



## **Holiness in a decadent age: The church's privilege and duty**

### **A Godly woman**

A little boy was asked a difficult question: 'Are there any godly people living in your village?' The question, no doubt, was a searching one, but without a moment's hesitation, the lad answered yes! He knew an elderly lady who, although she may not have been a serious contender at a beauty contest, nevertheless greatly impressed the youngster by her lifestyle.

At the tender age of ten years, he was probably not able to give a fully reasoned explanation for his answer, apart from the fact that although this lady was of a serious disposition, she was more attractive in her manner than most other people that he knew. There was a kindness and a caring loveliness about her that drew him strongly.

She was at the same time serious and happy; her words were grave yet tender. She retained unusual dignity and poise despite the difficulties and trials of life. The effect of all this upon the young lad was such that it not only drew him to her, but also pointed him to God. Instilled in him was a desire to be as she was, even to be godly himself. It was easy for him to answer the question in the way that he did!

I was that little lad, and the lady I admired lived an exemplary Christian life well into her nineties. She is now, I have every reason to believe, enjoying the unbroken and immediate fellowship of her LORD in heaven.

With more mature reflection, I now understand that what attracted me to the life of this "mother in Israel" was her holy walk. She walked with her God as she carried on with her daily domestic duties, and in consequence, the fragrance of heaven filled her life. Her kind of lifestyle was – and still is – the best advertisement for the Christian religion. Not only is it glorifying to God, but it also has a sanctifying effect upon those who care to take sober note of it.

### **The beauty of holiness**

In a day when there is so much emphasis on "image" at the expense of "substance", there is no better apology for the Cause of Christ than the holy life of those who profess to be His. There are benefits associated with the holy lifestyle of believers of which our fallen and sad world constantly stands in need. The more the Church of Christ projects Christ-likeness and grows in holiness, the more moral and spiritual benefits will accrue to our society.

There are many who would describe holiness as a bleak kind of doctrine: an unattractive, outdated, discouraging concept that is in essence either a series of prohibitions against sin, or a framework of legalistic rules, so that those who claim success in living this way invariably adopt an intolerant, "holier-than-thou" attitude to others.

True holiness is not like this. To be sure, the above description is of a judgemental, legalistic lifestyle. But we must bear in mind that legalism and holiness are not the same. The Pharisees mentioned in Scripture were legalistic, judgemental people, and our Lord pronounced repeated woes upon them for their hypocrisy. Holiness, on the other hand, is not hypocritical but beautiful – it beautifies a person's life because God Himself is the Author of it. His gracious presence and blessing adorn His people's lives. Those who are most holy are most Christ-like.

Holiness is something that God not only bestows but commands: *'Be ye holy, for I am holy'* (1 Peter 1:16). We are reminded of the value of true holiness when we read, *'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord'* (Hebrews 12:14). We would do well, therefore, to explore what this doctrine of holiness involves and ensure that our lives personally and corporately are in line with this Biblical principle, bearing in mind that the church as a corporate body is a direct and aggregate reflection of the individuals who make it up.

A Christian who has compromised with the world is, to say the least, an ineffective witness, and an unholy church is a contradiction of terms. Christ has given His Spirit to the church so that it may be different from the world – that it may be as a light shining in the darkness, and as a city set upon a hill. In contrast with the sinful world, it is different, eye-catching, attractive and beautiful. The Psalmist records that Mount Zion was *'Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth'* (Psalm 48:2).

## **1. Holiness, its origin and nature**

### ***The origin of holiness***

In the Shorter Catechism, holiness is mentioned as one of God's attributes. In the answer to question 4: What is God? We are told, *'God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.'* It is true to say that each of God's attributes is reflected in some measure in man, whom God has made in His image. These attributes find a place in the moral and rational constitution of man's nature, and also find expression in man's varied and extensive religious activity. Despite these reflections of God's attributes in man, sinful man is very different from God his Creator. In fact, the writer of Fisher's Catechism reminds us that

*'God is necessarily holy: holiness is as necessary to Him as His Being: He is as necessarily holy as He is necessarily God.'*

However, due to our creaturely limitations and sinful nature, we could never comprehend perfect holiness, apart from God's special revelation in the Bible. In fact, as Professor R A Finlayson has said, *'Holiness, as the very essence of God's being, is entirely a matter of revelation.'* It is only through God's self-disclosure that we have attained to this knowledge of God.

