

Countercultural Christianity and Spiritual Warfare

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“Be very careful how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” – Eph. 5:15

“Do not conform any longer to the thought-patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern God’s good and perfect will.” – Rom. 12:2

Normal Christianity



In the late 1930s the Chinese church leader, Watchman Nee, wrote *The Normal Christian Life*, a book that was based on lectures he gave in 1938-39 but which was not published until 1957. In his book Nee argued that a “normal” Christian is a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled believer who lives a life of total commitment. In that sense, a “normal” Christian is not the average Christian. Rather, “normal” denotes what *should* be – in contrast to the *abnormal* (or *subnormal*) spiritual lives that characterize many professing Christians.

My thesis is that “normal” Christianity is innately radical and countercultural. I do not mean “radical” in the most common use of the term – i.e., extreme, irrational or reckless – but “radical” (Latin: *radix*) in the original etymological sense of being connected to the root part (or the life source) of a system. In the case of the Christian faith, this means sharing organically in the life of Jesus Christ, and being attuned and animated by his values and priorities. This connotes a spiritual connection with Jesus rather than merely an institutional identification with the Christian religion. And when I contend that normative Christianity should be countercultural, I mean to the extent that we cultivate a worldview and a lifestyle in keeping with the values, beliefs and behavior of the Kingdom of God, and which contrast sharply to those of our world.

For the first 300 years of its existence, most Christians understood that the true church is by nature a radical countercultural community. They

realized that this world system is generally hostile to the values of the community of Christ, and that the true church will always be but a remnant within mainstream society. However, beginning with the emperor Constantine (r. 312-37) and the subsequent establishment of Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire, this perception changed. Mainstream society and its institutions were superficially “Christianized,” and for the next 1400 years or more Western civilization was regarded as essentially coterminous with Christendom. Unfortunately, the mainstream Protestant Reformation did little to disabuse most Christians of this dubious association, and despite the radical secularization of Western culture over the past two centuries many Christians continue to assume that our culture is generally compatible with biblical values.

As a result, many Christians are clueless when it comes to the very concept of countercultural Christianity. Many are quite comfortable in this world

and accept its values and lifestyles without question. This is also true for churches that strive so earnestly to be “relevant” by integrating as much pop culture as possible into worship services and other aspects of their ministry. In a misguided attempt to be “contemporary” (or in the case of emergent churches, “cool” and “edgy” or “postmodern”), they only trivialize the Gospel. Secular marketing strategies, mass audience manipulation techniques and feel-good pop psychology can certainly appear to be successful – many pop culture mega-churches attract hordes of followers – but their approach to ministry is a mile wide and an inch deep. Serious followers of Christ crave spiritual growth, and when the Gospel message is continually dumbed-down and reduced to the lowest common denominator, there is little chance that such churches will produce the kind of people that Watchman Nee referred to as “normal” Christians.

Aside from theological liberalism and the “Word of Faith / Prosperity Gospel” heresy, cultural accommodation poses the greatest threat to mainstream evangelical Christianity. In lieu of a vision of discipleship that is resolutely radical and countercultural, Christians are being swept along by the cultural currents of our day. And as our culture becomes increasingly rude, crude, lewd, degenerate and dysfunctional, the contrast between Christian values and lifestyles and those of unbelievers becomes increasingly blurred.

Christian theology teaches that there are three insidious forces conspiring to render us spiritually impotent: in traditional King James terminology, they are “the world, the flesh, and the devil.” The first one is external and relates to what we call “the world system” – the values, beliefs, and general operating principles of our society and culture, including the social, economic and political systems and institutions of this world that are generally antithetical to most everything the Gospel represents. The second factor is internal and relates to our human nature. Scripture is clear that when it comes to spiritual warfare, the primary battleground is the human heart – the essence of our mind, emotions and will. The third force is supernatural – the realm of Satan and demonic spirits. A wholistic understanding of Christian spirituality and discipleship addresses each of these forces, but according to Scripture, if we deal honestly and faithfully with the first two, we have relatively little to fear from the third. In keeping with

the theme of this article, I will address each of these factors, but in reverse order.

1. The Supernatural

The Prince of This World. The Bible teaches that there is a personal devil, Satan, who commands legions of evil spirits, or demons. Although we know little about the origins and machinations of this realm of reality, the Bible is emphatic on a few key points. For one, we are told that Satan has had great influence in human history, and that he currently holds great power over the nations and institutions of this world. In fact, he is even referred to as the “prince of this world.” A few examples:

- John 12:30-31 – *“Jesus said,... Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out....”*
- Ephesians 2:1-2 – *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”*
- Matthew 4:8-9 – *“Again, the devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’*
“Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” [Note: In this passage Jesus didn’t dispute the fact that Satan has temporary power over the nations and institutions of this world. Ultimately, of course, this is why the governments, corporations and other institutions of this world can be so corrupt, so inhumane and so evil. To a greater or lesser extent, they are manifestations of the dark spiritual forces that exercise power over this world.]
- II Corinthians 4:4 – *“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ....”*

