

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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The Pattern of This World

When people hear the word “worldliness” the tendency is to think of “worldly” activities such as partying, carousing, going for a night out on the town, etc. The Apostle did not restrict the word to that sort of behavior. Paul Barnett in his very helpful commentary on Romans points out, “...the Greek word is *aion*, a temporal word from which we derive our English word, ‘eon’ (an expanse of time). In fact, then, Paul’s ‘appeal’ is, ‘do not be “shaped” by this “age”.’ By ‘this age’ Paul means that period of time begun with the ‘fall’ of Adam and ended with the ‘revelation of the sons of God’ (8:19). In short, ‘this age’ is the ‘age of Adam’, the rebel against God, the ‘age’ where ‘Sin rules in Death’ (5:21). This ‘age’ does, indeed, ‘shape’ its people. It does not matter which culture or whether the time is ancient, medieval or modern, the Sin of Adam reigns supreme, shaping people after the likeness of Adam’s rejection of the kindly Creator. Earlier in the letter Paul pointed to the gross behaviour of the Gentiles in their idolatry, their ‘unclean’ sexual activities and their exploitation of one another. The historic people of God were equally in revolt against God, although it was expressed more subtly in hypocrisy and double standards. They are the more culpable because they had greater ‘light’ from God through the Law and the Prophets.”¹ John Murray adds that the term *aion* “...meaning is determined by the contrast with the age to come. ‘This age’ is that which stands on this side of what we often call eternity. It is the temporal and the transient age. Conformity to this age is to be wrapped up in the things that are temporal. It is to be a time-server. How far-reaching is this indictment! If all our calculations, plans, ambitions are determined by what falls within life here, then we are children of this age. Besides, this age is an evil age (cf. I Cor. 2:6, 8; Gal. 1:4) and if our fashion is that of this age then the iniquity characteristic of this age governs our life. The need for the negative is apparent.”²

I. THE WORLD: THE ALTERNATIVE TO GOD

When Paul speaks of “the pattern of this world (or age),” he is referring to something that is detrimental to the Christian. We just referenced the term “worldliness.” How are we to understand this word? We begin by noting I John 2:15: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Worldliness is best described as loving the world. KOSMOS is one of the New Testament terms for “world.” This term is used in three different ways: (1) the physical planet; (2) the nations of the earth or people collectively; (3) the world system, fallen humanity in rebellion against God. It is this third sense of the word that John has in mind.

A. Jesus and This World

Jesus Christ said He was not of this world (John 17:14; 18:36). We read in John 17:9 that He refuses to pray for the world. In John 12:31 and 14:30, Jesus opposes the ruler of this world (Satan) and in John 9:39; 16:7-11, He declares that He is the Judge of this world.

B. The Church and This World

Those who belong to the true church have been born of God (I John 3:1-3); those who belong to the world have not (I John 4:4-6); the Church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ (I John 3:7-10); the world belongs to Satan (I John 5:19) and Satan is called “the prince” of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The world is passing away (I John 2:17) and is under the judgment of God (I John 4:17). Love for God is therefore utterly incompatible with love for the

world (I John 2:15). Why is the world described this way? It has a system of *values* and *beliefs* and *behaviors* and *expectations* that are antithetical to God. The world is centered upon the fallen creature and not the Creator. “Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seems odd.”³ To put into theological language, the Bible is *theocentric* while the world is *anthropocentric*, as *opposed* to being theocentric. Now what does this tell us? That there are two opposing ways of thinking.

II. THE WORLD INVADING THE CHURCH

Worldliness is also a *religious* matter. It is not only possible to be worldly *and* religious, it is very common (cf. Luke 21:12; John 9:22; Romans 10:2). We are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world because the world seeks to displace God and, as such, it is idolatrous. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Evangelicalism is soaked in idolatry. Idolatry consists in *trusting* some substitute for God. “Idols will inevitably involve self-centeredness, self-inflation, and self-deception.”⁴ How is this evident with Evangelicalism? What are the danger signals?

A. Knowing the Right Questions – and Answers

James Sire has written extensively on this topic. In a recent work he gave the following checkpoints that are foundational to a distinctively Christian worldview.

1. **What is prime reality – the really real?**

To this we might answer: God, the gods, or the material universe.

2. **What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?**

Do we see the world as created or autonomous, as chaotic or orderly, as matter or spirit? Do we emphasize our subjective, personal relationship to the world or its objectivity apart from us?

3. **What is a human being?**

Are we highly complex machines, sleeping gods, people made in the image of God, or “naked apes”?

4. **What happens to a person at death?**

Is it personal extinction, transformation to a higher state, or departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side”?

5. **Why is it possible to know anything at all?**

Sample answers include the idea that we are made in the image of an all-knowing God or that consciousness and intelligence have developed under the pressures of survival in a long process of evolution.

6. **How do we know what is right and wrong?**

Is it because we are made in the image of God whose character is good? Are right and wrong determined by human choice alone? Or have the notions simply developed under the pressures of cultural and physical survival?

7. **What is the meaning of human history?**

Is it to realize the purposes of God or the gods, to make a paradise on earth, to prepare people for a life in community with a loving and holy God, or something else?⁵

The following are red flags that threaten to make us conformed to the pattern of this world.

