



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

"Worldliness"

by J P Thackway, editor of *The Bible League Quarterly* where this second article on the subject of worldliness appeared in the October — December 2002 issue



Scripture uses the expression "the world" in various ways. It occurs more than 200 times in the Bible, but it does not always mean the same thing. In studying God's Word, we must remember that the same word or phrase can be referring to different things. Concerning "the world," Handley Moule wrote, "The reader will find the context a sure clue in all cases, and the study will be pregnant of instruction."

Universe

For example, sometimes "the world" refers to that part of the physical universe where we live: "The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Psalm 21:4). Our planet together with the universe is the handiwork of God. It exhibits His wisdom (Psalm 104:24), love (Psalm 145:9) and power (Psalm 29). Creation is also attributed to God's Son: "the world was made by him" (John 1:9), because He is one with the Father. Here, the New Testament word for "world" is kosmos, which means arrangement, ornament, decoration, adornment: it emphasises how beautiful this

material world is. From this word, we derive our English term "cosmetic." This reminds us that at the creation God called it all "very good" (Genesis 1:31). There is nothing evil about the physical world itself.

Inhabitants

Mankind is the most important part of God's earth (Proverbs 8:31), therefore "the world" can refer to its inhabitants, the human population: "Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him" (Psalm 33:8). The Pharisees, dismayed by our Lord's popularity, once hyperbolically exclaimed, "Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him" (John 12:19). The world's population in our day stands at more than 6 billion people, in 11 main language families, speaking 6,000 distinct languages. Yet not one of them is anonymous to God, and He is calling out a people for Himself from among them (1 Timothy 4:10). Scripture also refers to "the world" as something that does not last long. In its present state it is transitory, "the world passeth away" (1 John 2:17; cf 1 Corinthians 7:31). The heavens (with the earth) will one day be taken down, "They shall perish, ... yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed" (Psalm 102:26). Only what is uncreated (the Godhead) is everlasting — together with what is appointed to last (our souls, heaven and hell) and what is redeemed (the Church, the new heavens and earth). This should regulate our priorities, because only what lasts forever is worth living for. Treasures laid up on this frail earth will perish with it.

Other Meanings

Some other meanings appear in scripture. For instance, in Hebrews 9:1 the writer describes a "worldly sanctuary." He means that the tabernacle and its contents are "the pat-



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terns of things in the heavens" (verse 23) — pictures on earth of real things in heaven. Twice (Ephesians 1:21 and 1 Tim.4:8) Paul contrasts this present time-state with our future heaven: "in this world ... in that which is to come;" "the life that now is, and of that which is to come." It is always good to be reminded of the glorious "afterward" (Psalm 73:24). So far, these definitions of "the world" have been fairly neutral. If this were all that scripture means by it we would perhaps not be considering our present subject. The same term, however, has a more specialised frame of reference. A sinister dimension leads us to the present aspect of our study. What is this other definition of "the world"? If we consider this carefully now, we will be in a better position to understand the meaning of the term "worldliness."

1. "The world" is human society considered as non-and anti-Christian.

Scripture uses the term with reference to mankind as fallen from God and in organised rebellion against Him. This is the unbelieving part of the world: the majority, the ungodly and unrighteous (Romans 1:18; 3:19). "The world" in this sense, then, means human society — everyone else besides God's redeemed and holy ones — "this present evil world" (Galatians 1:4). Bishop Ryle once defined it like this: "When I speak of 'the world' ... I mean those people who think only, or chiefly, of this world's things, and neglect the world to come — the people who are always thinking more of the earth than of heaven, more of time than of eternity, more of the body than of the soul, more of pleasing man than of pleasing God. It is of them and their ways, habits, customs, opinions, practices, tastes, aims, spirit, and tone, that I am speaking when I speak of 'the world.' This is the world from which St. Paul tells us to 'Come out and be separate.'" We can see that Christians are not designated by this term or included in it. They are the opposite of all this. The Lord has chosen them out of the world (John 15:19), set them apart for Himself (Psalm 4:3) and given them affections that are set on higher things (Colossians 3:1). Being born "from above" (John 3:3 margin), and with a nature akin to God (2 Peter 1:4), grace enables them to live above this wicked world (1 John 5:4). Here, then, are two diametrically opposed kingdoms and cultures. They each have their distinctive people and character — and are mutually exclusive.