Second, Scripture informs us that spiritual warfare is a reality, but we can prevail through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

- Ephesians 6:11 – *“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*
- James 4:7 – *“Submit yourselves... to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”*
- I Peter 5:8 – *“Be self-controlled, and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...”* [Note: Although a powerful and seductive spiritual force, Scripture is clear that we can resist Satan by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The implication of this verse is that Satan roars ferociously, but in fact he is toothless and powerless over those who live Spirit-filled lives. Contrary to the old Flip Wilson line, “The Devil made me do it!” in fact Satan cannot over-power us or force us to do anything against our will.]

Third, unless we are one of those rare Christians who has been called to a ministry of spiritual warfare and deliverance, we should never challenge spiritual forces directly.

- Jude 9 – *“But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”*

Undoubtedly, this is a major reason why Scripture has relatively little to say regarding the dark world of the Occult. Apparently, we are to avoid this realm of reality even to the point of suppressing any curiosity we might have of it. Demonic possession is a mystery, but it is sufficient to understand that we can open ourselves to demonic influences through any kind of deliberate and willful sin – whether it be our active participation in social injustice and the inhumane exploitation of others, our involvement in pornography and sexual sin, excessive consumption of alcohol or indulging in certain types of drugs, or direct involvement in the Occult itself.

Evil, in every possible manifestation, is rampant in this world, and we should be wise concerning the realities of this life. But fundamentally, our calling is to

follow Christ and immerse our soul – our mind, our emotions and our will – in those things that are spiritually and morally edifying. As the apostle Paul exhorted the Christians in Philippi...

Phil. 4:8-9 – *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent and praiseworthy – think on such things.... And the God of peace will be with you.*

Outside the Bible, perhaps the most eloquent and powerful statement on spiritual warfare ever written was **Martin Luther’s** magnificent hymn, **“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”** Theologically profound and musically powerful, the song is a virtual seminar encapsulating the key themes of this section:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe doth see to work us woe
His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel
hate*

On earth is not his equal.

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would
be losing*

*Were not the right Man on our side, the man of God’s
own choosing.*

*Doest ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He
Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same
And he must win the battle.*

*And though this world, with devils filled, should
threaten to undo us*

*We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to
triumph through us.*

*The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to
them, abideth*

*The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who
with us sideth.*

*Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also
The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever.*

Satan is real and demonic influences are pervasive in this world, but our greatest challenges come in the human realm – both in the internal issues related to our human nature and the external forces exerted upon us by our culture.

2. The Internal: Human Nature

The Realities of Human Nature. Human nature is a complex phenomenon. As human beings we are created in the *imago Dei* (image of God), as declared in Genesis 1:26-27: “*Let us make man in our image.*” The implications of this are quite phenomenal, and this is what sets us apart from the rest of creation. Like God, we have personality and self-consciousness (or self-awareness). We also possess self-determination, the capacity to make deliberate and rational choices rather than merely reacting reflexively and impulsively to internal and external stimuli. In this regard, we can be said to have at least conditional free will, or free will within certain boundaries.

Like God, we are intelligent beings who have the capacity for knowledge, reason, and critical thinking. We are imaginative and creative beings who can express ourselves in complex and abstract language and through art, crafts, music, literature, science, and technological inventions.

As human beings, we are also a unique species in terms of our moral consciousness. We have the capacity to discern good and evil, and the ability to choose between right and wrong. As James Sire has written, “Each of us possesses a unique character out of which we think, desire, weigh consequences, refuse to weigh consequences, indulge, refuse to indulge – in short, choose to act.” We are, in a sense, spiritual beings with an innate sense of God-consciousness – what John Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*. We are not divine, but we are more than purely physical beings whose character and destiny is determined purely by our physiology.

Scripture teaches that we have an eternal soul that is our true essence. However, the Fall has altered our human nature to the extent that we are neither totally good nor totally evil, but a curious and complex mix. We are capable of great acts of kindness, altruism, and self-sacrificial love, but also gross brutality, selfishness and insensitivity. [Note: The Calvinistic doctrine of “total depravity” relates to the fact that our nature has been corrupted in every respect (see below), and that we are utterly incapable of earning, deserving, or meriting God’s salvific grace. But it does not assert that we are totally incapable of any goodness whatsoever. Perhaps a better term than “total depravity” would be “innate depravity.”]

Everything about our human nature, including our perceptions of truth and reality, has been corrupted by the Fall. It distorted our understanding of the nature and character of God; it corrupted the divine image of God within us as we became selfish and rebellious toward God; and it broke our relationship with God as we lost the divine presence of God.

