

# THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH: 3

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"Yes, I saw a lot of John," said a member of his family, who had been visiting friends, "he is getting on in the world." There was a moment's pause, and then his mother asked, "Which world?"

The old *Sunday School Times* anecdote sounds a warning that is never dated. Churches are comprised of individuals. If they have "Johns," their character is affected accordingly. Yet, too many churches *are* "getting on in the world" – *this* world. And, although in the short term it seems to achieve gains in attendance (less biblical demands), in the longer term it will produce carnality (less biblical standards), and in the final term it may lead to apostasy (nothing biblical left).

One of the most challenging passages of scripture for each local church to consider is 1 Corinthians 3:12-15,

Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble;  
Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.  
If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.  
If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

We build upon Christ, the one Foundation. However, two kinds of superstructure can go up. "Wood, hay and stubble" represent worthless things: light, frivolous, commonplace. Matthew Henry suggests these include, "Corrupt opinions and doctrines, or vain inventions and usages in the worship of God." On the other hand, "gold, silver and precious stones" represent what is truly of God: weighty, solid, precious, enduring. This is the difference between worldly activity in the church, and what is biblical and spiritual; between the pragmatic and the principled.

What counts is "the day" that shall "declare it." The Lord will return and we shall all give account. He will inspect our works as One whose "eyes (are) as a flame of fire" (Revelation 19:12). There will be the fiery trial of everything we have believed and practised. As He tests it, the "wood, hay and stubble" will be "burned" and their perpetrators will "suffer loss." The "gold, silver and precious stones" will "abide" and faithful believers will "receive a reward."

This teaches some important lessons.

a] To be Christ's church in this world is serious.

What we believe and what we do has eternal repercussions. Justification shields us from condemnation on the great Day, but it does not exempt us from the assessment of our works, and greater or lesser degrees of glory in heaven. Separation from the world in obedience to scripture is no small matter. Doing God's work in God's way is everything, for time and eternity.

b] Largeness of numbers and apparent success are not the criteria.

The Lord will “try every man’s work *of what sort it is*” – not “*how much* it is.” Quality is what counts. Reality is what matters. So many churches justify worldly methods by pointing to increased attendances. Yet, as Dinsdale T. Young once pointed out, the only full place of worship recorded in scripture is the temple of Baal (2 Kings 10:21)! Being full of the Lord’s presence and favour counts for infinitely more, now and forever.

c] What if everything done in Christ’s church were measured by this passage? Much of what goes on would cease overnight. Reformation would begin. In addition, we would have the benchmark with which to measure everything we hold to and work for.

These considerations lead us to our final article on worldliness in the church. In our first, we sought to **1. Identify some symptoms**. Then we endeavoured to **2. Highlight some causes**. Now we must endeavour to,

### **3. Suggest some remedies**

Here are a few considerations to encourage us to avoid worldliness in the House of God and strive for what pleases Him.

1] Remember that this problem is nothing new.

The world has been in the church as long as the flesh remains in each Christian (Galatians 6:17). At Philippi, two women were not speaking to each other (Philippians 4:2). At Corinth it was worse. There were divisions (1 Corinthians ch.1-3), sin undisciplined (5:1,2; 6:1,4), drunkenness at the Lord’s table (11:20,21), pride and anarchy in the worship (ch.12 and 14), questioning the doctrine of the resurrection (ch.15), rebelling against Paul’s authority (2 Corinthians 11). In the church to which John wrote there was proud “Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, (who) receiveth us not” (3 John 9).

The history of God’s church down to today is replete with worldly and carnal behaviour within its ranks. We should not be dismayed to the point of imagining that this is unprecedented. It has all happened before – and has been dealt with before. Biblical reformation and revival are God’s twin purges to restore His church to her purity and order. Let us continue to work and pray for these in our day.

2] Ministers and congregations must reckon with *all* of God’s word.

The Scriptures are holy in themselves (2 Timothy 3:15) and they are an instrument to make *us* holy (3:17). Therefore we must be faithful to everything God says in His word. In preaching, it must be “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). No subject must be omitted for fear of giving offence. The apostle was committed “to fulfil (margin: ‘fully to preach’) the word of God” (Colossians 1:25). Only a full-orbed pastoral ministry will touch on everything necessary for the sanctification of the life and worship of God’s people.

