



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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A Culture of Separation

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This paper started toward birth in the course of a discussion with one of the retreatants at a Spiritual Nurture Retreat in June. He and I were discussing in some depth matters of belief, which inevitably led us to the subject of sin, and from that to the concept of a culture of separation. Finally, the paper is being born.

I am well aware that the word “sin” has a wide variety of meaning and uses. For instance, sin is an offense against God. It is a condition of dreadful estrangement from God. It is missing the mark, rebelling, transgressing, revolting against and being personally alienated from God. It applies to behaviors that are generally unacceptable, and considered to be wrong, evil, and/or destructive. However, as I think about all the meanings, one emerges that is, for me, the essence of them all. It is that sin means to be separated from God, with all the attendant consequences or results. It is a state or condition in which I choose to live, as do all who choose to see themselves separated from God.

This is what I mean by a culture of separation. All the dimensions of my life are lived from the point of view of my having chosen to be separated from God.

When I choose to live separated from God, God is the enemy. I don’t look to God for guidance, or support, or to be my friend, or for anything that has to do with providing for myself, or even making sure that I survive. Those are **my** tasks. It is true that in my efforts to secure my salvation, I may “look to God” and try to use God’s power as I attempt to tap in on every possible resource to enable me to try to save myself.

I’ve heard about sin all of my life. I confess that much of what I have heard, which includes what I am supposed to believe, hasn’t really been very helpful to me. I’ve had trouble reconciling it with what I believe about God’s being a loving God. I want my understanding of sin to “make sense” to me, instead of leaving me confused and uncertain – and sometimes anxiety-ridden. Understanding that sin is my choosing to live as if I am separated from God, and hence to be living in a culture of separation, makes sense to me.

According to our theology as I understand it, and harking back to the aftermath of the Garden of Eden experience, I am born in sin. I am born separated from God. I am taught that, if I want to see (experience) the kingdom of God, I must be born again – whatever that means. Further, according to Paul in his letter to the Romans, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

I’ve gotten ahead of myself. I want to go back and deal with the concept of the culture of separation, and how that came into being.

It all started with the Garden of Eden story.

As I see it, the plot of the story centered in the fact that human beings are confronted with a life-affecting choice which has to be made – has to be made by every person in every generation. In a very real sense, the Garden of Eden story is my story.

As was true with the man and the woman in the Garden, I am confronted with a decision that I cannot avoid making. It has to do with my view of myself, my outlook on life, and my relationship with God, who, I believe, is the source of my being. God has given me what I need for me to be all that I am created to be – and has suggested that living in relationship with God is the way to realize the richness of life that is available to me.

However, God has wisely left it up to me to decide. Simply stated, my choices are, on the one hand, to live in a close and caring relationship with God, or, on the other, not to.

While, in our society, many actions are looked upon as sins, it appears to me that the essence of sinfulness is in the decision to take on life separated from God. Not only does sin indicate heinous, evil, and destructive actions, it also indicates a position taken in relation to God that determines my view of my world, of me in it, and of God. Sin, then, is a way of life – a state of being, if you will – a culture of separation.

The man and the woman in the Garden of Eden chose to live separated from God. Instead of choosing to have God's care and keeping, they chose to be responsible for themselves without any dependency on God. They decide that they didn't need God; that they were wise enough, and had sufficient resources and power, to provide everything for themselves that they could ever need or want. As they saw it, this was the tempting promise of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Therefore, they elected to live as sinners – that is, in a culture of separation.

If I, as did the man and the woman in the Garden choose not to look to the relationship with God for my well-being, but rather, to depend upon myself and to provide for myself apart from that relationship, I choose to be a sinner. I choose to live in a culture of separation.

Now what happens?

Having chosen to live in a culture of separation, I discover, to my amazement, that my well-being – indeed, my very life – is now entirely in my hands. I, alone, am responsible for me. As I see it, I have no alternatives. I must protect my life. I must save myself. I must provide for myself. I can't look to God. Nor can I look to another human being.

In fact, almost immediately, I find that I see all other living creatures – especially my fellow human beings – as my enemies. I must, I tell myself, subdue them, make them my servants, and use them to accomplish my objectives. Or I must destroy them.

Since I am living in a culture of separation, I convince myself that all other living creatures have made the same decision as I. Therefore, they are, I am sure, out to subdue me, to make me their servant, to use me – or, worse yet, to destroy me. I can't let that happen. I have to maintain my guard. I have to protect myself. I have to see that I survive no matter what the cost – or what the damage may be done to me or anyone else. My care and well-being – indeed my very survival – is entirely up to me. I can't depend upon anything or anyone else. And I can't let anyone or anything destroy me.

True, impelled by my own anxiety and insecurity, I may decide to form some uneasy alliances with other people in the hope that they will safeguard me and provide some protection, however tenuous and uncertain it may be. To do so means that I, to some degree, must trust them. Maybe, if we can see enough mutual benefit, we will be willing to take that risk.