In a word, God has revealed Himself to us, and in consequence we gain insight into what perfect holiness is. Holiness originates with the Holy God.

### ***The nature of holiness***

To discover the essential nature of holiness we need to consider the meaning of the word holy, *qadosh*, as it appears in Scripture. Andrew Murray assures us that *'There is not a word that leads us higher into the mystery of Deity or deeper into the privileges and blessedness of God's children, than the word "holy".'* With this we agree.

Holiness as a moral attribute of God has the sense of purity positively, and negatively of freedom from sin. It is a term that describes the excellence of God's character and His freedom from all moral imperfections. *'God's holy nature is such that He infinitely delights in His own purity, and in everything agreeable to His will, and has a perfect hatred and abhorrence of everything that is contrary to it.'*

Clearly the idea of separation sits comfortably with the concept of God's holiness, in that it describes His separateness from His creation and His elevation above it, His separation from sin and all that is contrary to His impeccably pure nature. This is the basic meaning when the concept comes to be used biblically. It means "set apart".

We meet the idea of separation and transcendence repeatedly throughout the Old Testament in describing God, as in the words of Isaiah 40:25: *'To whom will you liken me, or to whom shall I be equal, says the Holy One?'* Further, Psalm 45:2 says of the Messiah, *'You are fairer than the sons of men'*, the prefix *min* indicating clearly the idea of separation.

Isaiah 6 relates that the Lord was seen high and lifted up; elevated above the seraphim, who hid their faces and their feet as they cried '*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory.*' A further example of this separation is seen in the experience of Moses when the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. God called to him,

*'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.'*

However, it is part of the wonder of Old Testament divine holiness that the Holy One is not spatially separate, though He is distinct. The Holy Place was not at some distant location but at the centre of the Israelite encampment, and moved with them as they journeyed. The essence of the saving grace of Old Testament revelation is that God is '*the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath*' (Hosea 1:9). "God is distinct ontologically and morally separate, yet graciously present."

### **Holy things**

How does this concept relate to things used in God's service? Walter Kaiser explains that *qodesh*, holy, means "withheld from ordinary use"; "treated with special care"; and "belonging to the sanctuary". The exclusiveness associated with holiness is true of all things designated as sacred under the Old Testament dispensation, such as the altars erected "*unto the Lord*" by the patriarchs, the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and the Temple in Jerusalem. Each had its consecrated furniture and holy utensils.

### **Holy people**

In addition, Israel was a "holy people", and among them was the specially consecrated priesthood. Israel were a people apart from all other nations; a people upon whom the favour of God rested. God required of them a consecrated lifestyle in response to the code for Holy Living engrossed in the book of Leviticus: '*You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine*' (Leviticus 20:24). The Holiness Code laid down various rules regarding sacrifices, foods allowed and disallowed, sexual behaviour, principles of neighbourliness, marriage, and details of how to deal with various crimes, to mention but a few.

Even though there were "holy people", "holy places" and "holy things", the point is not that these were in possession of an inherent holiness. They were holy because they belonged to God. They were holy by being associated with God. By God's presence or by His specific appointment, they were set apart from a common, ordinary use to be for God. Therefore when God was present, the ground became "holy ground", and when God dwelt above the mercy seat, the inner sanctum became the "holy of holies", and when God called a people to Himself, they became the holy Israel of God.

### **The holiness of Jesus**

The life and character of Jesus Christ showed with unmistakable clarity the holiness of God. He is '*holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners*' (Hebrews 7:26). Although our Lord lived as man, in a sinful, selfish, imperfect world, He did not for a moment compromise His holiness, and neither could He, being a divine Person. He retained His exclusive heavenliness as He ministered to the needs of humanity with grace and compassion. In our Lord's life, '*we have the holiness of the invisible God translated into the forms of human life, human character and conduct.*' His entire life on earth answered perfectly the holy requirements of a holy God.

God demands of all His moral creatures a holy life, and a holy God will be satisfied with nothing less. The divine imperative meets us at every turn: '*Be ye holy, for I am holy*' (1 Peter 1:16). Sadly, because of our sin, each one of us constantly falls short of this high standard. It cannot be denied, however, that the Church of God is a holy Church!

