

THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH

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Speaking generally, we must concede that the above title is warranted. Our readers no doubt have much to be thankful for in their congregations - but probably also some causes for concern. It is a constant battle for God's people to press forward to heaven, walk the narrow path of holiness, and avoid the injurious influences of the world.

Given the limited time at the means of grace compared with exposure to the world, it is a marvel that Christians do so well. When we think of our time at the *private* means (Quiet Time, etc.), and *public* means (services and meetings) compared with all those hours at work and at leisure-time activities - then add in our corrupt hearts, and a tireless devil - it is a *miracle* we do so well! It is proof of the supernaturalness of Christianity that "The righteous ... holds on his way, and he that hath clean hands [is] stronger and stronger" (Job 17:9).

However, the world is too much with us all. In the 19th century, Rabbi Duncan said,

Conformity to the world is one of the most besetting sins of the professing church at the present day.

In the 20th century, 1982, Howard Snyder wrote,

Worldliness is the greatest threat to the Church today. In other ages, the Church has suffered from dead orthodoxy, live heresy, flight from the world, and other maladies. But the painful truth today is that the Church is guilty of massive accommodation to the world.

And in our 21st century, Joel Beeke has said,

Worldliness is destroying the church of Jesus Christ. Christians and churches that fall prey to it lose their saltiness. The time is thus right for us to biblically expose and condemn worldliness, and to promote the alternatives of genuine piety and holiness.

The problem of worldliness is prevalent and pressing.

At this point, we need a definition of worldliness. It is not easy to describe. If this were fifty years ago, everybody would know what it is. There was an accepted "list," which acted as a ready-reckoner of what was acceptable and what was not. It tended to define worldliness in terms of no smoking, no alcohol, women not wearing make-up and jewellery, no cinema-going, no listening to popular music, no going out with girls until you meet the one you will marry, not owning expensive things, etc. Mostly it was what Christians should *not* do: negatives to live by. It was rather lop-sided, though well-meant. It did not, however, fully reflect scripture's teaching and wisdom on the matter.

We have left that behind now. No "list" of taboos exists to guide us anymore. Instead, a supposed Christian liberty has replaced it, that indulges many things our Christian forebears frowned upon. It even claims that if questionable things are done to the glory of God it can be justified. Trouble is, the glory of God is subjectively-defined. For instance, a Missionary leader ran on the Lord's Day in the London Marathon to raise funds - listening

to an MP3 player with hymns, so that he ran “to the glory of God”! If the “list” tended to legalism, the new liberty tends to antinomianism.

Someone has defined worldliness as,

being attached to, engrossed in, or preoccupied with the things of this temporal life ... worldliness means accepting the values, mores, and practices of the nice, but unbelieving, society around us without discerning whether or not those values, mores, and practices are biblical.

Here is a suggested definition of our own,

Worldliness is whenever our thinking, attitudes, motives, desires, speech, relationships, bearing, and conduct become less scrupulously scriptural - and more redolent of ungodly and unrighteous people in the world.

In the words of Romans 12:2, being “conformed to this world:” instead of being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” to “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” When we are converted, we receive “a new heart ... and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 36:26). This creates, not only a new relationship with God, but a new relationship to the world also (Galatians 1:4). It puts us out of love with it, moves us away from it – so that we feel ill at ease, and most comfortable when among the people of God or doing specifically Christian things.

However, remaining sin can so easily draw us into friendship with the world, which is enmity with God (James 4:4). Bunyan said, “Things present and our fleshly appetite are such near neighbours together.”

Let’s put it positively. What is it to be the *opposite* of worldly? Again, our own definition,

A truly Christian mind-set and lifestyle – formed by scripture, expressed in moderation, walked out in the tender fear of God, sweetened by communion with Jesus, quickened by the Holy Spirit, and restored when necessary by chastening.

Throughout the Bible, it is the Lord’s people maintaining their difference from the world. It doesn’t mean separation from it in the sense of retreating from it, for our Lord has said, “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil” (John 17:15). However, blur that difference, and it is worldliness to varying degrees. Let us identify some symptoms, highlight some causes, and suggest some remedies.

1. IDENTIFY SOME SYMPTOMS

The Christian assembly is called out of the world. Behaviour there should reflect the will of God and not the spirit of the age in which we live. The church must be in the world, not the world in the church: “how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

a] Let us think about our priorities.

Our Lord says, “but seek ye *first* the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). This is not only the antidote to worldly care, but to worldliness itself. However, is this priority always ours?

Regarding the *Lord's Day*. This is when heaven is opened and the world can be shut out from us. It throws our unworldliness into full relief when we "remember the Sabbath day" and "call the Sabbath a delight" (Exodus 20:8; Isaiah 58:13). However, how many overlook preparation for the day the previous evening, and are yawning on Sabbath morning through staying up too late the night before. Or, skip attendance at services and meetings for *no valid* reason (Hebrews 10:25). And what about our thoughtless, carnal, impression-dampening conversation after the service?