Without doubt, it will be a guarded and cautious trust. I will always wonder if I can really depend on anyone to come through for me – especially when the cost may be very high. After all, if I choose to provide for my own well-being, no matter what it may cost another, I can only expect similar decisions from others. It wouldn't be realistic for me to look to someone else to set aside his/her own well-being for mine, nor to protect my life at the cost of his or hers. In a culture of separation, that would be asking too much of anyone. I certainly wouldn't sacrifice my life to save somebody else's.

That's how it is in a culture of separation (a state of sin, if you will), and there is more to the story. To tell it, I think I need to identify some characteristic features of such a culture, and make note of typical behavior that goes with those characteristics.

To start with, it appears to me that such a culture is characterized by fear, distrust, suspicion, protectionism, and a tendency to isolate myself. After all, isolation is an excellent safeguard. If I shut myself off from everyone who could threaten me, I will be safe, or at least, hope that I am.

Then I (as I think would be true of every member of such a culture) must devote my time and energy to accumulating enough food, clothing, and shelter to remove the risk of ever being so hungry, or cold, or exposed that I might die. After all, in a culture of separation, it is a priority to avoid, or stave off, death as long as possible.

However, I have no way of knowing how much of food, clothing, and shelter I must accumulate to guarantee that I will not die. No matter how much I am able to gather together, I can never be really sure that I have enough.

And then I must remember about the other people who make up this culture of separation. I can assume that they, too, are, with similar diligence, trying to gather and have enough to make sure they won't die. They can see that it would be a lot easier for them to try to take what I have spent long hours and much energy to gather and store up instead of having to do it for themselves. I must guard against the possibility of that happening. I must build all kinds of protections – walls, moats, vaults – to make sure

they can't get what I have. Only how can I ever be sure that what I have built is enough protection?

Under the circumstances, I am afraid of everybody. The material fortress I have built isn't enough. To feel safe, I must maintain psychological and emotional barriers as well. Therefore, I get my feelings hurt. I become angry. I disparage and criticize. I shun closeness. I break relationships. I act as if I don't need anyone. I erect all kinds of barriers. I do not risk anything that might give another person any real power over me. I must do everything I possibly can to assure my salvation. Only, how can I ever be sure I've done enough?

I am good at what I do. I am seen as an expert in my field. I have a record of achievements in my profession. I am recognized and honored for them. Along the way, I have been able to accumulate considerable wealth, and a reputation as a good citizen and a respected member of my community.

I have an ideal marriage and family – or so everyone seems to believe. I am considered by all who know me to be a success in both my profession and my personal life. People both envy me and use me as a model. By every apparent indication, I have all the good things of life – the very best that life has to offer. I ought to feel good about myself. I ought to feel safe, secure, and important.

But I don't. Why don't I? Why is it that, when I face myself, I realize that I am dominated by fear, anxiety, suspicion, and guardedness, and not the OKness that everyone sees in me.

Sure, I have fun sometimes. I spend lots of time with friends and loved ones. I take pleasure in what I have and what I can do with it. I am proud of my achievements and of my place in my community. Over and over, I remind myself of just how well I have done, and of how fortunate I am. I tell myself that I ought to be completely satisfied and happy with all the comfort and security that is mine.

Only I am not. Most of the time, I feel anxious and afraid, and even depressed. I'm not even sure any more if anyone really cares about me.

It looked so utterly desirable – this culture of separation. Living in it, I have more than I can ever need or use. I don't have to be – and I'm not – dependent upon any other person – and certainly not God. What is the matter, then, that deep inside of me, I am so dissatisfied and miserable and unhappy?

Could it be that, long ago, I made the wrong choice? Do I – does anyone – have the capacity and the resources to “go it alone” in this life, and escape from the deep inner misery and unhappiness? My own experience tells me that I, at least, do not have that capacity.

It appears to me that what has happened to me is, in the final analysis, the inevitable outcome of my choice to live in a culture of separation – a state of sin. I could have chosen differently.

Fortunately, I still can.

I can choose to live in a culture of love in partnership with God. I can accept that God has given me my very being, and all the resources I need to live a fully and satisfying life in company with all other living creatures.

When I choose to live in a culture of love in partnership with God, I no longer need to fear death. I have no need to expend emotional and physical energy to try to save myself. Saving me is in God's hands. And I am free to taste and experience the fullness of life. I am secure in the faith-knowledge that I dwell in the hands of a loving God. I am free to devote all the resources of my life to being a creation in God's own image, showing my fellow creatures the same love with which I am already loved. I am free to use my life up in ministry.

I think about how different my life would have been had I made this decision to begin with. I might well have gotten the same education, entered the same profession, and been equally successful. The people around me might well see me exactly as they did. I might well have the same ideal family. The externals of my life might well appear just as they have all these years.

The difference would have to do with my view of myself, my outlook on life, and my relationship with God – and with how I would feel deep inside myself.

Anxiety and fear would not exist when I live in a culture of love. Nor would guardedness and defensiveness. Nor would I have to hoard extravagantly against possible need in the future. No fortresses would be necessary. Suspicion and distrust would not exist. I, and all who shared that culture with me, would know what it means to be free – to love unconditionally – and to be loved unconditionally.

It would be the good life that God created human beings to experience.

I don't need to write in "would" terms. The choice is always before me. God never closes that door. I can always choose to live in a culture of love.