A worldly-wise Christian once said to G. Campbell Morgan: “The preacher must catch the spirit of the age.” In a flash Morgan replied, “God forgive him if he does. The preacher’s business is to *correct* the spirit of the age.” We agree with Morgan. Yet, where is such boldness and conviction in preaching and pastoral leadership these days? Let us endeavour so to preach and so to hear, that things are corrected and

regulated according to God's holy word. When faith is thus built up, worldliness is left behind: "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

The importance of *application* in preaching cannot be stressed enough. Sermons that are worked out, and their "uses" made clear relevantly and faithfully will reach further than the mere understanding. Tender hearts and submissive wills will be moved, so that we pray, "Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way" (Psalm 119:37). Where there seems orthodox preaching from the pulpit, yet *unorthodox* worship and conduct in the pew, something is terribly wrong.

Likewise, where gracious hearts are being fed and exercised through pastoral preaching, there will be much less room for "ungodliness and worldly lusts" (Titus 2:12). If Christ's flock are feeding in the green pastures, they are contented, and such united pleasure prevents many problems and divisions beginning in the first place.

3] Let us strenuously resist modern worship.

Worship is the area where much of the battle for truth rages today. In the 1960s, the moral revolution called "The Permissive Society" transformed Britain beyond recognition. Few accept that it also began to transform evangelicalism – through a *spiritual* revolution called "The Charismatic Movement." Far from being the Holy Spirit, it was the spirit of the age invading the church, with its pretensions to "miracles" and its exuberant, fleshly worship. It spawned a whole industry of worship songs and singers making sums of money from sheet music, songbooks, CDs, DVDs and ticket prices for gigs. And it has made evangelical church feel they are missing something in worship. That "something" is the clubbing culture that has entered the church.

To this day, church after church succumbs to the assumptions of the Charismatic Movement, like an aggressive virus invading a body. It is accepted that the church must change its evangelism and worship in order to survive. Which means the worldly techniques and methods of charismatism. Pews become chairs, pulpits stages, the organ a music band, a microphone the mixing console, and the minister a worship leader. To the grief to the discerning and godly (who often end up leaving their church for somewhere God-fearing), and to the betrayal of the gospel itself, such churches have become worldly. For a tragic example of this, see <http://www.strateias.org/together.htm>

The usual approach these days is to say that worship is a "secondary issue," depending upon personal preference. And in any case, the gospel is not affected. However, is this true?

a] This would be incredulous to Christians of better times.

Past generations of the godly jealously guarded divine worship. It is true that past evangelicalism may have lacked a fully worked out biblical understanding of how God says we are to worship Him. The fact that it capitulated to charismatism, particularly in worship, shows this. However, spiritual instincts were right, and nothing was allowed that was incompatible with reverence. For instance, Dr. Lloyd-Jones once said that the organ was a much more appropriate instrument to lead praise to God than a saxophone, because the latter sounded "sensuous."

That the character of God's worship is a matter of taste and preference would also be incredulous to the biblical writers. Moses records the Lord giving the 10 Commandments and the first four directly concern His worship: no other gods ... no graven image ... no irreverence concerning His name ... sanctifying the Sabbath (Exodus 20:3-11). In other words - He is the sole Object of worship ... He must not be (mis)represented in any way ... He must only be worshipped with "reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:36) ... His worship is to be as set apart from common use as much as His day is. Later, after God judged Nadab and Abihu for offering "strange fire strange before the LORD, which he commanded them not" (Leviticus 10:1), He said, "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified" (10:3).

Moreover, our Lord's pattern prayer makes revering God the controlling priority in all our approaches to Him, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name..." (Matthew 6:9). In scripture, every encounter a man has with God prostrates him, whether it is Abraham (Genesis 17:3), Joshua (Joshua 5:14), Job (Job 42:5,6), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Peter (Luke 5:8) or John (Revelation 1:17). The Lord is "fearful in praises" (Exodus 15:11) which means, as Adam Clarke expresses it, "Such glorious holiness cannot be approached without the deepest reverence and fear, even by angels, who veil their faces before the majesty of God. How then should man, who is only sin and dust, approach the presence of his Maker!" It is impossible to truly know God and not be reverent, and worship accordingly.

c] The way God is worshipped *does* affect what the church believes.

If worship is offered to God in the idiom and style of secular rock music, are not such "worshippers" expressing their ignorance of who God really is? Does it not also beg the question as to whether they are worshipping the true God at all? Calvin said that Scripture is "the spectacles bleary-eyed men put on in order to see the true God." Many arm-waving and swaying congregations these days, cut loose from scripture, may well be worshipping a god they think sanctions such irreverence – a god of their own imagination. It may well be idolatry and "departing from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12).