2. The world is a under the sway of God's enemy.

"We are of God" writes John to Christians, but he describes fallen human society in this way, "the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 5:19). That the latter word refers to the devil is clear because the same Greek phrase is translated "wicked one" in the previous verse. It is a stark description. "Lieth in" is the same as in Luke 2:12 where the infant Christ is said to be "lying in a manger." The idea is of peacefully reposing in a comfortable place, secure and oblivious to any danger. Christians are "of God" — the product of a divine work; unbelievers "(lie) in wickedness" — they remain as they are by nature. When our Lord was here on earth, He referred three times to "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Scripture reveals to us the complete hold Satan has upon earth's unbelieving population. Being its "god" (the one they serve), he has "blinded their minds" (2 Corinthians 4:4); "deceived them" (Revelation 20:10); filled them with "enmity" against God (Genesis 3:15); stirs them up to live in rebellion and "disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2); holds them in a terrible "power" (Colossians 1:13) and will bring them down with him to "everlasting fire" (Matthew 25:41). This being so, it follows



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that Christians live in enemy territory here. It is occupied by our arch-enemy, Satan, and he has willing representatives in all non-Christians. There is a "spirit of the world" (1 Corinthians 2:12) in their every thought, word and deed. The world reflects the works of the devil. His children are haters of God (Romans 1:30), of Christ and Christians (John 15:18), of God's law (Romans 8:7), of the Bible (Jeremiah 36:23), of the Sabbath day (Amos 8:5), of holiness (Jeremiah 6:16) — and of everything else to do with God, Christ and heaven. Not only so, but they are lovers of everything that is opposite to God (2 Timothy 3:2-4). The more society is leavened by true Christianity, of course, the more restrained and refined things will be. We are thankful for the civilizing influence of the Bible, particularly here in the UK. Social conscience, moral decency, charitableness, family values, faithfulness to marriage vows, respect for authority, courteousness, law-abiding, etc. are still with us to some degree. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report" (Philippians 4:8) are to be gratefully cherished wherever we find them. May the Lord in mercy "strengthen the things which remain" (Revelation 3:2). Moreover, not everything in this world is bad or out of bounds for Christians. Many wholesome and interesting things there are that can be "used but not abused" (1 Corinthians 7:31) within stewardship of time and money. "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (Colossians 2:21) is asceticism and not Christianity. Although the enemy holds sway in this present world, his power is only exercised under the sovereignty of Christ: for our Saviour is "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). As Christians, the Lord entrusts us "richly" with "all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17) under this lordship of Christ.

3. The world is in solidarity against God and holiness.

Ungodly society stands together against the gospel and the standards of real religion. At a Christian funeral where the gospel is preached, the unbelievers will remain together afterwards - some puffing nervously on cigarettes - while believers will quietly rejoice at what they have seen and heard. Darkness and light do not mix well (John 3:19-21). However, the world is not usually outnumbered by the church. Normally it predominates and shows us where it stands. It now has its own language of "Political Correctness." Sodomy is being "gay." Fornication is "being in a relationship." The murder of unborn babies is called "termination." Grotesque idolatry is called "comparative religion," treacherous betrayal of the gospel with ecumenists is called "multi-faith worship," the God-denying theory of evolution is called "science," stealing small amounts of money is "fiddling," and so on. The world's language, when referring to sin, has its euphemisms to remove heaven's stigma. God says what things are, but the rebellious and arrogant world gives it other names; "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). Moreover, the world deeply resents Christians making pronouncements about it. It is wounded and hurt when value judgments are made upon its beliefs and behaviour. It has its own set of epithets ready for any who dare comment adversely. "Fundamentalist," "bigoted," "draconian," "racist," "xenophobic," "homophobic," "fascist," "unscientific," "chauvinist," "stereotypical," "self-righteous," are just some of the abuse ready to hand for any plain speaker on law and order, creationism, moral, gender or family issues. Our tolerant society becomes remarkably intolerant whenever any God-fearing and Christian stand is made. The world will often vigorously defend sins the Bible condemns and Christians hate: vulgar-



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ity, indecency and immodesty, foul language, gross injustice, laziness and self-serving, wild enthusiasm for trivial things, drunkenness, riotous partying, the pursuit of pleasure as the main goal in life, fashion and vanity, and the rest. The world protects itself from criticism — and yet unashamedly vaunts its own degeneracy and talk. It is not ashamed to attribute everything good to “luck,” to call work “a necessary evil,” live from one foreign holiday to the next, spend vast amounts of time in front of the television, virtually deify its pet animals, and make the brevity of life the excuse to live for today. The world even has its own method of emptying solemn Bible words of their content. It assigns them to a different context to guarantee they are shorn of their weighty and convicting impact. Words like “wicked” (now meaning ‘very impressive’), “evil” (meaning ‘disagreeable’), “hell” (to express annoyance, or awful people: ‘Neighbours from hell’). Not to mention the daring use of God’s name and the name of Christ as swear words. Such awful slang is the world’s method of putting the things of God and of eternity out of the picture altogether. We will only take the danger of worldliness — or conformity to the world — seriously when we see how bad the world really is. And when we realise that the world wants to make Christians like itself. If only believers would not be so narrow and different there would be no pressure exerted or persecution meted out. But Christians love what God loves and hate what God hates (Psalm 119:128; Revelation 2:6). They are too much like God for their own good. Sometimes apathy or benign tolerance seem to prevail: but it is only a surface appearance. Every worldling is the seed of the Serpent: in his or her heart is an implacable antipathy toward godly things and a desire to make the Lord’s people as bad as they are. Only hell itself is worse than this world as a place of divine abhorrence and deadly danger. “Hateful haters!” declared Rabbi Duncan, “A world of hateful haters! Is not this world thus a forehall, an antechamber of hell?”