Then, what about the private hours of the Sabbath: is it still for us God's day - "and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words" (Isaiah 58:13)? How our unspiritual hearts can reveal themselves like those people in Amos 8:5 and Malachi 1:13 "When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat?" ... "Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it!"

Another priority is *our stewardship*. Dr. Lloyd-Jones once said, "The more spiritual you are, the more simple will your life be." That is so very true, and so very searching. Are our hearts and lives cluttered with too many "things," because we fail to see that everything is entrusted to us and must be accounted for when the Master returns?

And *self-denying service*. Paul had to say that he could only ask Timothy to go to Philippi for him, "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Philippians 2:21). How many selfish believers there are, who do little for the kingdom of God because their priorities in life are not right! How much more might be accomplished if they were! The phrase, "The faithful few" is a terrible indictment of the worldly apathy of so many "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1) today.

Important decisions also involve priorities. When they are right, a choice concerning, say, job relocation will make the whereabouts of a good church come before a dream house. Holiday destinations, too, will revolve around where we can reach "the house of my master's brethren" (Genesis 24:27). And where we might retire to, if spared, will mean our spiritual home comes before any other consideration. Like Abraham, we will seek to pitch our tent where our altar is.

2] Let us think about attitudes.

Our lives can be free from scandalous sins, and yet conceal *heart-sins* like pride, jealousy, an unforgiving spirit, a "root of bitterness" (Hebrews 12:15b), enmity and rivalry – and a thousand inward wickednesses our conscience has made peace with long ago. The fact that we find it easier to "weep with them that weep" than "rejoice with them that do rejoice" (Romans 12:15) shows the bent of our corrupt hearts.

What a many-sidedly sinful attitude lies behind *backbiting* – running a person down to others when he or she is not present. Scripture condemns "a backbiting tongue" (Proverbs 25:23), yet how readily we indulge it. Pride, spite, fear and a host of other sins lie behind such evil speaking. It is true that in certain cases it is right to speak about someone who is not present, but three questions should condition this: Is it *necessary*? Is it *kind*? Is it *true*?

An *holier-than-thou* attitude can also be worldliness in an ironic form. As can the spiritual snobbery of Christians who fancy they are more faithful and diligent than others. Also,

self-importance, having hidden agendas, lack of honesty, despising divine chastening (Hebrews 12:5) all exude the world's spirit and attitude more than we know.

3] Conduct.

The way we dress and our personal bearing reveal how much God's word governs us – or how much the world holds sway. Female attire is not a neutral matter: "that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness" (1 Timothy 2:9). This is not to stifle dress sense, personal taste, etc., but it does require that the body be properly covered, and that men are not embarrassed or have to struggle with impure thoughts and desires (Matthew 5:28).

Likewise, there is a chivalry due from men to women: **1 Pet. 3:8 be courteous.** A godly man, whether married or unmarried, will never "flirt" with the opposite sex, for that is the way of world in its unsanctified urges, which only convention and reputation restrain. A woman should be able to feel feminine and safe in the presence of a Christian and a gentleman.

4] Worship.

Like the Sabbath, this is another index of spiritual religion. In worship, the church comes to its fullest expression. Therefore God regulates it by what *He* requires of us, and does not leave us to do what is most "enjoyable." Worship is for acceptance and glory, and this vertical plane comes first. The way a church worships expresses its view of God - and ultimately will govern and determine its view of God.

However, our hedonistic society has no time for weighty and solemn things. Casualness, lack of deference, an entertainment mentality are the order of the day, even intruding into what is regarded as sacrosanct. Tragically, for the last forty years, the church has succumbed to this and shifted its worship to the horizontal plane and to "will worship" (Colossians 2:23). The criteria nowadays is not, "Will this glorify God?" but, "This is great music, we feel liberated, it makes outsiders comfortable, etc." We tend to think this has been primarily through the charismatic movement, which is true. However, I remember an older couple telling me of those in a Brethren assembly in the late 1950s agitating for the use of skiffle, "to keep the young people."

5] Ministers and office-bearers.

If worldliness is found in us, it will spread to the church. It can be as basic as our prayer life – are we known for a busyness for God more than a busyness with God? The barrenness of a busy life can lead others astray. It was said of M'Cheyne's preaching that it was an extension of his prayer life, "His preaching was a continuation of his prayers. In both he spoke from within the veil, his hand on the mercy seat, and his eye fixed on things invisible."

Lack of personal discipline, a wrong spirit (Romans 1:9), controlled by numbers of people attending, (in the case of ministers) complaining about the salary, ambition for a name and reputation (we are just servants, Mark 9:35), compromise through fear of making a stand, jealousy of fellow-servants - and a host of other carnalities can show how little separated from the world and unto God we are. Professor John Murray once wrote: "Whenever we cease to offer resistance to the world, then we have become victims of the world."