B. Pragmatic Optimism

This outlook says that whatever *works* is what is *best*. The ends justify the means. This is most obvious in the church-growth movement that has taken root in so many churches. The

Church must be *marketed* and *adapted* to the culture. This strategy seems to bring the church into *conformity* with a consumer-oriented culture by means of a market-driven methodology. The more *effective* the methods, the better. And from what sources are those methods drawn to bring about growth and renewal? – modern psychology, Madison Avenue advertising and the findings of the behavioral sciences. One of the leading gurus of the church growth movement is George Barna.⁶ He contends the church must *sell its product*. Each local church is viewed as a *franchise*. Pastors are to be judged not by their ability to teach and preach the Bible, but by their ability to run the church like a business for *profit* in a *smooth and efficient* manner. In fact, according to Barna, pastors would be better prepared for their jobs if instead of having a M.Div. degree, they possessed an M.B.A. If we just adopted the right techniques, used the right tools, we could *grow a church*.

C. Therapeutic Victimization

Whatever became of sin? We no longer have sinners in the church, but people who are co-dependent or dysfunctional. Sinful behavior is no longer labeled as a “*disease*” or “*sickness*.” What does this relabeling of sin actually accomplish? It obviates accountability to God. After all, you are not personally responsible for your conduct. You are a victim. The Church, like the world around it, has been absorbed with the *self* and is busy *adapting* the Church to the therapeutic culture. What happens when concerned Christians raise their voices in protest to these things? Honest (and constructive) criticism is denounced as being judgmental and divisive. So what happens? Out of a sense of what is called *Christian* charity, the church is exposed to the danger of embracing any and every fad or trend that comes into the church simply because it is popular. In this sense, the call for *unity* has become an idol that is used to stifle any legitimate dissent. *Love* and *unity* are looked up to as being the two cardinal virtues that automatically rule out any criticism. This is, in fact, another aspect of our culture that the church has fallen for. Perpetual friendliness in the name of God means that dissent is uncongenial, if not abhorrent.

D. Consumer Materialism

The premise of all marketing is found in the phrase, “The consumer is always right.” User-friendly churches (as they like to call themselves) say that they are geared to meeting *felt-needs*. The satisfaction of the individual is foremost, which is nothing more than a self-centered consumerism. Religious consumers go to church for the same reason they do anything else. Spirituality and a sense of religious well-being are desirable in the same way that a new BMW is. God exists primarily to meet our needs. The creature takes center stage. God is simply a member of the supporting cast.

E. Excessive Subjectivism

Over the past few years we have witnessed in our society, a widespread interest in spirituality. Hunger for religious experiences continues unabated. The so-called New Age movement has attracted millions. The danger that confronts the Church is that often this hunger for religious experience *parallels* that of the world because it is accompanied by an outright aversion to provide any theological definition of that experience. “In such a culture, feelings replace the intellect as the barometer and organ of truth.”⁷ It is the inwardness of the experience that guarantees that it is valid. God has been reinterpreted. He has been internalized and as such has no real authority to compel and will soon begin to bore us. This is not the God of the Bible.⁸ This is contrary to the Word of God. Christians have “not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may *understand* what God has freely given us” (I Corinthians 2:12).

CONCLUSION: In one of the recent polls that we have alluded to, 75% of the Evangelicals surveyed could not give even a brief doctrinal explanation on what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. What’s wrong? Evangelical Churches have jettisoned theology and, as such, lack discernment. This is a spiritual capacity,

the ability to see *through* life, to see it for what it really is. Christians who have been taken captive by our therapeutic culture imagine that the chief end of man is not to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but to improve our own private inner disposition, and that the church exists to provide them with personal satisfaction and to give inner tranquility to their hectic lives. They want psychological wholeness, marital bliss and integrated families. If God fails to provide us with this kind of prosperity and success (consumer's satisfaction) then we become cynical and disillusioned. The best description for what I am describing is "Mall Christianity." In the mall, everything is for us, for our comfort and enjoyment, for our satisfaction, and so many Christians have come to assume that it must be so in the Church as well. The pattern of this world is seeking to conform the Church, and it is hard to recognize the world's schemes and even harder to dislodge them from the Church once it has taken root. "Indeed, without a powerful theological vision as its antithesis, these cultural currents are impossible to resist."⁹ Remember the words of I John 5:21, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

ENDNOTES

¹ P. Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003), p. 282.

² J. Murray, *The Epistle To The Romans II* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 113.

³ Wells, *God in The Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 29. "The 'world' is the biblical way of speaking of the cultural ethos, the social arrangements, the habits of life that follow upon the corrupting of human nature," p. 35.

⁴ Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Ages*, eds. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), p. 33.

⁵ James Sire, *Naming The Elephant: The Worldview as a Concept* (IVP, 2004), p. 122.

⁶ All references are drawn from his book *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988). Another leading Church Growth advocate, C. Peter Wagner, proudly declares that the movement does use "consecrated pragmatism," *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura: Regal, 1984), p. 201.

⁷ K. Riddlebarger, "There Have to Be Differences Among Us," *Modern Reformation*, July/Aug., 1994, p. 15.

⁸ In the Sept. 12, 1994 issue of *Christianity Today*, the lead article "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," drew heavily on the solutions offered by George Barna. The individuals interviewed advocated, among other things, that "an emotional experience of God is more important than its theological content," and that, "According to the experts [George Barna], it is no longer enough to present the gospel's propositional truths [sorry, Paul, John, Peter and the rest of the Apostles your *method* is outdated]. What will attract Xers, they say, is a strong, caring community of people who can be trusted [don't the Mormons fit this description? What's the difference between kind hearted Mormons and caring Christians?]."

⁹ Wells, op. cit., p. 57.