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## REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## INFORMATION

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The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD

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*John H. Armstrong*

Maltbie Davenport Babcock (1858-1901), pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Lockport, New York, had been an outstanding baseball player and a champion swimmer before he entered the ministry of the gospel. To keep his physical condition he ran virtually every morning. Early in the day he ran as much as eight miles—first to the brow of a hill overlooking Lake Ontario and then into a ravine where he observed as many as forty different species of birds in their native habitat. He sometimes told his staff, "I am going out to see my Father's world." Babcock also loved music. He played the organ, piano and violin.<sup>1</sup>

It is no surprise then that Maltbie Babcock, the New York Presbyterian minister, gave the church one of her greatest hymns:

This is my Father's world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
The music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world:  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—  
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,  
The birds their carols raise,  
The morning light, the lily white,  
Declare their maker's praise.  
This is my Father's world:  
He shines in all that's fair;  
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,  
He speaks to me everywhere.

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 earth and heav'n be one.

---

*But is this really the Father's world?  
 Many, especially under the influence of  
 modern charismatic faith teachers, speak  
 as if God has given the world over to the  
 Devil. They continually "bind the Devil"  
 and try to reclaim the world for God, who  
 somehow seems to have lost it in a cosmic  
 battle in the Garden of Eden.*



But is this really the Father's world? Many, especially under the influence of modern charismatic faith teachers, speak as if God has given the world over to the Devil. They continually "bind the Devil" and try to reclaim the world for God, who somehow seems to have lost it in a cosmic battle in the Garden of Eden.<sup>2</sup>

Isn't this world, cursed by the fall, something to be shunned as distinctly evil? Doesn't the New Testament make it abundantly plain that this world is hostile to God and to Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12, 3:19). And isn't this

world condemned by God (1 Cor. 11:32)? Furthermore, fellowship with this world is called "enmity with God" by James (4:4).

Evangelicals, as a direct result of nineteenth-century revivalism, reacted stridently against the culture around them. They found the world of the mind, of art, music and high culture, all opposed to the gospel they fervently preached. Historian Mark Noll has aptly concluded that "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."<sup>3</sup>

#### WHERE DO WE GO WRONG?

First, we go wrong by misunderstanding the Bible itself. A careful reading of the text will help to rescue us from this strident *oppositional* stance toward the world.

The basic idea of the New Testament Greek word commonly translated world (*kosmos*) is "order" or "arrangement." The related verb means "to arrange," "to furnish," or "to adorn." This is why Matthew says the Pharisees "adorn the monuments of the righteous" (23:29, RSV), and Peter writes, "the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves . . . (1 Peter 3:5). The related adjective means "fitting" or "decent" (cf. 1 Tim. 2:9; 3:2).

The noun "world" occurs some 188 times in the Greek New Testament, of which 104 are in the gospel and letters of John. Another 46 occurrences of the word appear in Paul's letters. One scholar-translator concludes:

The idea of order is always present in the meaning "universe" or "world," which is the sense the Greek noun most often carries. In biblical thought, of course, this order is *the result of God's activity. God created the universe as an orderly, harmonious system* (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

Second, we go wrong in not putting the proper emphasis upon the doctrines of creation, incarnation and providence. Evangelicals, often known in this century for their preoccupation with certain doctrinal emphases at the boundaries of their own identity, have generally been defined by this oppositional character. (We are the Protestants who oppose liberalism on the left and fundamentalism on the right.) As a result of this oppositional nature we often give short shrift to important doctrinal concerns because they are not part of "our" struggle. Both fundamentalists and evangelicals waged a front line fight against modernism during the first half of this century, only to forget large areas of truth at other corners of the theological kingdom. Let me illustrate.