## **2. The holiness of the church**

### **Holiness, the church's privilege**

In what sense can sinners become holy and be constituted a holy church? To be sure, no mere man is able to comply with the high standard required by God in order to secure His favour and blessing. It is God who makes His people holy!

Reformed Theology highlights the fact that sinners are made partakers of God's holiness by the regenerating grace of God through the New Birth. At the outset of an individual's personal experience of salvation, it is God who takes the initiative by effectually calling His elect to Him and consecrating them to His service. R A Finlayson reminds us that *'the holiness of the creature goes back to an act of the divine will, the divine election, and the divine calling'*.

This proves that although God is separate and transcendent, He is not remotely and exclusively so. It has pleased Him to communicate His holiness to the sons of men! God graciously associates with sinners for their salvation because His holiness includes His grace! His holiness is revealed in the context of redemption.

It is clear, therefore, that there is a possible association, a coming together, between God and men that does not, on the one hand, compromise the holiness of God; nor, on the other, does it lead to man's destruction. James 2:23 tells us that Abraham was *'the friend of God'*! And the Apostle John reminds us:

*'Truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.'*

(1John 1:3)

It is most interesting that the idea of holiness combines the two conditions of separation and communion. It has pleased God in His personal relations with His creatures to communicate His holiness, and it is this imparting of His holiness that definitively makes His creatures holy.

The Apostle Peter declares that the people of God are *'partakers of the divine nature'* (2 Peter 1:4), and the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the family of God as being *'partakers of His holiness'* (Hebrews 12:10). Not only are they separated unto God for His service, but they are also made the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit in believers communicates to the soul the image of God in righteousness and true holiness. James I Packer declares,

*'Sanctification is an immediate work of God's Spirit on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace to yield obedience unto God.'*

### ***Holiness, the church's duty***

It is both a humbling reality and an awesome responsibility for believers to know that the Holy Spirit dwells within them. This is a fact that Christians must not take lightly. The presence of God within the corporate body, the Church, always requires that none of us lives our life with any degree of flippancy, but with the utmost care, in the fear of the Lord. God is the intolerant Holy One and His presence creates an unconditional moral obligation to holy living. Only by yielding a loving obedience to His Word will we prove our delight in Him.

Man's proper path to godliness is to recognize the moral authority of God above all else and not to question the wisdom of His dictates, but to give obedience to His Word. The standard of ethics that is God's Word has never changed. It is as authoritative today as it was in Old Testament times. The standard of personal morality has remained the same since the beginning and so, in all ages, believers are required to display the holiness of their God.

The church down through the ages, whether through ignorance or error, has not manifested the holiness of God as it might have done. Indeed, there will always be room for an increase in holiness in the Church (Militant), and only at death will *'the souls of believers be made perfect in holiness, and immediately pass into glory'*. Unfortunately, the church has often been known to stray off the path of Scripture even in seeking a closer walk with God.

Retreat into a monastic life in pursuit of holiness was stimulated by growing laxity within the early church. The world was filled with situations that offended Christian morality, from which it wanted to flee. Above all, the increasing formalism of public worship, as developed by the close of the 3rd

century, led to a desire for a freer and more individual approach to God, which led many lay people to depart from the limitations of conventional Christian worship and service.

The general outlook of that age considered the monastery a place of refuge and a stepping-stone towards holiness. As Williston Walker says, '*As common Christian practice became less strenuous, asceticism grew as the ideal of the more serious*'. Voluntary poverty and voluntary celibacy were deemed to confer special merit on those who practiced them. A life of celibacy, poverty and contemplative retirement from the activities of the world was admired as the Christian ideal and was widely practiced, though, as yet, without separation from society. As a result of this, the foundations of monasticism were laid.

Whatever sanctifying benefits may be thought to accrue from a monastic lifestyle, and however an ascetic lifestyle may be promoted or encouraged by some, such withdrawal from the world is not the kind of holy separation Christ requires of His Church. The case of the hermit Simeon the Stylite was, it would seem, the ultimate expression of the idea of separation from the world, in that he dwelt for thirty years, till his death in 459 AD, on the top of a pillar situated east of Antioch.

Many evil practices developed within the monastic system over the centuries, so much so that the pre-Reformation Church was riddled with immorality, cruelty and arrogance. Such a spiritual blight had influenced the Church for many years.

