the Scripture admonishes and commands that we shall not associate with such, nor eat with them, nor greet them, nor receive them into our houses, etc.; and then if somebody should say, I will associate with them, I will eat with them, I will greet them in the Lord, and receive them into my house—he would plainly prove that he did not fear the commandment and admonition of the Lord, but that he despised it, rejected the Holy Spirit, and that he trusted, honored, and followed his own opinion rather than the Word of God. Now judge for yourself what kind of sin it is not to be willing to hear and obey God's Word. Paul says (II Thess. 3:6, 14): Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which ye received of us; again: And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Inasmuch as the ban was so strictly commanded by the Lord, and practiced by the apostles (Matt. 18:17), therefore we must also use it and obey it, since we are thus taught and enlightened by God, or else we should be shunned and avoided by the congregation of God. This must be acknowledged and confessed.

QUESTION 3. Should husband and wife shun each other on account of the ban—as also parents and children? *Answer.* First, that the rule of the ban is a general rule, and excepts none: neither husband nor wife, neither parent nor child. For God's word judges all flesh with the same judgment and knows no respect of persons. Inasmuch as the rule of the ban is general, excepts none, and is no respecter of persons—therefore it is reasonable and necessary to hear and obey the Word of the Lord in this respect; no matter whether it be husband or wife, parents or children.

Secondly, we say that separation must be made in the congregation; and therefore the husband must consent and vote with the church in the separation of his wife; and the wife in the separation of her husband. If the pious consort must give his

consent, then it is also becoming that he also shun her, with the church; for what use is there in the ban when the shunning and avoiding are not connected with it?

Thirdly, we say that the ban was instituted to make ashamed unto reformation. Do not understand this shame as the world is ashamed; but understand as in the conscience, and therefore let it be done with all discretion, reasonableness, and love. If then my husband or wife, parent or child is judged in the church, in the name of and by the power of Christ, to be banned, it becomes us (inasmuch as the evangelical ban is unto reformation), according to the counsel of the Holy Spirit, to seek the reformation of my own body, namely, of my spouse, and also of our nearest kinsfolk as parent or child; for spiritual love must be preferred to anything else. Aside from this I would care for them and provide the temporal necessities of life, so far as it would be in my power.

Fourthly, we say that the ban was given that we should not be sullied by the leaven of false doctrine or unclean-living flesh, by apostates. And as it is plain that none can corrupt and leaven us more than our own spouses, parents, etc., therefore the Holy Spirit counsels us to shun them, lest they leaven our faith and thus make us ashamed before God. If we love husband or wife, parent or child more than Christ Jesus, we cannot possibly be the disciples of Christ.

Some object to this, saying that there is no divorce but by reason of adultery. This is just what we say; and therefore we do not speak of divorce, but of shunning, and that for the aforementioned reasons. To shunning, Paul (I Cor. 7:10) has decidedly consented, although this is not always coupled with adultery; but not to divorce. For divorce is not allowed by the Scripture except by reason of adultery (Matt. 5:32; Luke 16:18); therefore we shall never consent to it for other reasons.

Therefore we understand it that the husband should shun his wife, the wife her husband, parents their children and the children their parents when they apostatize. For the rule of the ban is general. They [the godly] must consent, with the church, to the sentence; they must aim at Scriptural shame unto reformation and diligently watch, lest they [themselves] be leavened by them, as said above.

My beloved in the Lord, I would here sincerely pray you that you would make a difference between commandment and commandment and not consider all commandments as equally weighty. For adultery, idolatry, shedding blood, and the like

shameful and abominable works of the flesh will be punished more severely than a misunderstanding in regard to the ban, and particularly when not committed willfully and perversely. Therefore beware that in this matter of matrimony you press no one farther than he is taught of God in his heart and that he in his conscience can bear, lest you boil the kid while it is still sucking its mother's milk [cf. Deut. 14:21]. On every hand the Scriptures teach that we should bear with the weak. Brethren, it is a delicate matter. I know too well what has been the result of pressing this matter too far by some in my time. Therefore I advise you to point all to the sure and certain ground. And those consciences that are, through the Scripture and the Holy Spirit, free and unencumbered will freely, without the interference of anyone, by the unction of the Holy Spirit and not by human encouragement, do that which he advises, teaches, and commands in the Holy Scripture, if it should be that one's spouse should be banned. For verily I know that whoever obeys the Holy Spirit, with faithful heart will never be made ashamed.

