

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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TRANSFORMED MINDS (Part I)

More statistics on the deplorable state of contemporary Evangelicalism: 40% of all Evangelicals polled believe that it does not matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths are basically the same, people pray to the same God, regardless of their religious beliefs. Over 50% of those polled agreed that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Finally, over half of the Evangelicals polled affirm that a person's first priority and major responsibility is to find self-fulfillment.¹ Thomas Bergler calls this deplorable situation *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*.² Juvenilization tends to create a self-centered, emotionally driven, and intellectually empty faith. In their landmark National Study of Youth and Religion, Christian Smith and his team of researchers found that the majority of American teenagers, even those who are highly involved in church activities, are inarticulate about religious matters. They seldom used words like *faith*, *salvation*, *sin* or even *Jesus* to describe why God and Christianity are important to them. The phrase "feel happy" appeared over 2,000 times in 267 interviews. Bergler's analysis is strikingly similar to that of David Wells³ – the present condition of much of modern Evangelicalism is due to the church becoming enculturated. We need to ditch the false belief that cultural forms are neutral. Every enculturation of Christianity highlights some elements of the faith and obscures others. We must be vigilant and creatively compensate for what gets lost in translation when we use the language of youth culture. For example, if we sing songs that highlight the emotional consolations of the faith, what can we do to help young people also embrace the sufferings that come with following Jesus? Evangelicals, for the most part, are no longer people of truth. The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* is no longer operative in much that passes for evangelical today. Modern sources for authority are to be found in psychology and management theory. "Evangelicals are attracted by movements that have replaced theology with emphases that are relational, therapeutic, charismatic, and managerial (as in church growth). Whatever their virtues, none of these emphases gives truth and theology the place they require in the life and thought of a true disciple."⁴ Over the last few decades Evangelical churches by the boatload have pursued relevance like it was the Holy Grail. This in turn produced more and more accommodation to cultural norms with blissful indifference to the role of the early church creeds and the Protestant Confessions that grew out of the Reformation. Theology was viewed not merely as archaic but a serious liability.⁵ Much like the Middle Ages when very few people could read, the postmodern age that confronts us today is preoccupied with the visual over the verbal. "We believe it if we see it, feel it, experience it. Thoughts get in the way of feelings; conversations are less important than relating. It's like the ooze at the beach that squirts up between your toes, and the problem is that it is not being adequately resisted by Christians."⁶ In Romans 12:1, 2, the Apostle Paul admonishes believers: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."⁷

I. A QUESTION OF ATTITUDE

William James, the famous Harvard professor of Psychology of a past generation, once concluded that "human beings can alter their lives by altering the attitudes of the mind."⁸ James was not the first person to discover this. It is, in fact, embedded in our text. Paul is addressing the Christian attitude to God.

A. Paul's Appeal: The word *therefore* at the beginning of verse 1 is important. The Apostle is referring back to the whole of his epistle and is exhorting the Christians at Rome to respond accordingly. And what is the substance of this appeal? God's Mercy.⁹ "This illustrates what is characteristic of Paul's teaching, that ethics must rest upon the foundation of redemptive accomplishment."¹⁰

B. Paul's Injunction: *Offer your bodies as living sacrifices*. The word *offer* PARASTESAI was the proper term for bringing an offering to the Lord (Leviticus 16:7; Luke 2:22; Colossians 1:22, 28). The language here is clearly that of sacrificial ritual. But note the difference. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice is slain and its blood is shed. Here, the body is presented as a *living sacrifice* (cf. Romans 6:13). This is characterized as being *holy and pleasing to God*. Since we are the Lord's we ought for this very reason to be holy. "It is an affront," wrote Calvin, "to God's holiness to offer Him anything which has not first been consecrated."¹¹

C. Paul's Rationale: This is our *spiritual worship*. The word translated *spiritual* in the ESV Bible is LOGIKEN (used only here and in 1 Peter 2:2) and frequently means "rational" or "reasonable" (as in the KJV). The thought is of worship with understanding (as captured by J.B. Phillip's translation: "intelligent worship"). The word "worship," LATREIAN refers to either worship or service. The point is clear: We are called to serve God in a way that is described as conscious, consecrated devotion. This must be done with knowledge and understanding. It is necessary that we know and apprehend the state of things between us and the true and living God (cf. II Timothy 1:12). This is done with serious consideration, as a matter of great importance. It is, in the Apostle's mind, the *expected* thing to do.

II. THIS WORLD'S SCHEMES

Paul had stated a positive attitude towards God in verse 1. He now links this with a *negative* attitude. This chapter is full of negatives, cf. verses 3, 14, 16, 19, and 21; "There are things the Christian must avoid as well as things to do."¹² Remember that eight of the Ten Commandments are negative because people are sinners.

A. Developing Discernment: Paul's concern here is with behaviors – to be more precise it is our *pattern* of behavior – and this is determined by our pattern of *thought*. We are not to be *conformed* to the pattern of this world. The SUSCHEMATIZO means to adapt a posture or attitude. Here the word is used in the present passive imperative with the negative and is best translated, "Stop allowing yourselves to be fashioned after (or conformed by) the pattern of the world!" Note that the Apostle's injunction is a call to recognition and discernment. Christians are called to obedience, but as Cranfield has noted, it "is not just an obedience in principle. It is rather an obedience of thought and attitude, of word and deed."¹³

III. THIS MINDLESS AGE

The word translated "world" in the ESV is AION and it means "age." The complete expression, "pattern of this world" (TO AIONI TOUTO), literally means "this present (and passing) age."¹⁴ Paul's point is this: The world has its way of thinking and acting – and this is described by God as "evil" (cf. Galatians 1:4 and I Corinthians 2:6, 8). What is meant by "worldliness"? Many Christians think it is only such things as smoking, drinking, dancing, etc. That is not what Paul is alluding to in this text. "To think of worldliness only in those terms is to trivialize what is a far more serious and subtle problem."¹⁵ What characterizes our present age?

