

Reformation
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We are indeed called to “set [our] minds on the things above” (Col. 3:2), remembering, however, that this command is not structural in its thrust, telling us “where” to live our lives, but directional, telling us “how” and “in whose Name” to do so. The best way to seek the things above is to participate in God’s mission in His world.

Though fallen, this is still “our Father’s world.” In Christ He set out to restore His masterpiece. If, then, God has not turned His back on creation, neither may we. In fact, every attempt to flee the world in this sense is tantamount to a death wish. It is therefore very misleading to sing along with a catchy gospel hymn: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through. . . .” For the time being, at least, this world, and none other, is our God-appointed habitat. Of all people, Christians have every right to feel at home in this world of God’s making—at home, but not at ease, for the challenges of earthkeeping and caretaking are enormous.¹

Escape. This word perfectly characterizes our generation. Even worse, escapism has become a doctrine among many Christians. While the world avoids its problems through massive overdoses of television, recreation, and drugs, Christians dodge theirs by hiding in prayer closets and reading novels about the any-moment return of Jesus Christ. For these believers, the disease is despair and the diagnosis is terminal.

The world surveys itself and says, “There is no hope. Communism has failed, democracy is impotent, and everyone else is in no position to stop the downward spiral into destruction. World War III is inevitable.” Christians respond to this by saying, “Good. The world is about to fall apart. Too bad you unbelievers will be judged, but that’s the price you pay for your rebellion. As for us, we’ll escape the com-

ing Tribulation.” So, while a few feverishly try to restore some peace and order, and others run around affixing Band-Aids to cancer, most are content to “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow (Praise the Lord!) it all falls apart.”

Such an attitude is quite prevalent among pietists. With their dualistic view of the world, they hate time and matter. They see both as hindrances to their holiness. At best this world is merely a holding tank until we go to heaven. Yet, although we may have to dig deep in some cases, in nearly every pietist there is a sense of despair and hopelessness for anything substantially good *this side of heaven*. In fact, as Philip J. Lee writes, many times this is the root of their pietism.

... the one primary ingredient for the birth of gnosticism is a particular mood. The mood is one of despair. The gnostic solution can be satisfying only to those who have no tangible or rational hope. Because a certain number of people at every stage of history are caught up in despair, gnosticism of one sort or other always has a following.²

Consider the persecution of the Christians of the first century. It's no surprise that even before the twelve apostles passed from the scene an early form of Gnosticism had already begun to make inroads into the church. This is one possible reason why Paul had to write his letter to the Colossians and his Pastoral Epistles, and John penned his first Epistle. People in despair want to know how they can escape, not how to overcome. Furthermore, such escape has as its root an acknowledgment that anything earthly or human is sinful (dualism); therefore, true deliverance (escape) will include safe passage from such carnal things as business or social involvement.

Even moderate pietists are still dualistic to a large extent. While they do not actually say that being involved in the

world around them is evil, they do see, for example, their vocation as something to support their religious habit. One's efforts on the job has no essential value other than how they develop character or produce finances to give to missions. Work itself, then, is “neutral.” At best.

Part of our calling as Christians is to steward God's creation. We are to endeavor to make the world more beautiful, more fruitful, more reflective of God's wisdom, beauty, truth and goodness. One of the ways we accomplish this is through our various vocations.

Work is not part of God's curse on fallen people but part of His plan for our process of maturation. The more carefully we read the Bible, the more clearly we see that God is intimately concerned with our earthly life. Christianity is a very “earthy” religion. While we most certainly are not to be worldly, we are commanded to live *in* the world. Furthermore, if we are to be salt, light, and leaven, then it is mandatory that we engage ourselves in the world on a real and practical level. It's one thing to hate sin, it is another to hate the world God created.

Seeking escape is a retreatist mentality not advocated in Scriptures. Christians are those who conquer kingdoms, perform acts of righteousness, and obtain promises. They are the ones who “put foreign armies to flight” (Heb. 11:33-34)—not the ones who flee! And even though many Christians have died while engaged in the battle for the faith, they died pressing forward; they were not shot in the back.

Escape or Remobilization?

By A.D. 70, nation had risen against nation and famine had ravaged the earth, false prophets had risen, and lawlessness had increased; the Gospel had been preached in all the known world (Col. 1:6, 23), and the Roman army surrounded Jerusalem. Was it time to look for the Messiah's

physical return? Was this “The End”?

While it was God’s judgment on Israel for her rejection of Christ, it was not The End. In fact, Christ had warned people to beware of false prophets who said otherwise (Matt. 24). What actually had happened to the church in the midst of this judgment was that believers in Christ went about extending the revival of Pentecost. The faithful did not retreat or look for avenues of escape. They were committed for the long haul.³

In the 1500s, the Western church was apostate. Its priests played games of pharisaical show-and-tell rather than serving God’s people. Many of the ecclesiastical leaders had never read the Bible, but that was no real drawback, as far as they were concerned, since the majority of the people were not permitted to see one anyway. Immorality was permissible as long as the fee for forgiveness (indulgences) was paid to the local merchant of grace. In a very literal sense, it *was* the Dark Ages. But was it The End? Was Armageddon around the corner? No.