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*We have reacted against everything from art to music because we have lost the doctrine of creation in this sense. And without a proper doctrine of man we have evangelical extremes that abound.*




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#### CREATION

While contesting liberalism's frontal attack upon the integrity of the Genesis account we virtually lost the value of the doctrine of creation for living life to the glory of God in this present world. And by stressing the effects

of sin upon the human race, against the optimistic social gospel at the turn of the century, we lost the sheer order and glory of creation itself. This includes the inherent worth and goodness of all that God made, especially man. (The loss of the Psalter in our churches has had a great effect upon this as well. If evangelicals sang the Psalms, not just several selected verses in praise chorus form, they might actually maintain a more healthy view of man and creation!) This loss has profound effects within evangelicalism. We have reacted against everything from art to music because we have lost the doctrine of creation in this sense. And without a proper doctrine of man we have evangelical extremes that abound. For example, on the one hand evangelicals developed a seriously flawed notion of "self-esteem" that was clearly rooted in secular patterns of thought (cf. Robert Schuller, etc.), while at the same time we have a growing number of conservative Christians who react against these overtly secular notions with stridency and promote "biblical counseling," so-called. This approach often observes mankind *only* from the standpoint of fallenness. There is little or nothing in the literature of this emphasis which glories in man as God's special and unique creation, even though Scripture is filled with such doctrinal teaching (cf. Psalm 8, 139, etc.).

#### A REAL INCARNATION?

At the same time twentieth-century evangelicals have continued to flirt with a latent Docetism in regard to the incarnation.<sup>5</sup> Mark Noll clearly poses the proper question for evangelicals:

The questions with the greatest intellectual moment for those of us who are fundamentalists and evangelicals are the questions with the greatest moment—period. Does the cross

show forth the death of an *incarnate* savior? Was the Son of God truly born of a virgin, *truly incarnate in human nature*? Did Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, *really live on this earth*? Did Jesus die a *real death*? Did he *really rise bodily from the grave*? And does the Holy Spirit *really extend* to repentant sinners the benefits of the incarnate Christ in *this* life (emphasis mine)?<sup>6</sup>

Noll concludes:

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation tells us that God himself chose this world—a world defined by materiality as well as spirituality, a world of human institutions as well as divine realities—as the arena in which to accomplish the salvation of the elect.<sup>7</sup>

The physical bodies of believers in Christ “are members of Christ” (1 Cor. 6:15) and thus are to be offered to God in holy service and worship (cf. Rom. 12:1-2). Noll is right to add, “. . . the fact that the gospel goes out as a universal offer to all humanity suggests something about the dignity in this world of all human beings and the potential value in this world of all that they do.”<sup>8</sup>

### PROVIDENCE

Closely related to this proper emphasis upon materiality is the doctrine of divine providence. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the innovative hymn writer of his era, understood this when he penned the words of another widely sung and immensely useful hymn:

I sing th' almighty power of God  
That made the mountains rise,  
That spread the flowing seas abroad  
And built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained  
The sun to rule the day;  
The moon shines full at His command,  
And all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord  
That filled the earth with food;  
He formed the creatures with His word  
And then pronounced them good.

Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed  
Where'er I turn mine eyes;  
If I survey the ground I tread  
Or gaze upon the skies!

There's not a plant or flower below  
But makes Thy glories known;  
And clouds arise, and tempests blow  
By order from Thy throne.

Creatures, as numerous as they be,  
Are subject to Thy care;  
There's not a place where we can flee,  
But God is present there.

Providence is all but forgotten by modern evangelicals. We live day-to-day as if God were not really involved in our lives, especially in the *stuff* of this world. God is sovereign, we say, but in actuality He is an “absentee” ruler who governs from afar, not willing to get too sullied.

One of the reasons modern evangelicals are presently so interested in “signs and wonders,” or supposedly miraculous phenomena, is found here. If God is not *truly* involved on a day-to-day basis with life, as we know it, then we very much desire Him to intervene in miracu-



lous displays that will demonstrate He is personally interested in us and our very material struggles. A healthy doctrine of providence will go a long way in correcting these current waves of sign seeking.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Though the Hebrew does not have a single term for the world or the universe, there are several phrases in the Old Testament that refer to the world. Even though the Old Testament does not have a single term, there is "a fully developed doctrine of creation (cf. Gen. 1:1). God made all things. They are all equally the works of His hand. One divine plan lies behind everything."<sup>9</sup>

The earth, in the Old Testament, is important for several reasons. First, it is the place occupied by the nations and the peoples. God, the Creator of the entire universe, bears special relationship with man, and consequently to the whole inhabited earth. During his sojourn in this present world man experiences God's acts in providence, judgment and grace.