A rejection of the Truth, or gross indifference to it, was the greatest sin of the pre-Reformation Church. It rejected the Word by denying its sole authority. Everything wrong with the pre-Reformation Church could be traced to this one evil. While rejecting the Word of God as a rule of faith and life, she did not walk zealously in good works. There was little worship of God in spirit and truth.

## **Reformation**

But with the Reformation, a sea change came and the Church was revived. It must be said that it was not without fault, but it had gained priorities regarding Scripture Truth that it had not possessed before, and in its adherence to doctrine and practice it was as a body more consecrated to God.

We, as succeeding generations of believers who owe so much to the Church of the Reformation, must continue to manifest the holiness that pleases God by applying to every department and activity of our corporate and personal lives the principles of biblical truth. Whatever our position or station, a holy life is one lived in submission to the Word of God. J I Packer puts it well, as he describes the godly lifestyle of the Puritans in the following extended quotation:

*They sought to reduce to practice all that God taught them. They yoked their consciences to His Word, disciplining themselves to bring all activities under the scrutiny of the Scriptures and to demand a theological, as distinct from a pragmatic, justification for everything that they did. They applied their understanding of the mind of God to every branch of life, seeing the church, the family, the State, the arts and sciences, the world of commerce and industry, no less than the devotions of the individual, as so many spheres in which God must be served and honoured.*

Now, while it is never advisable to take an example from one situation and apply it elsewhere with little or no concession for changed historical circumstances, nevertheless the fact that the Puritans so built their lives upon the Word of God gives us great reason to admire them; even to emulate the best aspects of their lives.

I wish to briefly highlight three areas in which the Truth of God's Word needs to be carefully observed and promoted in our own day, that the church might fulfil its duty in exhibiting holiness by shining as a light in a dark place and by being as the salt of the earth.

### **I. Promoting personal holiness**

Holiness is both God's gift and man's prescribed duty. We grow in grace by the deliberate stirring up and exercise of the new powers and inclinations implanted within us through

regeneration. The Christian must therefore use the means of grace assiduously. This is achieved by hearing, reading, meditating, watching, praying, and worshipping. *'He must animate himself to universal obedience in all-round, all day conformity to God's revealed will, always remembering that the power is from God, not from himself, and to do it all in the spirit of prayerful dependence, or else he will fail.'*

Furthermore, although sin was slain in principle by the death of Christ on the Cross, and dethroned from the believer's heart by regeneration, yet there remains a remnant of corruption within the believer that must be mortified and slain. This work is to be done by degrees. The more vigorous the principle of holiness is in us, the weaker, more infirm and more crucified will be the principle of sin.

The activity by which the Christian directly secures the mortification of his sin is prayer. Using a play on words, the caption on a poster I once read was right when it shouted boldly: *'Seven days without prayer makes one weak'*! And this weakness is mostly felt in the fight against sin. So we must always be vigilant; we may never relax, for sin will not die but by being gradually and constantly weakened. Spare it, and it heals its wounds and recovers strength. A Christian defeated by sin is a casualty on the field of battle, and a Church that is deficient in prayer will make only a shallow mark upon the face of society.

## **II. Promoting family holiness**

The biblical educating of our children should begin as early as possible, always bearing in mind that, although it is our duty to sow the seed, it is the Lord who gives the increase. Clearly the example and influence of godly parents is the greatest stimulus to holiness, especially during children's early years. There is great value in conducting family worship, attendance at church services as a family, and in the teaching of Bible stories and teaching doctrine through the Shorter Catechism. Indeed, the Shorter Catechism presents Scripture in order and proportion, and next to the Scriptures, it has formerly helped to form the national character.

John Stuart Mill, although he was no friend of orthodox Christianity, said in his famous essay *On Liberty*:

*'The Shorter Catechism and study of the Bible have sharpened the wits of Scotsmen, as to make them stand foremost in the ranks of mental philosophy'.*

Maybe it is time for our nation to re-discover the treasure that is the Westminster Shorter Catechism!

We see our local schools as extensions of the family, and schoolteachers "in loco parentis". We are grateful for the calibre of teachers to whom we entrust the education of our children, and are particularly thankful to God for God-fearing teachers. However, whilst acknowledging that "all truth is God's truth", and emphasising the need to give our children a good education in order to equip them for life in this world, I do believe that godliness, which has an eternal, salvific dimension, is more important than learning.

