

Worldliness

John P Thackway

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 For modern-day Christians, fear of worldliness has been replaced by a far less healthy fear: their "image."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" (Acts 9:31; 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 his 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 naïve 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 change.

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 John 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).

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 ... The list was a mixed blessing. Although it served as a ready reckoner for Christian living, it nonetheless was largely man-made...Another problem with the list was that it tended to define holiness in terms of what you do not do ... It can give rise to pride, introspection, asceticism, despair and a host of other evils - the last thing the list was meant to produce ... 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 ... 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 ... " ... To return to the list, however, is not the answer - to return to the Word is.

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