QUESTION 4. Should we greet one that is banned, with the common, everyday greeting, or return our respects at his greeting? For John says (II John 10 f.): If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed; for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. *Answer.* Mildness, politeness, respectfulness and friendliness to all mankind becomes all Christians. If, then, an apostate should greet me with the common greeting of Good Morning or Good Day and I should be silent; if he should be respectful to me and I should turn my face from him, and bear myself austere and unfriendly toward him, I might well be ashamed of myself, as Sirach says. For how can such a one be convinced, led to repentance, and be moved to do better by such austerity? The ban is not given to destroy but to build up.

If it should be said that John has forbidden such greeting, I for myself would answer that, before my God, I cannot understand that John said this in regard to the everyday greeting, but that he says, if some deceiver should come to us who has left the doctrine of Christ, that we should not receive such a one into our houses, lest he mislead us; and that we should not greet him as a brother lest we have communion with him. But not so with the worldly greeting. For if the worldly greeting have such power in itself that it causes the communion of the vain works

of those whom I greet, then it must follow that I would have communion with the fornication, adultery, drunkenness, avarice, idolatry and bloodshed of the world, whenever I should greet a worldly man with the common greeting or return his compliment. Oh no! But the greeting or kiss of peace does signify communion. Yet if one should have conscientious scruples in this matter, with such a one I do not dispute about it. For it is not worth contending about. But I would much rather see all scruples in regard to this matter removed and have Christian discretion, love, politeness, and respectfulness practiced for [our] improvement rather than stubbornness, unfriendliness, malice, and unmercifulness unto disruption. Brethren, beware of discord and controversy. The Lord grant every God-fearing person a wholesome understanding of his holy Word. Amen.

QUESTION 5. Are we allowed to show the banned any charity, love, and mercy? *Answer.* Everyone should consider, (1) the exact meaning of the word *commercium*; (2) for what reason and purpose the ban was ordained by the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures; (3) how a real true Christian is reborn, bred, and endowed³; (4) how the merciful Father himself acts with those who are already worthy of his judgment and wrath.

All those who can rightly see into these will doubtlessly not deny necessary services, love, and mercy to the banned. For the word *commercium* does not forbid these, but it forbids daily company, conversation, society and business, as was explained above. The ban is also a work of divine love and not of perverse, unmerciful, heathenish cruelty. A true Christian will serve, aid, and commiserate with everybody; yea, even with his most bitter enemies. Austerity, cruelty, and unmercifulness he hates with all his heart. He has a nature like his Father of whom he is born: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. If I, then, be of a different nature than he, I show that I am not his child.

Therefore I say with our faithful brother Dietrich Philips⁴ that we should not practice the ban to the destruction of mankind (as the Pharisees did their Sabbath) but to its improvement; and thus we desire to serve the bodies of the fallen, in love, reasonableness, and humility, with our temporal goods when necessary, and their souls with the spiritual goods of the holy Word. And we should rather, with the Samaritan, show mercy

³ The text has "uyt geboren, gaert ende genatuert."

⁴ See Selection XI, the fourth ordinance.

to the wounded than to pass by him with the priest and Levite. James says (ch. 2:13): For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy, and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. Be ye therefore merciful as your Father also is merciful. Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy. In short, if we understand the true meaning and nature of the word *commercium*, we understand for what reason and purpose the ban was instituted, how a true Christian is and should be minded; and if we conform ourselves to the example of Christ and of God, then the matter is all helped along. And if we have not this grace, we will shamefully err in this ban and be cruel, unmerciful Christians; from which error and abomination may the gracious Father eternally save all his beloved children.

My brethren, I tell the truth and lie not when I say that I hate with all my heart such unmercifulness and cruel-mindedness. Nor do I wish to be considered a brother of such unmerciful, cruel brethren, if there should be such, unless they desist from such abomination and discreetly follow, in love and mercy, the example of God and Christ. For my heart cannot consent to such unmerciful action which exceeds the cruelty of the heathen and Turks; and by the grace of God I will fight against it with my Lord's sword unto death. For it is against the doctrine of the New Testament, and contrary to the Spirit, mind, and nature of God and Christ, according to which all the Scriptures of the New Testament should be judged and understood. All those who do not understand it thus are already in great error.

But in case my necessary service, charity, love, and mercy should become a *commercium*, or that my soul should thereby be led into corruption, then we confess (the Lord must be praised) that our daily intercourse is forbidden in the Scripture, and that it is better to leave off our charity, love, and mercy than to ensnare our souls thereby and lead them into error. The unction of the Holy Spirit will teach us what we should best do in these matters.

QUESTION 6. Are we allowed to sell to, and buy of, the apostates inasmuch as Paul says (I Cor. 5:11) that we should not have intercourse with them? And yet the disciples bought victuals in Sychar, and the Jews dealt with the Gentiles (John 4:5). *Answer.* That the apostles bought victuals in Sychar proves nothing at all; for many of the Samaritans were a remnant of the ten tribes, as we have sufficiently shown above, from the Holy Scripture. But we do not deny that the Jews dealt with the Gentiles, yet they shunned their *commercium*, that

is, their daily association, company, and conversation, and did not eat or drink with them, as the writings of the Evangelist sufficiently and plainly show in many Scriptural passages.

