



# The Reflector

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## The People of God – Their Attitude Towards the Social Order

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Throughout history, in relating themselves to the world, the two options which Christians have most often pursued were to vigorously strive to control the world or to disdainfully withdraw from it. Some have dreamed that they would make their society "Christian," necessarily defined in cultural and nationalistic terms, and have passed laws, mounted reforms, and, ironically, fought wars, in the name of Christ. At the other end of the spectrum have been the ascetics who, seeing the folly of coercing sinners into behaving like saints, have denounced the sinful world and withdrawn into isolation — hermits, monks, Amish, and the like.

However much these two models seem consistent to us, they are not what Jesus had in mind. "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so I have also sent them into the world." (John 17:14-18.) There is the dilemma — in it but not of it. The Christian does not belong here, even as Jesus did not belong here, but he has a work to do in the midst of the persistent filth and degradation. We have work to do. But that work is not the redemption of the world — a world which is beyond redemption and can only hate those who rise above sin. The work is the eternal salvation of the honest and good souls.

Perhaps when compared with the sacred literature of other religions, the most remarkable feature of the New Testament, is its almost total disregard of

the society of its day. This of course, is quite a contrast to the Old Testament where God's kingdom, for prophetic reasons, was civil as well as religious. But one could read the New Testament through and go away knowing almost nothing of the society in which it was written. How was the government structured? What were the laws of inheritance, labor, family relations, foreign relations? Clearly, Jesus did not much care. It is true that the New Testament occasionally recognizes the fact that the powerful oppress the weak (James 2:6-7), but it offers no general solutions. Just a certain note of resignation. No revolutions were launched. It is just as if these things really did not matter. And that is exactly the case.

### Spiritual Work or Social Reform?

Jesus explained to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, thus his servants would not fight. (John 18:36) His kingdom was spiritual and his followers would be occupied with spiritual work. Jesus had come to seek and save the lost. He never envisioned that society would become just — in fact, he clearly stated that most people would reject the path of righteousness which he taught. Individual regeneration makes people better, but the reformer who imagines that the world will become a moral utopia craves a millennium which the scriptures do not promise. Our escape from evil will come only with our escape from this wicked world.

One of the persistent marks of apostate religion is a shift in emphasis from the spiritual to the work of social reform. This change of emphasis marks a people whose spiritual purpose has become blunted.

Salvation, forgiveness, and heaven become inadequate ends, and "other-worldly" religion is supplanted by "this-worldly" ethical and moral reform. When a man comes to spend most of his time worrying about the predicament of man in this world, he has lost view of the consummate importance of the next world. Physical suffering or death are of little consequence when compared with eternal matters. In the honor roll of those who died in faith (Hebrews, chapter eleven), suffering and injustice appear as irrelevant tragedies in this transient life, overshadowed by the truly significant triumph of those who live by faith to the saving of their souls.

So, it is easy to get things out of perspective. Men infatuated with this world come to center their religion on the problems of this world rather than the salvation of souls. Modern liberal Protestantism is a religion that has lost its spiritual zest and has become little more than soft-headed reformism. But conservatives can also become "this-worldly" in their religion, in the manner of Billy James Hargis and Carl McIntyre. The solution that one has to the world's problems is not so much the point as the truth that those who seek to save the nations are not likely to be much interested in saving people. Jesus and his disciples ignored Rome to seek and save those who were lost.

### **Growing Schism in Churches of Christ**

The changes in Churches of Christ in the years after World War II reflect a growing schism along these lines. The division over the use of the churches' funds to support orphan homes, other benevolent institutions, and for various social and recreational purposes, while raising important scriptural issues, clearly reflected a shifting balance in the minds of many about the relative importance of this world and the next. While the New Testament teaches that all Christians will react humanely to the world around them (Gal. 6:10), and the local churches felt a common responsibility for the lives of other saints, one soon reaches the end of the New Testament's social instructions. The extension of the church's role to that of a generous benevolent society and a service institution to provide recreational and social fellowship is both unscriptural and a clear perversion of

the otherworldly emphasis one finds in the New Testament. The apostolic churches were a spiritual fellowship for the purpose of evangelization, edification, and worship. When one changes that scheme he almost surely has come to underestimate the importance of spiritual things, and to think more highly than he ought to of the importance of this world.

