

Editorial

A Worldly Christianity?

By Art Azurdia



The title of this issue of *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*—even posed as a question—may arouse a bit of consternation in some. In truth, it is not my intention to be provocative. It is my intention to capture a dialectic that defines the essence of authentic Christianity.

What do I mean? On the one hand, as followers of Jesus Christ we are exhorted to keep ourselves “unstained from the world” (Ja 1:27). Moreover, we are informed that “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (Ja 4:4). On the other hand, none of us can deny that God Himself loves the world (Jn 3:16). Nor can we ignore Jesus’ repeated self-identification as the one whom the Father has “sent into the world” (Jn 10:36, *et al*).

Do these statements seem a bit antithetical? Contradictory, perhaps? The apparent contradiction becomes even more glaring when one considers the various expressions of the Great Commission (each of which—it would do us well to remember—was uttered by the resurrected Christ):

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Ma 28:19)

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (Mar 16:15)

. . . the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . . you are witnesses of these things (Lu 24:46-48)

As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you (Jn 20:21)

. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8)

At the risk of seeming pedantic, I draw these obvious references to your attention to establish the basis for a clear and simple assertion: the commission of Jesus Christ is to a *worldly Christianity*. In His mind, at least, these are not mutually exclusive concepts. To the contrary, as His followers we cannot hope to be authentically Christian without being meaningfully worldly. Acknowledging this, however, requires us to recognize that evangelicals in nearly every generation (including ours!) have repeatedly succumbed to two practical distortions that have severely undercut our influence in the world.

The first distortion is *cultural gluttony*. It is sinful compromise with the world—the consequence of being missional without being theological. Often masked in the guise of desiring to win the world, we rabidly pursue likeness to the world. Over time, unfortunately, the world’s values, objectives, and desires, become *our* values, objectives, and desires. Cultural gluttony is the act of consuming the culture until it forms us. The present condition of American evangelicalism serves to handily prove our susceptibility to this distortion.

The second distortion is *cultural anorexia*. It takes the form of a radical and decided withdrawal from the world—the consequence of being theological without being missional. Since we are determined not to let the world shape us, we isolate, insulate, and withdraw. Before long the Church evolves into a kind of enclave, a ghetto, an island of irrelevant piety, and eventually we lose the ability to speak to non-

Christians. Worse yet, our hearts become filled with a compassionless indifference toward such people. Arrogance eventually emerges. Missionary endeavor finally disappears.

Can you identify with this experience? To succumb to such a distortion is an amazingly simple and subtle phenomenon. It often occurs unintentionally in the life of a pastor who, over time, becomes consumed exclusively with church ministry. The tyrannous demands of the pastorate allow him no time for meaningful engagement with unbelievers. Not uncommonly, this replicates itself in his congregation, which sadly comes to exist as a haven from the world rather than as leaven within the world.

Allow me to remind you, dear brothers, just as I must remind myself: The sphere of our mission is the world. At the very least this must mean that our reaction to cultural gluttony must never take the form of cultural anorexia, precisely because Jesus Himself commissions us for the world. It is, then, our great task as pastors to persuade our people away from fear; to convince them that it is a great day to be a Christian. We are alive at a time when people are being destroyed by sin as never before, and the truth belongs to us—the truth that can conquer any perplexity modernity or *postmodernity* may set before us. *We have the gospel.* We have the promise God made to Abraham that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. We have the fulfillment of that promise in Revelation 5, where we read that Jesus purchased human beings for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. Consequently, we must seek to inculcate into our people the biblically-informed confidence of the hymn-writer:

This is my Father's world;
O let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world;
The battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
and heaven and earth be one.¹

At this critical moment in history we must not allow our congregations to lose their nerve and flee the culture, justifying themselves in expressions of pseudo-piety. We must convince them that it is Jesus Himself who sends us into the culture; not in service to the culture—in the sense of helping it achieve its own ends—but in a divinely subversive way, infiltrating the culture with the kingdom of God and the gospel.

As you are about to discover, all the features contained in this issue of *TSFJ* (articles, sermon, interview, historical reflection, quotes, book reviews) seek in some way to address this exceedingly complicated responsibility facing the church of Jesus Christ. Its conclusions/suggestions may not prove comprehensively satisfying. It is my prayerful hope, however, that they will stimulate your own critical thinking regarding this important matter . . . for the glory of God, the reformation of the church, and the good of the world.

So bear with the title—"Worldly Christianity." *Why?* To imitate Jesus means a commitment to be authentically Christian *and* meaningfully worldly.

¹ *This Is My Father's World*, Words by Maltbie Babcock.