## **III. Sanctifying the Lord's Day**

James Bannerman reminds us that *'the Christian Church is designed and fitted to be a witness for Christ in the world...'*; and the public witness of the Church to her Lord and His Word could be demonstrated in a number of ways. But the regular gathering for public worship is a significant and prolific witness for Christ. In particular, believers, as witnesses for Christ, ought to show clearly their high regard for the Lord by conscientiously sanctifying the Sabbath/Lord's Day, as a day to be above the other days of the week. In a very real sense, as Henry Halley says,

*'Nothing happens in any community as important to the life of the community as the regular Sunday worship services' (Halley's Bible Handbook); he continues: 'Every community ought to love its churches and, at this appointed time, turn out en masse, to honour Him in whose name the church exists'.*

It goes without saying that careful observance of the Lord's Day is conducive both to personal holiness and the sanctifying of society in general. I am convinced that a great part of the reason why the power of godliness is not so evident in our society is that the Sabbath is no longer strictly observed.

### **3. The decadence of our age**

The church has a responsibility both to worship God and serve Him in the world. But in what kind of world is it called to serve? It would not be an overstatement to say that the nations, the communities, and the individuals whom we are asked to disciple are averse to receiving the Word of God. In general, their focus is not God-ward at all. The following statistics give some insight into the current moral state of our society:

- a. The 2003 Church Census showed that only 11.2% of the population of Scotland attend church on an average Sunday. Although there are some encouraging regional and denominational variations, this overall figure is both depressing and challenging for the Church of God.
- b. There is a significant rise in the number of single-parent families. In 2006, 24% of children were living with just one parent – treble the proportion recorded in 1972. The figure has crept up from 21% a decade ago and from 22% in 2001, according to the Office for National Statistics.
- c. There were 12,603 therapeutic abortions performed in Scotland in 2005, an increase of over 1% over the previous year. This is consistent with the pattern seen in recent years in which the rate for every 1,000 women aged 15-44 was 11.9% as compared to 10.9% in 1996.
- d. Prison population has reached a new high, with over 7,000 prisoners in Scottish prisons in 2007. There was also a 13% increase in female prisoners from 2003 to 2004.
- e. Although the divorce rate in the UK presently stands at its lowest for 30 years, there were nevertheless a total of over 148,000 divorces granted between 2005 and 2006.
- f. In addition, and as if these were not sufficient proof that our society is being sucked ever deeper into moral darkness, The Scottish Law Commission, in a report published in December 2007, recommended legalising sex between children who are both aged 13 to 15, and the House of Lords recently voted to abolish the law against blasphemy.

With great sadness we observe that an increasing number of people seem to hold no objective standard of truth or morality. They believe that "living for the moment" is the right thing to do, and doing what is right in their own eyes is the way to go.

Now, in view of these depressing statistics and information, one could easily become discouraged and even be tempted to withdraw from being involved with such a society. However, our decadent age needs a holy church above all else, and the Church is called to witness for Christ and be as salt and light in the midst of fallen humanity.

As salt, we are to act as a preservative in the world, and add flavour to it. But salt can act thus only if it is in close contact with that which is to be preserved and seasoned. Obviously the followers of Christ cannot function as the light of the world if they keep their light hidden under a bushel or under a bed!

God is at work in human society by His common grace, as He gives the world the blessings of family and government, by which evil is restrained and relationships controlled. But He also sees fit to bestow Gospel blessings upon society through the members of the Church as they live out the Kingdom ethic from day to day.

Now, we are keenly aware that the Greek word *ekklesia*, used throughout the NT to designate the Christian Church, means "that which is called out", and it is clear that that from which the church is called out is the world. The very name that the Holy Spirit has given to the church denotes separation from the world.

The question arises, while not of the world, to what extent does it need to separate itself from the world in which it operates?

