



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Worldliness

by J P Thackway, editor of The Bible League Quarterly where this article appeared in its July-September 2002 issue



In the Foreword to John White's book *Flirting with the World*, published in 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."

Twenty years later, our day leaves us with the conviction that things have not grown better but far worse. These words are more uncomfortably true now than they were then.

Issue

Ironically, though, worldliness does not seem to be an issue for the modern church. It is preoccupied with other matters instead. Where the question of its relationship to the world does arise, it coyly avoids language like "separation from the world." This thinking is novel. In the

past, evangelicals viewed any accommodation to the world as treason. It was to be avoided at all costs if they were to please the Lord and serve Him acceptably.

Although separation from the world tended to mean different things to different believers, nonetheless they were agreed that a distinctive Christian life-style, so different from the ungodly around them, was the pre-requisite for God's people. Only then could they be the "salt" and "light" the world needs, and live to the glory of the God who set them apart for Himself (Matthew 5:13-16).

1. Past examples illustrate how important this was.

The traditional emphasis of the Keswick Convention included the danger of conformity to the world. For example, in 1946 the saintly Fred Mitchell addressed the Convention on "Worldliness." His sermon made a deep impression on the 5,000-strong congregation: "startling" is how someone afterwards described it. Keswick printed it in full, to be circulated more widely. While the Bible League takes a different view of sanctification from Keswick teaching, nevertheless the Convention's concern for personal holiness was laudable. We wonder, though, if any preacher there nowadays would tackle the subject of worldliness.

Back in the 1960s, I belonged to Christian Endeavour and attended its Saturday evening meetings at my local church. Founded in 1881 as The Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour, its purpose ever since has been to help young Christians confess Christ and serve Him. Each month, C E held its "Consecration" meeting. This was the opportunity to renew our discipleship to Christ and follow Him more fully. Those gatherings were sober times of worship, being challenged from God's Word and re-dedicating ourselves to the Lord. While the theology of this practice is questionable, like Keswick its aim was laudable. One wonders, though, if this does not look rather quaint in our modern climate. Is C E even still in existence today?



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In 1977, the Life of Faith Christian paper ceased publication, the veteran editor, Mr. H. F. Stevenson, retiring after forty years. The paper became a monthly magazine with a new editorial team and a new emphasis. Iain Murray, writing in *The Banner of Truth* at the time, shrewdly observed: "The change is attributed to rising costs but we are inclined to believe there may be other factors operating. The stand on holiness and separation from the world which was characteristic of evangelicalism in former days and to which, among other things, Mr. Stevenson has maintained an undeviating witness, is beginning to look 'old fashioned' in much of the evangelicalism which is in vogue today."

It was not long before even the monthly Life of Faith folded up.

2. Modern evangelicalism has moved on noticeably.

As if to remind us of this, it is usual now for some Christian publications to carry reviews of secular films and even of popular music CDs. At one time, cinema going was considered inappropriate for Christians - now Christian writers provide them with film reviews! We read positive assessments of the Harry Potter books — and now the film — despite the warnings of Deuteronomy 18:9-13 and Ephesians 5:11. Some Christian young people's magazines feature material that requires us to blink and look again to convince ourselves that we are not reading something from the secular newsstand.

In line with this changed climate, we find that church young people starting at university receive a culture shock, in more ways than one. Trained in their home assemblies to think biblically about their relationship to the world, they meet other Christians with a different perspective. To their dismay, they see such Christians going off to the nightclub late on Fridays, and even to the pub after the Sunday evening service. The unanimity that used to exist on such things has tragically disappeared.

This almost lost conception of worldliness is strikingly seen in the media celebrities who claim to have been converted. The missing factor in their testimonies is separation from the world of which they were so much a part. Two of the latest illustrate this. Apparently Geri Halliwell, of Spice Girls fame, has been helped to faith through the Alpha Course. However, Miss Halliwell seems still very much at home in her ethos, continuing also to promote yoga. Another example is Samantha Fox, the former Sun newspaper "Page Three" model. Claiming that the Alpha Course had a life-changing effect upon her, she continues in the glamour modelling business and says: "I am doing what God wants me to do."

Not so long ago, anyone converted from such backgrounds would have quit their professions, deeming them incompatible with being a Christian (2 Corinthians 6:17,18). This would even include the more serious arts such as Shakespearian theatre, opera and the symphony orchestra. Today, however, it is almost axiomatic that such people remain there to be witnesses. This trend may have begun with the example of Cliff Richard back in 1966. Its repercussions concerning worldliness, however, go well beyond the world of show business.

A related issue here is the Lord's day and Christians in professional sport. With the deregulation of Sunday legislation in England and Wales, many sporting events now take place on God's holy day. The robust example of Eric Liddell, with his refusal to run his heat on Sunday at the 1924 Paris Olympics, is unforgettable. However, these days Christian sports personalities run the risk of losing their careers if a similar stand is made.



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Christians in Sport is an organisation that presumably would provide help to such believers. However, one of their members, Stuart Weir, has recently written a book entitled *What the book says about sport*. In it, the author rejects the creation Sabbath principle of Genesis 2, and with it the fourth commandment of Exodus 20 and its re-iteration in Hebrews 4. With no divine commandment and authority for the Lord's day, the way is opened for Christian sportsmen to compete on God's holy day "to the glory of God"!