The character of the church's worship affects its whole life. Worship like this is bound to carnalise and worldlyfy a Christian church, and there is growing evidence that this is happening. Immodesty of dress, disrespect of spiritual authority, lax keeping of the Sabbath all prove revealing. When the worship is downgraded, other things are downgraded as well. Dr. Samuel Johnson once said if he could control the nation's ballads he cared not who made its laws. The point being that what is sung often has a deeper effect than what is inculcated. The way a church worships expresses its view of God. Ultimately, it will govern and determine its view of God. However, when reverent and scriptural worship is maintained, the world is at bay and heaven comes near, "O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3).\*

FN \*For the editor's other articles on this subject, which consider the matter more fully, see

<http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/worship.html>

4] We ministers must be a model of holiness and other-worldliness.

Other things being equal, our people are going to rise as high above the world as our example will lift them. The next most powerful message after the sermon is an

exemplary life: “be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” ... “ensamples to the flock” ... “In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity” (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3; Titus 2:7). Our Christian walk is a message that inspires long after the sermon has finished. “A minister’s life is the life of his ministry.”

The importance of this cannot be overstated. Among the qualification for office in the church, personal character and domestic qualities outnumber other factors. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 the requisite qualities for elders and deacons nearly all relate to what kind of a Christian man, husband, father, head of household each has proved to be. These are highly visible things, that show the true worth of God’s servants and show their people the way.

This is borne out by the fact that, in dealing with carnality in the seven churches of Asia, our Lord addressed His words “Unto the angel of the church...” – meaning the God-sent messenger, the Minister (see Revelation chapters 2 and 3). A worldly pastor will have a worldly flock; a spiritual pastor will at least show his people the way to “overcome the world” (1 John 5:4). Baxter’s words in *The Reformed Pastor* are more needed now than ever:

O brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts: keep out lusts and passions, and worldly inclinations; keep up the life of faith, and love, and zeal: be much at home, and be much with God. If it be not your daily business to study your own hearts, and to subdue corruption, and to walk with God — if you make not this a work to which you constancy attend, all will go wrong, and you will starve your hearers; ... Above all, be much in secret prayer and meditation. Thence you must fetch the heavenly fire that must kindle your sacrifices: remember, you cannot decline and neglect your duty, to your own hurt alone; many will be losers by it as well as you. For your people’s sakes, therefore, look to your hearts

Paul could say, “But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life” (2 Timothy 3:10). Ministers must be “the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 8:23) and the role model for all ages in their congregations. A compelling example of moderation (1 Corinthians 7:31; Philippians 4:5); moral cleanness (1 Thessalonians 4:3); savoury and sound speech (Colossians 4:5; Titus 2:8); patience in suffering (2 Corinthians 6:4); unmoved by either flattery or threatening (Galatians 1:10); prayerfulness (2 Timothy 1:3); heavenly-mindedness (Philippians 1:21-23). The words of Horatius Bonar in his *Night of Weeping* are apt,

His cure for worldliness is the bringing before us of another world, more glorious than that which He calls on us to forsake. There is no thorough cure for it but this. It is lack of faith that makes us worldlings; and when the believing eye gets fixed on the world to come, then we learn to set our affections on things above ... The opposite of worldliness is heavenly mindedness or spiritual mindedness. This, the new relish which the Holy Spirit imparts at conversion, in some measure produces. But it is feeble. It easily gives way. It is not keen enough to withstand much temptation. God’s wish is to impart a keener relish for the things of God and to destroy the relish for the things of time.

If the Pastor’s life and lifestyle is contagious heavenward, would this not make his people feel that the world is nothing but “vanity and vexation of spirit” – nothing, compared to the deeply satisfying joys of fellowship with God?

5] Remember the cause is not ours but God's.

Our Lord prayed for His people in this world, that God would "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:15,17) – and God the Father is answering that prayer. He *will* perfect that which concerns us (Psalm 138:8). It is His will that they be "delivered from this present evil world" (Galatians 1:4) – and that will shall be done.

Christ has bought His Church at too dear a price to see her defiled and besmirched by this evil world. He who ransomed her with His blood will cleanse and sanctify her with His word in the power of His Spirit (Ephesians 5:26). And when she does slip into worldliness, He will exchange the word for the rod – the rod of chastisement (Hebrews 12:5-11) ... "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Revelation 3:19). That sanctification will be completed in glorification, when the church is finally out of the world and forever into a better.

All this the Lord will accomplish. Let us, by His grace, be faithful in life, witness and labour. We contribute to this great and grand purpose more than we know. May it be that He can say of us, "This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise" (Isaiah 43:21).