But Martin Luther and the Reformation were.

Sadly, American Christianity has been permeated with the doctrines of defeat and despair. It substitutes a frantic craving for a godly hope to be with Jesus. Evangelists play on such despair by portraying Christ as a way out of life’s trials. Moody repeatedly compared himself to a man standing on a sinking ship throwing out life preservers. “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’” Do you hear the implicit despair of such a comment? What of the “convert” to this message? Will she take seriously the command to make disciples? To a degree, possibly, so long as discipleship deals with matters of the heart. But as for cultivating every area of life to the glory of God, certainly not. She’s grabbed on to the Savior and is going to escape this death trap any day now. Why polish brass on a sinking ship?

Why take time to grow and mature and nurture others? After all, in the words of Hal Lindsey, “We should be living like persons who don’t expect to be around much longer.”⁴ Any time now, it will all be over. We hope.

Such an attitude of retreat can be seen in Montanus and his followers only a century after the apostles had left the scene. Montanus knew by “prophetic revelation” that Christ was about to return. Subsequently, he counseled Christians to abstain from marriage, practice severe asceticism, and retreat to an appropriate place to await the any-moment return of Jesus. While the Montanists were somewhat orthodox in their theology, they added to the Word of God and thereby subtracted from their responsibilities to occupy until the Lord returns. The world, then, became a holding area where we await the return of Christ—a place from which to escape.

Today’s Montanuses declare that this current world is headed toward judgment. After that judgment, Christ will take control of the world and rule it with a steel sword. However, until that happens, the message and activities for believers should be “Flee the wrath to come by finding safety in Jesus Christ.”

For the gnostic personality the world is a terrifying place. It is inexorably subject to decay and death and one day will be mercifully put out of its misery. The primary hope is for the game to be called due to darkness; the big fear is that it won’t happen soon enough.

Of course, if time itself is to be escaped, then such concerns as history, roots, and continuity are irrelevant. And if history is irrelevant, what is happening now has no value either. Who cares what laws are legislated? What difference does investing in the future make? Why be concerned about the poverty of the inner city? In the end it really doesn’t matter.

All that matters to one who is in despair about the earth

and God's plans for *this side of eternity* is conversion and preparing for heaven. Why waste time talking about the Exodus or the Transfiguration, the Passover or the Incarnation? People who want to run away don't want to hear of biblical events, except as a distraction from the events of the world around them. They have no desire to hear how God has moved in history. They want to know how to escape history. Besides, teaching theology might chase the sinners off, and converting sinners is our sole Christian purpose, isn't it?

In Jeremiah's day there were prophets scurrying around telling the people to relax, deliverance was right around the corner. God's rebuke of these prophets and his counsel for Israel through Jeremiah are very pertinent to the twentieth-century Christian.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare (Jer. 29:5-7).

If we are to disciple the nations and cultivate the earth for the glory of Christ, we must stop looking for a way out. We must also stop listening to every false prophet who says the end is near. Whatever our eschatology, we are to establish ourselves in a vocation, have families and plan for grandchildren. We are also to pray for the peace of the cities we live in. Contrary to John Walvoord's comment that the Bible "presents no commands to improve society as a whole," we are clearly commanded to be light and salt, working toward subduing every area of life to Christ.⁵ This life is not some-

thing we should try to escape from; it is something we must live to its fullest for the glory of God.

None of this is to say that we should not be heavenly minded or cease longing for the return of Christ. On the contrary, the more eternally minded we are the more we place ourselves in the heart of God's reality. The more heavenly minded we are the more clearly we see this world, with its problems and needs and possibilities, from a godly perspective. Consciousness of eternity does not produce a person who despises this life, but one who is more deeply committed to God's purposes for history.

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Endnotes

- 1 Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 530, 470.
- 2 Philip J. Lee, *Against Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.
- 3 I am aware of the teaching that says the early Christians expected Jesus to return at any moment. The fact is that Peter knew he was to die; Jesus had told him so. Paul didn't expect the any-moment return; after all, why spend so much time on the infrastructure of the church if it was about to be raptured? What was expected was

His “coming in the clouds,” which spoke of His coming in judgment and deliverance, which He did in A.D. 70. The Old Testament is replete with this image of God coming in the clouds which foretold of coming judgment. Reference Genesis 15:17; Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20; Nahum 1:2-8; Acts 2:19, to cite just a few of the relevant passages.

- 4 Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1970), 145.
- 5 John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 134.