Here is something far worse than worldly compromise. This is using (misusing) the Word of God to sanction Sabbath-desecration in the name of sport. It is a solemn and awful responsibility to write a book like this (see Matthew 5:19; James 3:1). While we do not judge the author's motives, nonetheless his book will inevitably encourage worldly Christianity in sport and produce more role models who are a million miles away from Eric Liddell.

3. The church has a new preoccupation.

It would be bad enough if it were simply a matter of Christians disagreeing over what is right or wrong for them to do. It is far worse than that. For modern-day Christians, fear of worldliness has been replaced by a far less healthy fear: their "image." How Christian individuals, Christian societies and local churches appear in the eyes of the world seems to matter very much today. Fear of being judged "old fashioned" grips them much more than "the fear of the Lord" and how "to walk and to please God" (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

For historic evangelicalism, after doctrinal orthodoxy came holy living. No one can deny that these were biblical priorities. A glance at Paul's epistles shows this, where the first chapters are doctrinal and experiential, with the concluding ones being applied and practical: compare Ephesians chapters 1-3 with 4-6, and Romans 1-11 with 12-16.

The new engagement with the world, however, has produced a culture where separation from it is equated with seriously hindering meaningful witness. A naive and dangerous liaison now exists between the Christian and the world. Not what is biblical but what is relevant is the criterion. This is a very significant shift of concern. It will continue to have far-reaching repercussions unless current thinking and practice are changed.

Compared with this, it is refreshing to see how free from "street credibility" the early Christians were. "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you" (1 John 3:13) wrote the apostle John. "He must increase, but I must decrease," declared the Baptist (John 3:30). Warned James, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, 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). Not surprisingly, these divine imperatives are little noticed by today's "strangers and pilgrims" (1 Peter 2:11).

4. There used to be a "list."

In their concern to spell out these things practically, our Christian forebears informally drew up a list of things that were considered taboo for the Lord's people. It was an almost unwritten directory, yet everybody knew what it contained. John White, in the book mentioned above, expressed it like this:

"Thou shalt not smoke. Thou shalt not drink alcohol. Thou shalt not dress too fashionably. Thou shalt not buy season tickets to the ballet."

There were many other forbidden things on the list too. However, the list has now gone.



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The militant permissiveness of the 1960s that dismantled moral conventions from society, has virtually done the same in the church. The colossal challenge back then to everything virtuous and sacred made the list look quaint. Consequently, large sections of evangelicalism were embarrassed and distanced themselves from it. Nothing better has replaced the list, and a generation of Christians has grown up without these traditional rules to sensitise their conscience.

The list was a mixed blessing. Although it served as a ready reckoner for Christian living, it nonetheless was largely man-made. It described Christian living in terms of specific dos and don'ts. Believers branded certain things "worldly" and other things they considered safe. It equated worldliness with certain forms of behaviour, whereas (as I hope to show) it includes that but is also much bigger than that.

Another problem with the list was that it tended to define holiness in terms of what you do not do. This meant that God's people found themselves thinking negatively about most things and sometimes fell into bondage. When well-meaning people legislate for others, it can become Pharisaical. The list tended to go too far — often further than scripture goes, and descended to minutiae — often more punctilious than scripture is. Moreover, to outwardly conform to rules may look like Christian discipleship, but it can be a heavy yoke that is not of Christ's making (Matthew 11:28,29). It can also give rise to pride, introspection, asceticism, despair and a host of other evils - the last things the list meant to produce.

5. Our approach must be firmly earthed in scripture.

God's Word has its own approach to the moral dilemmas we face in a fallen world. While it has a definite list of forbidden things, it also has a list of approved and commanded things: "cease to do evil; learn to do well" (Isaiah 1:16,17). This makes holiness not only separation from sin but also the embracing of qualities that are godly and Christlike.

Moreover, with matters that are not so clear-cut, scripture furnishes us with clear principles to which we expose ourselves. If our sincere desire is to have our steps ordered in God's Word (Psalm 119:133) we shall find ourselves inevitably thinking, feeling, speaking and acting according to the will of our God. Our lives will be continually "transformed" because our minds are being "renewed" (Romans 12:2) - and that will be the opposite of worldliness.

The evangelical taboos have long gone and are superseded by the (apparent) need to relate to the world acceptably and engage with it meaningfully — separation from it is not the issue. We are observing now an over-reaction to the list that resents almost any objective standard for believers, even Holy Scripture and the Ten Commandments. Our new freedom has launched us on a much wider path that puts choice and happiness before truth and righteousness.

Sometime ago a writer expressed his concern: "It was as if people felt they must do all they were free to do. The assertion of Christian liberty became the be-all and end-all of Christian living and believers were spending more and more of their time playing football, going to cinemas and listening to pop music. Spiritual-mindedness and heavenly-mindedness were at a discount and the means of grace a burden." The same writer expressed the belief that "the worst of that phase is past." I fear he is too optimistic.



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The modern indifference, and even hostility, to Christian niceties is far worse than adherence to the list ever was. Legalism is less damaging in the end than laxity. To return to the list, however, is not the answer — to return to the Word is. “To the law and to the testimony” (Isaiah 8:20) must be the rule for our ethics as much as for our doctrine. Clearly there is an urgent need to re-consider the subject of worldliness in the light of scripture and for the times in which we live. This first article has been by way of introduction. In the ones to follow, God willing, we hope to examine the matter more fully.