4. Scripture takes worldliness very seriously.

Therefore, we should take it seriously too. To show how numerous and comprehensive its warnings are, J.C. Ryle brought together twenty-one texts and set them out for his readers to see. Here they are, taken from his helpful book *Practical Religion*, chapter 11, “The World,” “If the texts I am about to quote do not prove that the world is a source of danger to the soul, there is no meaning in words.

(a) Let us hear what St. Paul says.

‘Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Romans 12:2). ‘We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God’ (1 Corinthians 2:12). ‘Christ gave Himself for us, that He might deliver us from this present evil world’ (Galatians 1:4). ‘In time past ye walked according to the course of this world’ (Ephesians 2:2). ‘Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world’ (2 Timothy 4:10).

(b) Let us hear what St. James says.

‘Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world’ (James 1:27). ‘Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God’ (James 4:4).



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(c) Let us hear what St. John says.

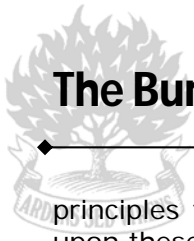
‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.’ ‘And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever’ (1 John 2:15-17). ‘The world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not’ (1 John 3:1). ‘They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them’ (1 John 4:5). ‘Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world’ (1 John 5:4). ‘We know that we are of God and the whole world lieth in wickedness’ (1 John 5:19).

(d) Let us hear, lastly, what the Lord Jesus Christ says. ‘The cares of this world choke the Word, and it becometh unfruitful’ (Matthew 13:22). ‘Ye are of this world: I am not of this world’ (John 8:23). ‘The Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him’ (John 14:17).

‘If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you’ (John 15:18). ‘If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you’ (John 15:19). ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). ‘They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world’ (John 17:16). I make no comment on these twenty-one texts. They speak for themselves. If anyone can read them carefully, and fail to see that ‘the world’ is an enemy to the Christian’s soul, and that there is an utter opposition between the friendship of the world and the friendship of Christ, he is past the reach of argument, and it is waste of time to reason with him. To my eyes they contain a lesson as clear as the sun at noon day.”

5. The term “worldliness” expresses a strange tendency.

It is the inclination in believers to forget what grace has made them and what the Lord requires of them. Our danger is more than the world itself — it is that of living like it and conforming ourselves to it. Being not of the world, it is yet possible for us to be as the world. This, of course, is to go over “to the other side,” it is an ingratitude and unfaithfulness nothing short of spiritual adultery (James 4:4). What we cheerfully renounced in order to follow Christ still fascinates and attracts us. Like Israel at the Exodus: they went out of Egypt but Egypt did not go out of them. That was the root of all their troubles in their wilderness journeys. We are referring, of course, to an ally the world has. Christians have within them “the flesh” (Romans 7:18; 8:12). Although our regeneration has formed a spiritual and heavenly nature within us, it has not replaced the flesh — it has displaced it (Galatians 5:16). We are left with the problem and discipline of remaining sin, our old nature. And this answers to all that is in the world exactly, they are bosom friends. So the world has this ally within us and thus enjoys an advantage. This is why the world can still bedazzle us: why we naturally lust after what it offers and promises. This is how we can be “envious at the foolish ... (and) the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:3). Or, more subtly, how we can unconsciously succumb to the world’s mindset and values. How futile it would be for us to try to escape the pollution of the world by withdrawal and isolation. We might go out of the world, but the world would not go out of us. Our old nature is the world in microcosm. There is, however, a better way. So far we have been laying down



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principles from scripture to serve as a foundation. Next time, God willing, we shall build upon these and consider the subject in more practical terms.

I would like to thank Rev. John Thackway for his kind permission to reprint these two articles from the magazine he edits, "The Bible League Quarterly." I am sure that our readers will have found them most useful and edifying.

The Editor.