In short what ultimately becomes the social gospel in liberal churches — the message that Jesus came to bring social justice to this world — begins slowly and with good intentions. Innocent, and even scriptural, as the support of benevolent institutions seemed to many well-intentioned members of Churches of Christ, the pattern of thinking that emphasizes the solution of social ills starts one down a long road that has no end. If Christianity calls us to the solution of the world's social problems, as millions in the past have conceived it to do, one must push on beyond the poor and orphaned to cleanse the world of every social evil. And it is a mission that Jesus failed to attend to, as did Paul and all the other divinely guided men in apostolic days. And it is a mission which inevitably leads us away from the work which the New Testament calls us to do — preaching the gospel to a lost world.

### **Keep Things in Perspective!**

All of this does not mean that a Christian is socially calloused, nor does it mean that one is forbidden to participate in the political order in which he lives. Christians live lives of compassion, and are ready to help those in need always as they have ability and opportunity. A Christian has a right to exercise any civil exercise that the government grants to him which does not cause him to violate the principles of Christian conduct. One may pay taxes (Matt. 22:17-21), appeal to the courts (Acts 25:8-12), and, I believe, hold a civil office (Phil. 4:22; Acts 19:12) without undermining his Christian commitment. And certainly has a right, and an obligation, to try to make the society in which he lives as peaceful and hospitable as possible, using the means that the government grants to him as a citizen.

The point is: keep it in perspective. A runaway

sentimentality and distortion of New Testament social teachings has led many to involve local churches in unscriptural ends ranging from the building of orphan homes to the sponsoring of black guerillas in Rhodesia. And a runaway zeal for a politically moral society has led some to forget how little difference the shape of this world makes.

We need always to keep our priorities in order. On the rare occasions when I begin to fret and take this world seriously, I still find it useful to ask the question: "Would Jesus have really cared?" I can let the world go, and get back to the business of seeing my fellow-man as one who is spiritually lost and who needs the salvation which Jesus came to give him. ■

## God's Plan to Save Man

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Without freewill, love is really impossible and communion is meaningless. With the ability to choose to love God and have fellowship with him comes the ability to choose not to love him and reject his offer of fellowship.

So, he placed man (Adam and Eve) in the garden of Eden with dual responsibilities to: 1) care for and dominate the rest of his earthly creation and 2) populate the earth with offspring. When God placed man in the garden, he had already created both plant and animal life for his environmental and dietary enjoyment. (Genesis 1:29-30). What a great position to be in! Truly, he made man upright but, unfortunately, man violated that trust and sought out many inventions: "*Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.*" (Ecclesiastes 7:29) As Paul wrote, "*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:*" (Romans 5:12)

By the sin in the garden, man lost his right to the tree of life and his fellowship with God (spiritual death). As promised, he died spiritually the day he ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:17) and was driven from the tree of life to eventually die physically. Verily, the wages of sin is death (cf. Romans 6:23). It was at this point that God began to implement his eternal plan for saving man from the eternal conse-

quence of his sin – hell. The first hint of this plan comes with God's rebuke of the serpent (Satan) for his part in the fall of man from the high estate of his creation.

God announced, "*And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*" (Genesis 3:15) This points to a time when the "seed of the woman" would triumph over Satan. While Satan would merely bruise the **heel** or the woman's seed, her seed would bruise the **head** of Satan, referring to the small hurt done to the Christ at the crucifixion with the great hurt delivered to Satan by Jesus' triumph over death by the resurrection. This was done by the seed of the woman. He had no earthly father.