### THE GREEK CONCEPT

The Greek philosophers had a highly developed sense of the universe as a single entity quite separate from the personal Creator. This can be seen in the word "cosmos", as noted above. The Greeks generally thought in terms of order, structure, and adornment. In this thought the world is seen as an ordered, harmonious and beautiful structure. Even if the Greeks thought in terms of an origin for the universe they continued to think of matter as eternal.

Plato took these ideas and saw the world as a body with a soul, or a sensual reflection of the eternal. In this concept a *demiourgos*, or *theos*, made this world. God, in this thought, is the highest idea in the cosmos. The cre-

ated world is thought of as god in this framework.

Aristotle rejected Plato's simplistic thought regarding a genesis of the physical world and accepted the eternity of the world. He came to regard God, not as the world's maker, but rather as pure mind or form.

Gnosticism, which had an immense effect upon the early church, developed a dualistic thought form which saw the material world as a prison for the soul while redemption was liberation from this prison. The desire was to return, through redemption, to the realm of pure mind, or true God. This philosophical heresy distressed the church immensely and most certainly was behind some of the error the apostle John addressed in his epistles.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT

Clearly the word cosmos is the most significant of all the words used in the New Testament for the world. In the New Testament the cosmos is "primarily the sum of all things, the universe (Acts 17:24) . . . in the main it represents . . . the totality of things."<sup>10</sup>

Theologian Geoffrey Bromiley has correctly concluded:

The predominant concern of the NT, as of the OT, is not with the cosmos as a whole but with man in the cosmos. God made the whole world, but He made man in His image, and His main dealings are with man. Hence, in the familiar phrase, the cosmos is the theater of human history, and more specifically of the history of God and man.<sup>11</sup>

To conclude, we must say that in a very important sense worldliness, understood as concern for this world and the life we live in it, is a proper and noble response to both God and His creation. We must identify with this planet. As worshipers of the true and living God we

must be concerned for all that affects this world, especially as it touches upon humanity—physically, socially and spiritually. A good God created a good world, and we, saved because of His goodness and kindness, must exercise our proper dominion in this world (Gen. 1:26). If culture is “the total pattern of human behavior and its products, a society’s way of life and thinking,”<sup>12</sup> then we who follow the true God must be, of all people, most interested in human culture and attempts to construct and preserve society.

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#### THIS PRESENT EVIL WORLD

But, you protest, doesn't the Bible speak of this world as evil? Yes, for sure, but only in the sense that this world is alienated, or estranged, from the God who made it. God does not hate this world. He made it good

in every way. He has not thrown away His creation. He is redeeming it through His Son (Rom. 8:20-22).

The present alienation of the world from the Creator is frequently the theme of the apostles John and Paul. In Romans the darkest picture is sketched. Sin entered this world, bringing chaos and rebellion. God sent His one and only Son into this world, and the rulers of this fallen world crucified the Lord of glory. The world now refuses to believe in Him and lies condemned, facing judgment. This present refusal to acknowledge the kingship of Christ, the Second Adam, condemns the world in its unbelief (John 3:36). This is why those who believe are not to be conformed to this world, but rather to be transforming it through the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2).

When the writers of Scripture use the term world in this sense it is quite obvious they are not rejecting this world, either as a physical entity or as a place in which men and women live lives that are good and pleasing to God. The term world, in this evil sense, speaks of the world as a place which is hostile to God and to His Christ. The world, in this sense, is a source of moral corruption. The world, in this sense again, brings us into a dangerous place that threatens our spiritual health.

Paul speaks of “the spirit of the world” (1 Cor. 2:12), and of the world being condemned (1 Cor. 11:32). Perhaps the most descriptive text occurs in Ephesians 2:2 where Paul speaks of “the course of this world” (NASB, RSV), or “the ways of the world” (NIV). James uses this idea to say that “a friend of this world makes himself an enemy of God” (4:4).

And the apostle John makes it very clear that Jesus does not belong to this world either (cf. John 17:14,16). Those who follow Jesus are in the world (John 13:1), but they do not belong to the world (15:19; 17:14,16).