Scripture has much to say about the inherent sinfulness of human nature. In his epistle to the Galatians the apostle Paul writes:

Gal. 5:13ff – You... were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature....

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want....

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you... that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

The Unholy Trinity. When it comes to the internal struggles with our human nature, there are three raging and insatiable impulses that work synergistically to corrupt our souls: egoism, materialism, and hedonism. If these impulses can be not only harnessed but spiritually transformed by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to experience the kind of “normal” Christian life of which Watchman Nee wrote.

Egoism. The ego is our conscious self – our God-given sense of self-awareness and self-identity. It is the understanding that I am a distinct being from all others in that I have my own individual personality. This is in contrast to the pantheistic monism that underlies much of Eastern philosophy, expressed in abstract concepts such as the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman*: “*I am he as you are he, as you are me, and we are all together.*”

As an individual accountable to God, I have a spiritual responsibility to nurture my body and soul. I also have a responsibility to develop my natural talents and my spiritual gifts not only for the purpose of self-fulfillment but to edify others and glorify God. So at least in this sense, we can say that ego – i.e., self-identity and self-awareness – is good!



Egoism, however, is quite another thing: it is a selfish orientation characterized by an obsessive fixation on oneself and one's own self-interest. As such, it is a form of idolatry in which self-fulfillment and ego-gratification become central preoccupations.

Historically, Christian theologians and moral philosophers have regarded egoism – often expressed in self-pride or hubris – as one of the “Seven Deadly Sins.” In *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis refers to it as “the complete anti-God state of mind” and a form of “spiritual cancer.” It is also the source of most relationship problems in life – everything from divorce to church schisms, as we are reminded in the Epistle of James:

James 4:1-3 – *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it.... You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own selfish desires.*

Being the essence of sin, egoism is not mentally healthy. In his book, *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer observes that “the labor of self-love [or egoism] is a heavy one indeed” because it causes us to usurp the rightful place of God in our lives. The consequences are both emotionally and spiritually debilitating:

Such people tend to be pretentious, overly image-conscious, and hyper-sensitive to any perceived slights from others. “The fear of being found out gnaws like rodents within their hearts. The man of culture is haunted by fear that he will someday come upon a man more cultured than himself. The [educated] man fears to meet a man more learned than he. The rich man sweats under the fear that his clothes or his car or his house will sometime be made to look cheap by comparison with those of another rich man....

Another source of burden is artificiality.... Most people live in secret fear that some day they will be careless and by chance an enemy or a friend will be allowed to peep into their poor, empty souls. So they are never relaxed. Bright people are tense and alert in fear that they may be trapped into saying something common or stupid. Traveled people are afraid that they may meet some Marco Polo who is able to describe some remote place where they have never been.

This unnatural condition is part of our sad heritage of sin, but in our day it is aggravated by our whole way of life. Advertising is largely based upon this habit of pretense.... Books are sold, clothes and cosmetics are peddled playing continually upon this desire to appear what we are not. Artificiality is one curse that will drop away the moment we kneel at Jesus' feet and surrender ourselves to his meekness.

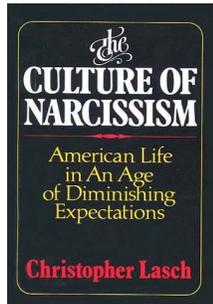
Then we will not care what people think of us so long as God is pleased. [A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 107ff.]

Our greatest challenge in life is to live thoughtfully and intentionally without succumbing to egocentrism. We must care about the cultivation of both our body and our soul without descending into the netherworld of narcissism – the state of total self-absorption in which we become the center of our own universe, a private little world in which we expect everybody and everything to revolve around us. In effect, narcissism is a form of self-deification in which we become our own god.

The titles of three popular magazine titles say a lot about our society. When *People* magazine debuted in 1974, it focused primarily on the lives (and scandals) of famous celebrities. *People* has the largest audience of any American magazine, and it is probably most known for annual polls such as “The Most Beautiful People,” “The Best Dressed,” “The Sexiest Man Alive,” etc. *Us*, founded in 1977, featured a more inclusive title, but still focused primarily on celebrity gossip and fads in

fashion, beauty, and entertainment. Then *Self*, founded a couple of years later in 1979, seemed to perfectly epitomize the narcissistic tendencies of our culture, specializing in health, fitness, nutrition, beauty tips, and self-help advice – everything from how to get rich to how to get healthy to how to have great sex. Over a period of five years, I recall watching in bemusement as first *People*, then *Us*, and finally *Self* made their debut. There seemed to be not only a pattern here but a trend.

All of this post-Sixties self-absorption prompted the historian **Christopher Lasch** to write his incisive critique of American society, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Twenty-five years before social networking and Facebook became cultural phenomena, Lasch warned that America was becoming a therapeutic-fixated society obsessed with image, fame and celebrity in which everyone aspires to be the star of his/her own reality show.



