

Is the Church In the World as Much as the World is In the Church? (Part 3)

As this series of articles moves into its final installment, let us now note an important distinction between the two usages of the word, "world" in the title. The Lord's church is to be in the world in the sense that we are to be among its human inhabitants, influencing our fellowman and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:13-16; Mark 16:15-16). On the other hand, we are to separate ourselves from the unrighteousness that is in the world (Titus 2:12; James 4:4; I John 2:15-16). Basically, we are to be in the world (among the people), but the world (ungodliness) is not to be in us. Having demonstrated the need for the church to be in the world, we must now consider whether or not there is more of the world's influence in us than there is of our influence in the world.

Of course it can't be done, but for sake of illustration, let us imagine putting the church in the 21st century on a scale. One side of the scale bears the weight of worldliness while the other measures the spiritual impact of the church on society. Which way does the scale tip? Does worldliness outweigh Godly influence? Is there a 50/50 balance between the two? Is righteous living the heavier of the two? Just exactly where is the church of Christ today on this scale?

There is ample Biblical precedent for concern about this. Going back to the Old Testament, we find God warning Israel years before they had the opportunity to enter physical Canaan that they should not get caught up in the ways of the people of that land (Deuteronomy 7). Sadly, they did not listen and often suffered the consequences of allowing the world to be in them. The first letter to the Corinthian Christians is another example of those who permitted the world residence in their hearts. They even engaged in sins of which the very same worldly people they were to be influencing for Christ were ashamed (I Corinthians 5:1). Worldliness can be found among the majority of those congregations of the Lord's church addressed in Revelation chapters two and three. After pinpointing each congregation's unrighteousness, the Lord sternly spoke of the horrible consequences were they to continue in their worldly ways. Throughout the epistles there is warning after warning about engaging in society's sins. Whether it was the teaching of false doctrine, the practice of lustful deeds or the ungodliness of lazy spiritual living, the first century church was admonished time and again to lock the doors of their hearts and keep worldliness on the outside looking in.

Is there worldliness in the church today? As difficult as it is to admit, it must be sorrowfully said that, yes, it is present. How prevalent is it? Certainly there are still "seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (I Kings 19:18), but in some places, the church of Christ, that distinctive spiritual body purchased with Jesus' precious blood (I Peter 1:18-19), is barely recognizable above the unholy lives and the unscriptural denominations amongst which it exists. Would that these churches would even stop calling themselves by the scriptural name of Christ's body (Romans 16:16) so that those in the world who are searching for truth would not be confused. Whether it's the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship, the burgeoning error of the direct operation of the Holy Spirit, unscriptural uses of women in worship or a host of other false doctrines, these churches are successfully blending into the fabric of the world, destined never again to be seen as the distinctive body of Christ unless and until they decide to repent and go back to the Bible as their sole authority and the authority for their souls.

Individually, even in faithful congregations of the Lord's church, there are those whose lives barely resemble that of the pattern set down for the child of God in the Bible. Little concern for worshipping God with the saints and then casual and careless attitudes even when they do attend, drinking, using foul language, dressing immodestly and other acts of worldliness characterize the lives of far too many of those who had once enjoyed the blessings of salvation but since have allowed themselves to be dragged down into the slough of sin.

It's really quite a simple question. Is the church in the world as much as the world is in the church? Which dominates the life of the church of which we are a part and which dominates our lives individually as Christians? Does the world see Christ in us or does Christ see the world in us? Do we have the courage to examine ourselves to discover the answers to these questions? Do we think this is really not a problem? Are we so blinded by sin that we do not see where we are as the church collectively and as children of God individually?

Is the church in the world as much as the world is in the church? Dear friends, the question is before us. Are we willing to search for the answer and face up to what might possibly be cold, hard truth and then do something about it?

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