Man continued to choose sin over obedience. The result being that the world sank deeper and deeper into sin following the initial fall and the announcement of ultimate redemption through the seed of the woman. Over the years that followed, until the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, God was working the eternal plan, hidden in his mind, to restore fellowship with man that had been broken by sin. Old Testament history records the unfolding of that "mystery" that would ultimately be made fully known by the redemptive work of Christ and reflected by the existence of the church. (Ephesians 3:10). As the world sank deeper into sin, God saved a few (8 souls) from death to keep the race alive. After the flood sin again overtook the world. Idolatry and immorality ran rampant. But in spite of this God's plan was at work. He called Abraham's family out of that world to serve him in a land that he would show him. He gave him a three-fold promise. 1) His seed would become a great (huge) nation, 2) it would possess a great (prosperous) land and 3) ultimately by one special seed (cf. Galatians 3:16) all the nations or families of the earth would be blessed.

These promises were passed on to Abraham's immediate posterity. While these spent their lives wandering in the promised land (Canaan), they themselves did not receive the promises, but their descendants did. The descendants became a great nation while slaves in Egypt. They had been saved from starvation by Joseph's providential rise to power in Egypt. After the years of slavery, God

placed Moses in position to lead the nation to the land that had been promised and called him to do the job. Under God's guidance, Moses led them out of Egypt headed for Canaan. Shortly after the escape, God gave Moses a law upon Mount Sinai to deliver to the nation – a law that would foreshadow the ultimate life under the rule of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. (Hebrews 10:1). Eventually, through the work of Moses and Joshua (and the providence of God) the nation goes in and overruns, for the most part, the inhabitants of the promised land. Two of God's promises were fulfilled with one to go. The promise to bless the all nations through Abraham's seed would come later.

God worked with and disciplined his chosen nation for over hundreds of years during which he prepared them for the coming seed that would bless all nations. He sent prophets to the nation to call them back from their often apostasies. These prophets not only tried to reform Israel, they prophesied an encouraging age to come – the reign of the Messiah – all of which were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

The apostle Paul emphatically declares Jesus to be the one "Seed" of promise that extended salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. (Galatians 3:14-16). This Jesus had been born of a virgin – truly "born of the woman." (Cf. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; Galatians 4:4).

Paul uses a great part of his letter to the Ephesians giving thanks to God for giving him the privilege of declaring the mystery hidden in the mind of God for ages but now revealed to the apostle and prophets (New Testament prophets) by the Spirit (read chapter 3). By reading the apostolic writings we can now know what God was up to all those years of Old Testament history. He was setting the stage for bringing the Redeemer into the world at the exact right moment in history – called the "fulness of the times" (1:10; Galatians 4:4).

For the most part, when Paul referenced salvation by faith, he was speaking of faith in the promise made to Abraham, long before the giving of the law, which was a schoolmaster to restore the Jews, and ultimately all mankind, to fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. Abraham's justification by faith in that promise to bless all nations through his seed

predated "the law" by many years, thus he could not have been justified by the works of that law. This does not mean that his faith in the promise kept him from responding to the promise by acting in obedience to the commands associated with the promise. It was by faith in that promise that he left his former home (Hebrews 11:8-10). It was by faith in the promise that he offered Isaac (Hebrews 11:17-19).

So, when the "fulness of the times" came, Jesus was born of a woman (without a man) and died and arose for every man – Jew or Gentile. The process by which both alike become children of God (or saved) is clearly revealed by the apostolic writer. It is the same faith that Abraham had – faith in the promise made to him before the law was ever given. Paul speaks of "before faith came" and then "after that faith is come" (Galatians 3:23,25), speaking of the time before and after the fulfillment the Abrahamic promise – the object of their faith. Once the fulfillment came in the person of Jesus Christ, the Jews (and later the Gentiles) became children of God by faith (in that promise), a faith that required obedience. *"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."* (Galatians 3:26-29)

Verse 27 tells who the children of God by faith are. They are those who have been baptized into Christ regardless of their ethic (Jew or Gentile), social (bond or free), or gender (male or female) identity. So God's plan, hidden in his mind in times past, is now clear in retrospect to those who read God's revelation of it. What does "the Seed" say about what he expects of us to be saved? Is it, "pray the sinners prayer?" If so, where? Since he is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, whatever he or his apostles say about the subject is what we must do for it to be by faith in the promise. One must have a faith based on God's word (Romans 10:17). He must act upon that faith by repenting, confessing Christ and being baptized – all of which contribute to his salvation (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:10; 1 Peter 3:20-21). ■