Ours is a society that admires narcissists – especially narcissistic celebrities – and many people are fascinated by the rich, the powerful, the attractive and the famous in business, politics, sports and entertainment. Unfortunately, this is also true in religion in general and Christianity in particular as rich, powerful, successful celebrity preachers and televangelists are idolized by the baptized masses.

The epitome of Christian narcissism is the **Prosperity Gospel** and the **Word of Faith movement**. As the fastest-growing subculture within Christianity, Word of Faith theology is a distorted view of Christian theology and spirituality that focuses on how the power of God can be accessed and applied to guarantee personal health, wealth, happiness and success. In other words, as “King’s Kids,” Christians not only have the opportunity but the right to live “abundant” and “victorious” lives as “overcomers,” and God’s manifold blessings are available to all who have the faith to claim them.

Christian egoism is spiritualized self-helpism, as exemplified in the ministry of the man that the media has dubbed “America’s Pastor,” **Joel Osteen**. Theologically, this is not only shallow but overtly heretical. While emphasizing the blessings of the Christian life, it denies the suffering that is attendant to living in a fallen and corrupt world. It also avoids

dealing realistically with our own human nature. Such a distorted theology has no concept of wholistic discipleship, just as it avoids dealing with sin, guilt, repentance, the traditional spiritual disciplines, and what **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** described as “The Cost of Discipleship.” In addition, Christian egoism, being innately self-centered and myopic, fails to relate Christian faith to the great social, cultural and political challenges of our day – or what **Francis Schaeffer** referred to as “the lordship of Jesus Christ over the whole of life.” As a result, the social consequences of such a mentality can be devastating as egoism erodes any sense of community or civic duty, or even loyalty to one’s family.

This raises the question: What is the purpose of family, and why is it so vitally important? Certainly, families exist to provide a stable, secure and committed environment conducive to procreation and raising healthy children, as well as a permanent and dependable support system. We all need help to get through this life. The old adage, “You can choose your friends, but you’re stuck with your family,” can certainly be true; but friends come and go, and committed lifelong friendships are rare. On the other hand, families should offer a support network for life.

The spiritual, psychological and social consequences of family breakdown can be disastrous. Many people who struggle spiritually testify that in lieu of a strong, faithful father (or mother) figure, they have had a difficult time believing in a Heavenly Father who loves and cares for them. Furthermore, without strong family ties and a stable and dependable support system, people seek security in life either by becoming successful in their chosen career or through dependence upon the government.

Since 1945 we have seen the constant erosion of community and the breakdown of the family, including the fragmentation of the extended family. Christians, like most everyone else, have become job-centered and follow wherever the best career and financial opportunities lead them. Therefore, their job dictates the city and the general area where they will live, whereupon they look for the best house in the nicest community or subdivision that they can afford. Then, having settled that, they look around for a church that is convenient and one that offers the kinds of programs they want for themselves and their family.

In his 1981 book, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, **Tom Sine** offered a counter-scenario. What if, instead of being ego- and career-centered, our priority in life was to make the most significant contribution possible to the expansion of the Kingdom of God? How would that effect our career, where we live, and our lifestyle choices? He explains:

Instead of beginning with the question, "What do I want?", I think we would have a better chance of discovering God's will by asking "What does God want, and how does he want me to be a part of what he is doing?" When we look at the will of God this way, the first question for a Christian to ask becomes, "What are the intentions of God for his world, and how does he want to use my life and gifts to advance his kingdom?" The answer to that question for each of us is our ministry calling – our Christian vocation – and it comes before any specific decisions as to job, spouse, or lifestyle.

Once we discover how God wants to use our lives to promote righteousness, reconciliation, justice, peace, and wholeness in our needy world, we have a reference point for all our other life decisions. Then we will seek that job, career, or tentmaking position that will enable us to most fully work for his kingdom calling in our life. We will seek his guidance regarding whether we should remain single or get married in light of our ministry vocation. And of course, one of our primary criteria for marriage will be finding someone who shares a highly compatible sense of ministry calling. We will even intentionally decide where to live and what kind of lifestyle to adopt in light of God's kingdom call on our lives.

[Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, p. 140.]

Materialism. There is a direct connection between egoism and materialism. The more material and financial resources we have, the more self-assured and self-sufficient we imagine ourselves to be – at least until a major crisis comes along that reminds us of just how utterly dependent upon the grace of God we truly are.

Materialism, usually associated with greed or avarice in the list of "Seven Deadly Sins," is the great "unmentionable sin" that is rarely addressed in church. Many pastors and church leaders who boldly address sexual sins and a broad spectrum of social evils suddenly become quite timid when it comes to this particular problem. Undoubtedly, it must be because most are as caught up in materialism as everyone else. So, not only do they avoid the topic, but they often become quite defensive whenever the issue is raised. But like all other private and public sins, the sin of

materialism can severely damage our Christian life and neuter our testimony.