A. Autonomous individualism. This is reflected in the "me-first-now" attitude that cloaks itself with terms like "self-fulfillment" and "affirming yourself." The individual is seen as sovereign and much of our social demise has been brought about by excessive individualism.

B. Narcissistic hedonism. Narcissus, you remember from Greek mythology, fell in love with his own reflection. Hedonism, from the Greek word HEDONE, refers to the pursuit of pleasure. The sexual revolution of the 60's symbolized this. The social fruits of this unconstrained hedonism, in addition to the horrible sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS and untold millions of abortions, are loneliness, divorce and suicide, to mention only a few.

C. Reductive naturalism. Sex is reduced to orgasm, persons to bodies, babies to fetuses or worse yet, tissue, etc. All forms of knowing stem from laboratory experimentation, empirical observation or

quantitative analysis. Naturalism argues that reality is a closed system in which there is no God; there is only man and nature. Reality is composed of physical objects alone. Man is no different from anything in nature, and death is the end of man. As such, the universe has no ethical character.

D. Absolute moral relativism. All moral values are merely relative to the changing, processing determinants of human cultures. “This,” in the language of Thomas C. Oden, “points to the depth of the failure of modern consciousness.”¹⁶

These four key motifs are best summarized under the rubric of Secular Humanism. Secularism simply means to operate within the limits of life here on earth. What matters is the now of the present. The here and now is all that there is or will be. It is entirely a “this-worldly” mindset. Humanism is multifaceted, but the major tenets would include: The denial of the relevance of God and the supernatural; the supremacy of human reason; the inevitability of progress (a strong emphasis on evolution) and the belief that human beings are inherently good.

CONCLUSION: Over thirty years ago, noted sociologist Peter Berger observed: “When churches abandon or de-emphasize theology, they give up the intellectual tools by which the Christian message can be articulated and defended. In the resulting chaos of religious ideas, the principal criterion left to the community as it seems to find its way is, quite naturally, that of expediency.”¹⁷ More recently noted NY Times columnist Ross Douthat says that the primary reason for our cultural morass is due to the decline of traditional Christianity in the west. He is especially critical of present day Evangelicalism. He looks back to the individuals that helped shape post war Evangelicalism – men like C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaffer, Carl Henry and Billy Graham and contrast this with the likes of Joel Osteen, Rick Warren and Joyce Meyers – Thus the title of his book – *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics!*¹⁸ What is shaping your life? I can guarantee you that whatever influences your mind is also shaping your life and your values. The tragic thing is that many Christians assume that the world and its schemes are either harmless or neutral. We have today in the Church, a mentality that entertainment must be incorporated in the Church and into the worship of the Church. People expect from the Church what they see on TV and there is enormous pressure on churches (if they want to attract and keep people in the pews) to conform to the entertainment motif. What happens then? Listen to the words of James M. Boice: “Out goes expository preaching, because people cannot concentrate very long. Forget theology: people are not interested in theology, and they can’t follow an argument anyway. Let there be funny stories, and let them be short. As for the worship service, bring on lively ditties that make people feel good! Surely God will be blessed. And, above all, do not permit long prayers.”¹⁹ May God help us to think like Christians.

ENDNOTES

¹ The sources for the data: George Gallup and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion* (Macmillian, 1989); George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Regal, 1991).

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/channel/utilities/pring.html?id=96521>

³ Cf. David Wells, *God in The Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1994).

⁴ *No God But God: Breaking With the Idols of Our Age*, eds. Os Guinness and John Seel (Moody, 1992), p. 18.

⁵ Cf. David Wells, *No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993)

⁶ Michael Scott Horton, editorial in *Modern Reformation*, July/August 1994, p. 2

⁷ This is how J.B. Phillips translated this phrase *The New Testament in Modern English* (Macmillian, 1972), p. 332

⁸ As cited by G.R. Collins, *Your Magnificent Mind: The Fascinating Ways It Works for You*. (Baker Book House, 1988), p. 36.

⁹ The Greek text has “mercies.” The plural form OIKTIRMON expresses the thought of many acts of mercy or may be due to nothing more than assimilation to the Hebrew RACHAMIM as in Genesis 43:14; Deuteronomy 13:17; Nehemiah 1:11; Isaiah 47:6.

¹⁰ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 110.

¹¹ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 263

¹² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 434.

¹³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), p. 608.

¹⁴ The phrase always implies contrast to “the age to come,” i.e. the time in the future of God’s visible reign over all (cf. Matthew 12:32; Luke 20: 34-36).

¹⁵ J.M. Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 73.

¹⁶ T.C. Oden, “On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age” in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, p. 193.

¹⁷ As cited by Ken Myers in “On Packaging and Pragmatism,” *Tabletalk*, October, 1994, p. 59.

¹⁸ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012)

¹⁹ James M. Boice, “Wanted: Thinking Christians,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 1994, p. 7.