Thus Christian believers are commanded "not to love the world nor the things of the world" (1 John 2:15). It is with this biblical truth in mind that theologian David F. Wells has aptly defined worldliness, as an evil clearly opposed to Christ, in this way:

... worldliness is that system of values which in any culture has the fallen sinner at its center, which takes no account of God or His Word, and which therefore views sin as normal and righteousness as abnormal.<sup>13</sup>

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*What the churches have lost is a proper theological understanding of both the world and the evil of true worldliness. This loss is the result of a century and a half of theological and biblical downgrade.*




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Worldliness, then, has very little to do with what many twentieth-century Christians think of when this term comes to mind. Worldliness is not so much to be thought of in terms that are negative ("touch not, taste not, handle not") but rather in terms which explain the ways in which we respond to this world, and our lives in it, "which take no account of God or His Word." If this be true, and I believe it is, then I submit that most churches and church agencies, at the end of the twentieth century, are more "worldly" in the biblical sense than any of us has adequately imagined.

What the churches have lost is a proper theological understanding of both the world and the evil of *true* worldliness. This loss is the result of a century and a half of theological and biblical downgrade. We have lost our moorings and the future is uncertain, at least humanly speaking, for evangelical Christianity in North America. Modernity, our present worldliness, has "reshaped our sense of what is proper. As a result, confession has either lost its weight or disappeared entirely in academic theology."<sup>14</sup> Wells adds that "once confession is lost, reflection is cut loose to find new pastures." He adds:

Once it [i.e., academic theology] has lost its discipline in the Word of God, it finds its subject matter anywhere along a line that runs from Eastern spirituality to radical politics to feminist ideology to environmental concerns.<sup>15</sup>

Wells further concludes:

By a different route, the same thing has happened in the Church, the evangelical wing included. As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one's self. . . . In eviscerating theology this way, by substituting for its defining, confessional center a new set of principles (if they can appropriately be called that), evangelicals are moving ever closer to the point at which they will no longer meaningfully be able to speak of themselves as historic Protestants.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

If we are to recover the proper vision of the church, that vision which she knew at her best moments in history, we must properly embrace the truth of Scripture

regarding the world. We must be "worldly Christians" who are profoundly concerned for this world. What is our part in this present age? Are we really the vice-regents of earth's true sovereign, King Jesus, working for the advance of His truth on every front within our culture? Or are we part of a defeated minority that simply waits for the faithful remnant to be "snatched away" before the end of this age? Until the church answers this question properly it is doubtful if she will ever be strengthened to carry out her calling.

At the same time can we work "in the world" without being taken captive by its impressive methods and modern techniques? The church at the end of this present century seems increasingly unable to avoid the crippling evil of "worldliness" through the interrelated philosophies of modernity. God has been marginalized, not only in the culture of the West, but specifically within the churches. If you doubt this, ask yourself just one question: Is that which genuinely motivates and defines the life of your local church what is true and absolute or what is relevant and helpful? Have we not, as David Wells asks, substituted "our own private religious experience for truth that was once also public and universal in scope"?<sup>17</sup>

Embrace the world, love the world, live in the world? By all means. Trust the wisdom of the world, as it stands in opposition to Christ? Never!

We must be regularly reminded that it was our Lord who taught us: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men" (Matt. 5:13).

### Notes

1. Robert K. Brown and Mark R. Norton, editors and compilers, *The One*

*Year Book of Hymns* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995). See May 10 devotional reading.

2. Cf. John H. Armstrong, ed. *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 227-41. See especially my chapter titled "How Shall We Wage Our Warfare?"
3. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Cf. inside cover dust jacket for quote.
4. Robert G. Bratcher, *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 430. The Bible Translator is a publication of the United Bible Societies.
5. Docetism is the doctrine that the humanity of Jesus is not genuine, or real; He merely appeared to be real, or human.
6. Noll, 252.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, 252-53.
9. Merrill C. Tenney, general editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 5: 963.
10. Ibid, 966.
11. Ibid., 966.
12. Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 40.
13. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 215.
14. Ibid., 101.
15. Ibid., 101.
16. Ibid., 101-102.
17. Ibid., 8.