RB Kuiper writes, *'It is of the greatest importance to distinguish between "required separation" and "forbidden separation".'*

### ***What separation is required?***

It needs to be clarified that the antithesis of the Church and the world is primarily spiritual and not spatial. However, the spiritual antithesis has very spatial implications. An adult Christian has no right to expose himself needlessly to temptation. Admittedly, he cannot avoid all temptation. In the line of duty he is bound to encounter more than a little temptation from day to day. Christian youth and the children of Christian families should be kept from evil associates as far as possible, and they should be prevented as well from being subjected to worldly influences. Kuiper says again, *'The influence of environment may be more potent in the case of a child than in that of an adult, but also in the latter instance, it is far from negligible'*. The Psalmist explained the situation regarding "required separation" very clearly when he said, *'Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful'* (Psalm 1:1). Such separation is essential for godly living.

### ***What separation is forbidden?***

There is a separation that is not appropriate. As we have mentioned above, there have been some who have put undue emphasis on the spatial aspects of the Christian's separation from the world. This has always had the tendency to lead to a negative rather than a positive life, and thus negating one's duty in the world. It is not sufficient for the Christian to abstain from evil; he must also be zealous of good works! RB Kuiper has rightly said:

*'He who would go beyond the precepts of Scripture in the matter of separation from the world is peculiarly liable to the abominable sin of spiritual pride. Almost invariably he will take a holier than thou attitude towards his fellow men.'* And, *'He who today forbids what God allows will almost certainly tomorrow allow what God forbids. It is always a sin to presume to be wiser than God.'*

We are of the view that the Church's strength lies in its being radically different from the world. The world is darkness; the Church is light. But light must shine into the darkness in order to drive it away. The Church has a responsibility both to worship God and to serve the world. It has been called out of the world to worship God – and sent back into the world to witness and serve.

Alternatively we may say that the Church is summoned by God to be simultaneously "holy" and "worldly", not in assimilating the world's values and standards, but in serving God in the world. Nobody has ever exhibited the meaning of this better than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. His incarnation is the perfect embodiment of it, making Himself one with us in our frailty and exposing Himself to our temptations. Although Jesus was so involved with sinful people in a sinful world, He never sacrificed or even for a moment compromised His own unique identity.

John Stott reminds us that we, Christ's followers, are sent into the world as His witnesses, *'in order to penetrate other people's worlds, as He penetrated ours; the world of their thinking, their misunderstandings of the Gospel, the world of their feeling, their pain, and the world of their living'*.

Yet, this involvement with the world is to be undertaken while at the same time maintaining untarnished the standards of Jesus Christ, and not compromising our own Christian integrity. John Stott again says: *'Christ's vision of the church's holiness is neither withdrawal from the world, nor conformity to it'*. In fact, true holiness is a Christ-likeness that is lived out in the real world. A holy life is lived on a straight and narrow road, and Christians always stand in need of God's grace in order to walk in a God-glorifying way. Sadly, at times, in an overemphasis on its holiness, the church has withdrawn from the world, and so has neglected its mission.



At other times, it has conformed to the world, assimilating its views and values, and so has neglected its holiness. In order to fulfil its mission, the Church must faithfully respond to both its callings and preserve both parts of its identity.

#### **4. The desired influence of a holy church**

The influence we wish to see is none other than that the world be conquered for Christ. Our Lord has commanded, *'Make disciples of all nations'*. Is this a realistic aim? On the face of it, and from a natural, rational point of view, it is not, for the following reasons.

The overwhelming majority of mankind constitute the world; the Church consists of a small minority. The world is rich in material possessions; the Church is poor. The world is powerful; the Church is weak. The world boasts of wisdom: the Church declares the Gospel, reckoned by many to be foolishness! Amazingly, the seemingly insignificant Church is called to disciple the imposing world. Not only must it strive to do this, but it has God's promise that by His grace it will ultimately succeed!

*'The little one shall become a thousand and the small one a strong nation: I the LORD will hasten it in his time.'*

(Isaiah 60:22)

Needless to say, the Church is always under pressure from the world to conform to its agenda. But as the Church engages with its God-given task, it needs to have its house in order, and in particular, to be careful not to be swayed or influenced by worldly methods or expectations.

James Montgomery Boice has done the Cause of Christ a service by highlighting four areas, from his own experience, in which the church is at danger from the world, and I wish to alert us to the threat that these may pose to evangelicalism in our own day. These all constitute stumbling blocks to the church's effectiveness.