My wife and I once visited a church in which, in the course of preaching expositively through the New Testament, the pastor had to address the issues raised in I Timothy 6:11ff. Casually skimming over Paul's warnings related to the love of money and the deceitfulness of wealth, he was quick to assure the congregation (as if they needed any assurance) that there is nothing wrong with money *per se*. In fact, he said, he hoped some day to be rich himself! My wife and I exchanged glances as we both had the same reaction: If you want to get rich, what are you doing in the ministry? He had probably never heard, nor would he have been prone to heed, the admonition of St. Jerome who wrote...

A clergyman who engages in business, and who rises from poverty to wealth, and from obscurity to a high position, avoid as you would the plague.... It is the glory of a bishop to make provision for the wants of the poor; but it is the shame of all priests to amass private fortunes.

Needless to say, my wife and I didn't linger long in that church before moving on. In all likelihood, a church leader who is driven to accumulate wealth is not someone who can be trusted to offer wise spiritual counsel in most areas of life.

So what exactly is materialism? Perhaps more than any other sin, it is the one that we can most readily see in others but are most blind to in our own lives. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with material things *per se*. But like egoism, materialism is a form of idolatry. It is the obsession with money and material things to the point that money and stuff become objects of adoration and worship.

Materialism is integrally connected to the sin of covetousness, which is probably one of the Ten Commandments that is taken the least seriously. As Jesus declared, "You cannot serve God and mammon (money or accumulated wealth)," but in keeping with the previous point, covetousness is a sin that we might recognize so perceptively in others while being oblivious to it when it affects us personally. It is easy to criticize the materialism and covetousness of others – especially those who have more than I – when in fact, judgement should start (and usually end) with oneself.

Materialism is problematical on several counts. For one thing, it violates the classical moral principle of

sophrosyne – “nothing in excess” and moderation in all things that are *good*. In Greek mythology, *Sophrosyne* was the goddess of moderation, self-control, temperance, restraint and discretion. (Pythagoreans incorporated this principle into their concept of *harmonia*, and Plato emphasized *sophrosyne* in the *Republic*.) In contrast, materialism is a form of extravagant indulgence – the lust for luxury, and the psychological need to have the newest, the biggest and the best of everything. [Note: This isn’t an argument for buying cheap products. We should value quality – just not in excess.]

The manifestations of materialism are obvious, just as they are commonly excused:

- The obsession with maintaining a large bank account;
- The obsession with building up one’s investment portfolio;
- A large, expensive house that exceeds one’s needs;
- A second (or third) house – the idyllic cabin on the lake or the ocean-side condo;
- Expensive cars;
- Excessive and expensive clothes;
- Consumerism – compulsive and unnecessary shopping and buying. As Christians, our calling is to be Christ-centered and ministry-focused, not habitual consumers and loyal contributors to the economy.

I SHOP
THEREFORE I AM

As Paul wrote in *Philippians 4:11*, we should learn to be content with what we have – an admonition that is emphasized throughout the New Testament.

- *Hebrews 13:5* – “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.”
- *I Timothy 6:11ff* – “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of

all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs....

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God.... Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

Contentment is a great virtue, but how exactly do we learn to be content with what we have in the midst of a society that is so affluent, so extravagant, and so materialistic? By cultivating a profound and deep spirit of gratitude for what we have – especially, the simple things in life: good health, beauty in nature, inspiring art, and the goodness we see in other people. As the hymn, “**We Plow the Fields and Scatter**,” expresses it so beautifully:

*We plough the fields and scatter
The good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered
By God’s almighty hand:
He sends the snow in winter,
The warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine,
And soft, refreshing rain.*

** All good gifts around us
Are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord,
O thank the Lord,
For all his love.*

*We thank thee then, O Father,
For all things bright and good,
The seed time and the harvest,
Our life, our health, our food.
No gifts have we to offer
For all thy love imparts,
Except what thou desirest –
Our humble, thankful hearts.*

Materialism is indicative of a life of faithlessness. If we don’t trust God for our needs, we must accumulate as much wealth as possible to protect and insulate us from possible deprivation and suffering. (Or in the case of the chronically poor, they must depend upon government to meet their needs). Materialism contributes to egoism and hedonism because it usually takes considerable financial resources to live a self-

indulgent life. As **John White** writes in *The Golden Cow: Materialism in the Twentieth Century Church*, “Riches are not evil but they are dangerous.... Riches corrupt everybody who is in the least corruptible” – which pretty much includes all of us.

So how much is too much? There are no rules. We live by faith, not by manmade standards or according to sociological norms. (See Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, and Galatians 3:11). Some occupations pay more than others, including some that are intrinsically socially-beneficial such as the healthcare profession. And while income potential shouldn't be the *primary* reason why we choose a vocation, it can (and perhaps should) be a factor. Certainly, within the church God uses people in a variety of vocations to meet the needs of all.

