

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Romans 12:1-3; Ephesians 4:14; 1 Timothy 4:1		Gary L. W. Johnson
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APOSTOLIC IMPERATIVE (Part 1)

“Christianity,” observed Thomas C. Reeves, “has always absorbed elements of the culture of its adherents, and it is important to consider how extensively the classic faith has been altered by a modern, literate, prosperous, technologically-driven society undeniably absorbed with obtaining prosperity, security, and pleasure. In short, what is the content of our Christianity?”¹ This is a critically important question. How we answer this question will determine, to a large degree, what kind of Christianity we will embrace. This in turn underscores the importance of *teaching*. Our Lord declared, “Go and make disciples [clearly, those brought to Christ are to be grounded in the Christian faith primarily through teaching] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and [note this emphasis] *teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). In light of this, we need to heed the words of J. R. W. Stott. “Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God’s church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers. . . . It is teaching which builds up the church. It is teachers who are needed most.”² Recently Erwin Lutzer, pastor emeritus of Moody Church in Chicago, declared, “My heart is for the church, and I see the church submitting to the culture. Instead of allowing Scripture to stand alone, we interpret it in a way that is consistent with the culture. I want to challenge Christians: Will we interpret the culture through the lens of Scripture? Or will we interpret Scripture through the lens of culture?” He goes on to add, “the Church is being shamed into silence because we don’t know what to say . . . we fear that we will be misunderstood and vilified. But so many things have changed in America that we can no longer take for granted all the freedoms that we generally enjoyed. We are in a new day.”³ Lutzer specifically mentions the Woke threat and Critical Race Theory (CRT).⁴ In 1 Timothy 4 the Apostle Paul warned young Timothy about the danger of apostasy and of false doctrine and deceiving spirits. What is Timothy to do? 2 Timothy 4:2 states: “Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Likewise, 1 Timothy 4:6 declares: “If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained (*parakolouthēō* – to follow beside. The word combines the thoughts of “understanding” with that of “practicing preserving”).” 1 Tim. 4:13 reads, devote yourself (*proseche*, present tense imperative (!), the word implies previous preparation in private) to reading, to exhortation, to *doctrine*. A couple of verses later Paul instructs Timothy to “Be diligent.” (*meleta*, lit. to take care, to practice, to take pains with) upon these things; give thyself wholly (*isthi*, present tense imperative, lit. be in them) to these matters. Paul’s language here, observes Guthrie, “Is a construction expressing absorption in anything. The mind is to be as immersed in these pursuits as the body in the air it breathes.”⁵ The saints must have their minds, their thinking habits, renewed in the knowledge of the Word of God (Rom. 12:1ff; Eph. 4:23). Once that occurs, behavior and practice follow suit, and maturity develops. Teachers are given this responsibility, and it is to consume

them (*note* the warning in James 3:1). In Ephesians 4, the same Apostle urges his readers to protect the Church from false doctrine. Who is it that gets tossed around here and there by bad doctrine? “Infants,” *nepios*, baby, immature; this word refers to the immaturity of children in opposition to the adult status of the perfect man. Children, as every parent knows, are not discerning. They do not know what is best for them. They will gladly eat popcorn, peanuts, cotton candy and the like all day, and cry and throw a fit if they can’t have it! Note also that the Apostle declares that “children” are easily attracted and carried away by “sleight of men (*kubeia*, lit. dice playing, wicked dice playing – it refers to intentional fraud) and cunning craftiness (*methodeia* – following after, deceit, scheming; cf. Eph. 6:11) by which they lie in wait to deceive.” Note Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-32). In Romans 12:1-3 Paul underscores the need for sanctified minds. This is an imperative. It is a command.

- I. **A QUESTION OF ATTITUDE.** William James, the famous Harvard professor of psychology of a past generation, once concluded, “human beings can alter their lives by altering the attitude of the mind.”⁶ James was not the first person to discover this. It is in fact embedded in our text.
 - 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.⁷ “This illustrates what is characteristic of Paul’s teaching, that ethics must rest upon the foundation of redemptive accomplishment.”⁸
 - 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.”⁹
 - 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. 2 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. **THE 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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.”¹² 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 1 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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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 tenants 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.”¹⁵ More recently, noted NT 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!*¹⁶ 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 the late 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.”¹⁷ May God help us to think like Christians.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas C. Reeves, *the Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore?* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 61. He later adds, “Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an other-worldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain. The faith has been overwhelmed by the culture, producing what may be called cultural Christianity. This is not a question of mere influence; acculturation takes place at all times and in all places. Christianity becomes cultural Christianity when the faith is dominated by a culture to the point that it loses much or most of its authenticity.” (p. 67).

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979), p. 164.

³ cf. His *We Will Not Be Silenced: Responding Courageously to Our Culture’s Assault on Christianity* (Moody, 2021).

⁴ The details of this will be spelled out next week.

⁵ D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 99.

⁶ As cited by G. R. Collins, *Your Magnificent Mind: The Fascinating Ways It Works for You* (Baker Book House, 1988), p. 36.

⁷ 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.

⁸ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 110.

⁹ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 110.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 434.

¹¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans II* (T&T Clark, 1979), p. 608.

¹² 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).

¹³ J. M. Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Baker, 1994), p. 73.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ As cited by Ken Meyers in “On Packaging and Pragmatism,” *Tabletalk*, October, 1994, p. 59.

¹⁶ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012).

¹⁷ James M. Boice, “Wanted: Thinking Christians,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 1994, p. 7.