- a. The first of these is the world's wisdom, which denies the Word of God the unique place it ought to have in the Church. The result of replacing the Word with worldly wisdom is that people become man-centred and confused, not knowing whom or what to believe. The world's wisdom refuses to accept that the Bible is an adequate tool to change the lives of people for the better, and to bring eternal life and give spiritual growth. Those who have such little confidence in the Word of God tend to preach to the felt needs of people rather than to their real needs, and in so doing are in danger of pleasing men rather than pleasing God. The consequences of this approach are easy to anticipate: there will be no fruit unto holiness in the lives of the hearers. When God's Word is not the only rule by which we live and serve, things go wrong very quickly, and the Church is found denying its holy nature and its holy calling.
- b. The second stumbling block is the world's theology. This theology remodels the whole doctrine of sin. Instead of highlighting the biblical meaning of sin as non-compliance to God's Law, or transgression of that Law, sin is diluted to mean social depravation, or addiction, or some unpleasant personality traits inherited from parents, or other dysfunctional behaviour, which can be successfully treated by therapy of some kind. The whole theme of man's accountability to God is removed from the world's theology, as is the need for an atoning sacrifice. Even "salvation" is given a new meaning. It is replaced by "self-esteem" or "wholeness."
- c. The third is the world's agenda. This is represented by the idea that whatever happens to be fashionable should be the major concern of the church, whether it is ecology, racism, or world hunger. These, it is considered, should make the church's agenda! Now, we agree that being topical in our preaching has many advantages. We also agree that the church must always be ready to fulfil every aspect of its social responsibility. But the world's agenda should not be allowed to lead the programme of the Church of God! The Church must always have its agenda dictated by the Scriptures. The Psalmist said, *'I'll hear what God the Lord doth speak'* (Psalm 85:8).

- d. The fourth danger area is the temptation to adopt the world's methods. These are many and varied. One of the more subtle ways in which the world invades the church's thinking is by getting people to place undue emphasis on image rather than on substance; on the physical rather than on the spiritual. Some ministries have been designed solely to effect numerical growth, with people engaging in church growth methodologies, in which market strategy, business techniques and demographics are given a higher priority than biblical instruction. This whole outlook deflects the church's energy and thus reduces its spiritual impact upon society. At any rate, it is a far cry from the method adopted by the Apostles, who *'gave themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word'* (Acts 5:4).

*'All this', according to Montgomery Boice, 'leads to a religion that is more practical than personal, more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological; a religion that is about feeling good, rather than being good.'*

In view of these pitfalls, the Church must strive with all its power to keep its thinking, theology and outlook firmly within biblical bounds and out of the clutches of the world. At the same time, in prayerful dependence upon God, it must commit itself to bringing sinners into the fold of Christ, by declaring the Gospel message. After all, *'it is not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, saith the LORD'* (Zechariah 4:6).

## **Conclusion**

Our generation needs the holy influence of the Church of Christ more than it knows. And the Church corporately must be bold to bring the influence of God's Word to bear upon all sections of society. Indeed, the Church must proclaim Christ as LORD and demand of all men everywhere that they bend the knee in homage to Him who is the Head of all things (Psalm 8:6; Ephesians 1:22). People in all walks of life need to hear this demand from the church as it dedicates itself to holy living.

Each one of us can best serve our generation by demonstrating in all our church activities, as in our personal lives, that we love the Word of God and are happy to live under its authority. After all, holiness is the Truth shining in the lives of believers.

This brings me right back to where I started. I have recounted how I was impressed by someone who radiated the grace of God while she engaged in the legitimate activities of life. Such palpable heavenliness was apparent because of her close walk with God. To be often in the gracious presence of the Holy One of Israel will mean for us, too, that our faces will shine, reflecting the light of His glory, although we ourselves may be totally unaware of this.

John Owen the Puritan, in a sermon on Habakkuk 3:1-9, spoke some challenging words to preachers of the Word: *'He that is more frequent in the pulpit to his people than he is in his closet for his people, is a sorry watchman'*. None of us would wish to be a sorry watchman, or a sorry Christian. It is nevertheless a solemn fact, that the church can have no legitimate claim on people's respect or allegiance if it fails to project the LORD's high and holy standards. Our nation certainly needs such a witness today!

Let us therefore continue to labour, doing our heavenly Master's business, and keeping ourselves *'unspotted from the world'* (James 1:27).

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