Throughout Christian history there has been a tendency by some to spiritualize poverty and patronize the poor – often due to the fact that (1) Jesus lived as an itinerant rabbi bereft of worldly possessions; and (2) throughout most of history the poor have often been the victims of appalling social, economic and political injustice. But covetousness is universal, and materialism can be just as problematic for the poor as for the wealthy. Particularly over the past 150 years, as Marxism and class warfare ideology have become so influential, low-income Christians need to be very cautious when it comes to judging others who have more than they.

Is poverty more “spiritual” than a conventional lifestyle? Although committed Christians are sometimes guided into low-paying vocations, poverty in itself is not innately “spiritual.” In fact, Scripture is clear that we have a responsibility to provide for ourselves so we don't become a burden to others. Paul's admonition in I Timothy 5:8 is a spiritual and ethical principle that is inviolable: “*If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*”

Living simply is a virtue, but living in poverty is not. As with all gifts and talents, the question when it comes to money is: How can it be used to provide for my needs and that of my family, how can it be used most efficaciously to help others, and how can it be invested to further the Gospel of Christ here in this life?

[Note: For an extraordinarily honest and perceptive treatment of wealth and materialism, see the aforementioned book by John White, *The Golden Cow* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1979).]

Hedonism. Like egoism and materialism, hedonism – the pursuit of pleasure – is a form of idolatry. Among the traditional “Seven Deadly Sins,” hedonism is characterized by lust and gluttony – i.e., uncontrolled passions, cravings and appetites.

Hedonism should not be confused with the pursuit of happiness – unless of course one's whole concept of happiness derives from a life devoted to ease, comfort, luxury, and perpetual entertainment. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with enjoying life. Indeed, we should strive to enjoy life – it is, after all, a gift from God, and we should cherish it. But happiness cannot be a goal in life, or else it becomes a false idol and an existential deadend. Rather, true happiness is the by-product of a God-centered life, mental tranquility and a grateful heart. As Jesus taught, “Blessed (or happy) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6).

We need a certain amount of relaxation and distraction from the constant pressures of everyday living in order to maintain a healthy emotional disposition. But as with egoism and materialism, the pursuit of happiness becomes a negative force when it becomes an obsessive pursuit of pleasure. In this respect, **Neil Postman's** modern classic, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), offers a necessary corrective to the modern fixation on fun and entertainment. Postman discusses how the entertainment mentality has compromised (if not corrupted) so much of American culture from education to TV news. The more we crave constant stimulation and pleasure, the less satisfied we become with the simple and natural things of life. Likewise, the more entertainment we consume, the more our aesthetic sensibilities are impaired and our standards compromised to the point that we eventually lose the capacity to discriminate between true art and crass commercial entertainment. But even Postman, as astute a cultural observer as he was, couldn't foresee the extent to which pop culture and crass commercialism would infiltrate and affect contemporary American Christianity.

As with materialism, the regulating principle regarding pleasure and entertainment should be *sophrosyne* – moderation in all things that are good and healthy. But by its very nature, hedonism is a mindless and indiscriminate addiction to pleasure that leads to unhealthy forms of escapism and the exclusion of what really matters in life.

The manifestations of hedonism are obvious – except perhaps to the hedonist him/herself – and include such pathologies as an addiction to watching sports; constant exposure to unfiltered entertainment – whether TV, movies, music, video games, etc.; an obsession with entertainment-based technology; uncontrolled eating and drinking; the consumption of illegal drugs; ravenous sexual impulses; a perverse fascination with violence; an unhealthy fixation on one’s body and appearance; and an undisciplined and irresponsible lifestyle in general.

It is important to carefully consider that in this life, all we have is (1) time, (2) energy, (3) resources, and (4) priorities. And realistically, we have a limited amount of time, energy, and resources – which makes it all the more essential that we set priorities if we hope to accomplish anything meaningful in this life. For the Christian, our sole consuming desire and our one obsession should be the cultivation of our spiritual life and to grow in Christ-likeness – what Jesus referred to as the Pearl of Great Price – and contrary to the popular commercial, we cannot in fact “have it all.” Life is about making choices.

The Spiritual Disciplines. In a free and affluent society such as modern America in which the influence of decadent pop culture is so pervasive and intrusive, it is easy to be seduced and simply go with the flow. Unfortunately, however, the flow is hell-bound. (Significantly, Angus Kinnear’s biography of Watchman Nee was entitled *Against the Tide* – a theme that should characterize the life of all conscientious Christians.) But to resist the pressures to conform to our culture requires both intentionality and persistent attentionality – a process that can only be achieved by conscientiously integrating the traditional spiritual disciplines into our lifestyle:

- (1) **Solitude and silence.**
- (2) **Regular and systematic prayer, contemplation and meditation.**
- (3) **Regular confession of sins and repentance.**
- (4) **Healthy diet and exercise.**
- (5) **Periodic fasting.**
- (6) **Regular Bible reading.**
- (7) **Study and intellectual growth.**

Note: In Proverbs 19:2 we read, “*It is not good to have zeal without knowledge.*” Certainly, Christians should be committed to spiritual and intellectual growth by reading and studying not

only the Bible and devotional materials but also theology, Christian history and biographies, philosophy, apologetics, and Christian spiritual literature.