And inasmuch as Christ points us to the Jewish ban or shunning, namely, that as they shunned the Gentiles and sinners, so we should likewise shun an apostate Christian; and as the Jews had dealings with them, although they shunned their daily intercourse in company, association, and conversation; therefore we say that we cannot maintain, either by the Jewish example to which Christ points or by any explicit Scripture, that we should not in any manner deal with the apostate, if no such daily intercourse arises therefrom. For such intercourse with the apostate is strictly prohibited by Scripture; and since it is prohibited, it is manifest that a pious, God-fearing Christian could have no apostate as a regular buyer or seller. For as I have daily to get my cloth, bread, corn, salt, etc., and exchange for it my grain, butter, etc., it cannot fail but that intercourse will arise therefrom. But with a trading which is conducted without such intercourse this is not the case.

And because such business which is carried on without intercourse cannot be shown to be disallowed by virtue of the Scripture, as was said, therefore we would pray all God-fearing brethren and sisters in the Lord, for the sake of God and of love, to act in this matter, as in all others, as reasonable, good, discreet, wise, and prudent Christians and not as vain, reckless, self-conceited, proud, obdurate, and offensive boasters; for a true Christian should always strive after that which is the best and the surest, and follow the pure, unfeigned love, lest he abuse the freedom which he seems to have, to the injury and hindrance of his own soul, to the affliction and destruction of his beloved brethren, to the scornful boasting of the perverse, and to the shameful defamation of the holy Word and the afflicted church of Christ. Besides, I pray and desire in like manner that none will thus in the least be offended at his brother and mistake and judge him by an unscriptural judgment; as he has in this case no reproving example among the Jews nor forbidding word [in the Scriptures].

O my sincerely beloved brethren, let us sincerely pray for understanding and wisdom that all misunderstanding, error, jealousy, offense, division, and untimely reports may be utterly exterminated, root and branch; that a wholesome understanding, doctrine, friendship, love, edification, and a sound judgment may get under way and prevail. Let everyone look

with pure eyes and impartial hearts to the example to which Christ points, and to the wholesome, natural meaning of the holy apostles, and let true, Christian love take precedence; and everyone will know, by the grace of God, how he should act and proceed concerning this matter.

QUESTION 7. Are we allowed to be seated with an apostate in a ship or wagon, or to eat with him at the table of a tavern? *Answer.* The first part of this question . . . we deem childish and useless, since this so often happens without intercourse and must needs happen. As to the second part, namely, [whether] to eat at the table with an apostate, while traveling, we can point the questioner to no surer ground and answer than this, namely, we advise, pray, and admonish every pious Christian, as he loves Christ and his Word, to fear God sincerely, and follow the most certain way, that is, not to eat by or with him; for thereby none can be deceived; and if perchance some God-fearing brother might do so, then let everyone beware, lest he sin against his brother by an unscriptural judgment; for none may judge unless he have the judging word on his side.

Whosoever fears God, whosoever desires to follow after his holy Word, with all his strength loves his brother, seeks to avoid all offense and desires to walk in the house of God in all peace and unity, will act justly in all things and will not offend or afflict his brethren.

QUESTION 8. Who, according to Scripture, should be banned or excommunicated? *Answer.* Christ says (Matt. 18:15-17): If thy brother trespass against thee, etc., and will not hear thee or the witnesses, nor the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. And Paul (I Cor. 5:11): If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one do not eat. To this class also belong perjurers, thieves, violent persons, haters, fighters and all those who walk in open, well-known, damnable works of the flesh, of which Paul enumerates a great many (Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:19; I Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:5). Again, disorderly persons, working not at all, but who are busybodies; such as do not abide in the doctrine of Christ and his apostles and do not walk therein, but are disobedient (II Thess. 3:11, 14). Again, masters of sects. Again, those who give offense, cause dispute and discord concerning the doctrine of Christ and of his apostles. In short, all those who openly lead a shameful, carnal life, and those who are corrupted by a heretical, unclean doctrine (Titus 3:10), and

who will not be overcome by the wine and oil^s of the Holy Spirit, but remain, after they have been admonished and sought to be regained in all love and reasonableness, obdurate in their corrupted walk and opinion. They should, at last, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, by the binding Word of God, be reluctantly but unanimously separated from the church of Christ and thereupon, according to the Scriptures, be shunned in all divine obedience, until they repent.

^s Cf. Hubmaier, Selection V, introduction and p. 130.