(8) Worship.

(9) Koinonia fellowship – regular interaction with other Christians.

(10) Giving – of our time, energy, and money in service to God.

(11) Service – sensitivity and ministry to the needs of others.

(12) Witnessing – verbal and lifestyle testimony of our faith to both Christians and non-believers.

The temptation to conform to this world and its values – as expressed in egoism, materialism and hedonism – requires that we seriously heed Paul’s injunction in his epistle to the Romans:

Romans 12:1-2 – *Therefore, I urge you, brothers [and sisters], in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the thought-patterns [the values, or ways of thinking] of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern God’s good and perfect will for your life.*

This we cannot do by our own power or by relying on our own resources. It requires spiritual transformation, a process that can only be achieved over time as we open our heart and our mind to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within us. This is why the spiritual disciplines enumerated above are so vital: they condition us to “Be still, and know that I AM God” (Psalm 46:10), and to control our impulses and emotions in order to enter into focused communion with God via the internal presence of the Holy Spirit. In essence, this is simply a process by which we cooperate with God’s will and purpose for our life, and the spiritual, emotional and physical rewards will exceed anything we can imagine.

3. The External: The “World System” The Christian and “the World.”

In the context of Scripture, “the world” refers to the “world system” – the general worldview, values, goals, priorities, methods, systems, institutions, and mindset of this fallen world. As Christians, it is important that we understand the fundamental values of this world and just how hostile they are to the precepts and priorities of the Kingdom of God.

What are the dominant values of this world? For the most part, the world is obsessed with four things: (1) Power; (2) wealth; (3) status; and (4) pleasure. These four obsessions explain much of why our world and its social, economic, educational, political, and religious institutions can be so corrupt, so dysfunctional, so exploitative, so dehumanizing, and so anti-Christ. As mentioned earlier, the Bible teaches that Satan is the prince of this present age, and that he exerts power and influence over the nations and the systems and the institutions of this world (see Matt. 4:8-9 and II Cor. 4:4). As followers of Jesus Christ, we should never be comfortable in this world, and we should always be mindful that we are merely sojourners in this life. As the old hymn puts it, *“This world is not my home / I’m just a-passing through...”*

According to Scripture, not only should we not be at peace with the values of this world, but we should actually adopt an adversarial relationship with it. Not necessarily with people, but certainly with the dominant values and attitudes and priorities that characterize the world system. Repeatedly, we are reminded that the world is not merely neutral but implacably hostile toward the values of the Kingdom of God:

- I John 2:15 – *“Love not the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”*
- Romans 12:2 – *“Do not be conformed to the values of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to know God’s good and perfect will for your life.”*
- Gal. 1:4 – *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age.”*
- II Cor. 4:4 – *“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ....”*

- Eph. 6:11-12 – *“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against men [flesh and blood], but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*
- James 4:4 – *“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?”*

As **Thomas Merton** wrote in *The Wisdom of the Desert*, devotion to Christ requires that we clearly understand the evil and seductive forces of this world and actively struggle against them. As an example, he cites the attitude of the Desert Fathers (and Mothers) of the early Christian era toward their own society:

Society... was regarded [by the Desert Fathers] as a shipwreck from which each single individual had to swim for his life.... These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. [Quoted in Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 11]

In a similar vein, **Henri Nouwen** warns us in his contemplative classic, *The Way of the Heart*, that our society is not substantially different than that of the decadent Roman Empire in the time of the Desert Fathers, and that it is still dominated by those who crave power, wealth, status and pleasure.

Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul....

The basic question is whether we... have not already been so deeply molded by the seductive powers of our dark world that we have become blind to our own and other people’s fatal state and have lost the power and motivation to swim for our lives. [ibid., p. 11]

Acculturated Christianity – a mindless and weak-willed capitulation to the values of this world – is the great enemy of the normal Christian life. The ways of this world – the beliefs, the goals and the priorities of this world – are absolutely antithetical to the Kingdom of God, and they constantly try to press us into their mold. They are all about grasping and utilizing power, wealth and status for one’s own egoistic purposes, and pursuing as much pleasure as possible. And unfortunately, these false values are dominant not only

in secular organizations and institutions, but too often they characterize the culture in many of our Christian institutions and churches. How many sensitive Christians and spiritual seekers have been disillusioned (if not spiritually devastated) by the hypocrisy, the political machinations, the dishonesty, the corruption, and the abuse of power that they have witnessed in the church?

Cultural accommodation is an insidious spiritual cancer, yet it is an enticing trend that is actually celebrated in many evangelical churches. As mentioned in the introduction, many churches, under the guise of being culturally “relevant” (as if the undiluted Gospel of Jesus Christ is ever *irrelevant*), enthusiastically incorporate as much pop culture into their ministry as possible. Like the pop culture versions of the Bible that resemble teen magazines, this does little but cheapen and undermine the gravity – the weighty seriousness and the solemn dignity – of the eternal Word of God and God’s work here on earth.

Acculturated Christianity compromises the stark truth of the historic Christian faith by stripping it of its prophetic message in a futile attempt to make it conform to contemporary values, norms and trends. Without the realization that authentic Christianity is always radical and countercultural, we become like the proverbial frog dropped into the pot of water. As the temperature increases, we adapt to our environment to the point that we lose any sense of being distinctive people in a fallen and flawed world. Eventually, our values become indistinguishable from those of the world – other than the fact that we are perhaps more “religious.” In the process we forget that we are called to be the agents of the most radical and countercultural person who ever lived: Jesus Christ.

When we as the corporate Body of Christ become acculturated – thoroughly saturated with worldly concerns and values – we lose any legitimate prophetic voice we might otherwise have in terms of speaking truth to our society. As Martin Luther King Jr. once commented, the church should function as a social and cultural thermostat, not as a thermometer. But too often, rather than regulating the spiritual and moral climate in our society and culture, the church merely reflects it.

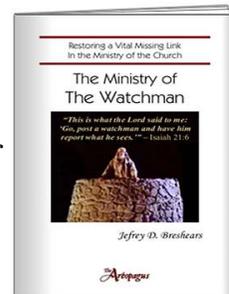
The Solution

The Call to Radical Countercultural Discipleship.

How do we contend with the internal challenges of egoism, materialism and hedonism? Basically, through two means: (1) As mentioned above, through the systematic practice of the spiritual disciplines, as Richard Foster has written about in his modern classic, *Celebration of Discipline*; and (2) by entering into intentional accountability relationships with other serious Christians with whom we can have open and honest dialogue.

Secondly, how do we deal with the external challenges presented by the world system? Here, the only viable solution is to gain an understanding of wholistic Christian discipleship – something that I focus on in the booklet, *The Ministry of the Watchman: Restoring a Vital Missing Link in the Ministry of the Church*. The reason evil is so rampant today is that too many Christians are ignorant, uninformed and apathetic when it comes to the great moral and social challenges of our day. In this booklet I discuss how Christians can become proactively involved in such a way as to be a true source of light and truth in our society. In summary:

For the church to minister effectively in the midst of an increasingly confused and dysfunctional society, it must exercise its prophetic role at the local level. For that to happen, it is essential that the church restore the ministry of the watchman. This is a vital missing link between what the church currently is and what it is called to be – a source of light and truth to the surrounding community. Every church, regardless of size, should have an organized group whose designated ministry is to survey the cultural landscape and report regularly on matters of particular relevance to the congregation. Like the men of Issachar in I Chronicles 12:32 who “understood their times,” this requires men and women who are attuned to the issues of the day, both nationally and locally, and who have the knowledge, the communication skills, and the organizational ability to function as effective leaders in this crucial area of ministry. [Jefrey D. Breshears, *The Ministry of the Watchman* (CentrePointe Publishing, 2012), p. 13.]



In conclusion, there are two imperatives to consider. First, we must rethink our whole paradigm of the Christian faith in the context of it being a radical countercultural alternative to the values and ways of this world. **Authentic Christianity has always been, and will always be, out of synch with the dominant principles, priorities and goals of this world, which are all about ego gratification, materialistic acquisition, and hedonistic excess – as manifest in its obsession with power, wealth, status and pleasure.** Therefore, genuine Christianity will never be acceptable to this world. This is why our secularistic society today is more intolerant of biblical Christians than any other social group – including even radical Muslims.

Second, it is imperative that we rethink our calling in this world. We are not here to support this world system or to be mindless consumers of this world's goods and services. Nor are we here to serve the institutions of this world (including the institutional church!). Our calling is to be God's agents in this world and to take our place in the community of Christ. As such, we are to function as a source of Light and Truth in the midst of a society and culture that are becoming spiritually darker and more corrupt all the time.

This is a time of intense and unprecedented spiritual warfare. As the philosopher J. Budziszewski has observed...

We are passing through an eerie phase of history in which the [moral truths] that everyone really knows are treated as unheard-of doctrines, a time in which the elements of common decency are themselves

attacked as indecent. Nothing quite like this has ever happened before. Although our civilization has passed through quite a few troughs of immorality, never before has vice held the high *moral* ground.

Our time considers it dirty-minded to treat sexual purity as a virtue... [and] a sign of impious pride to profess humble faith in God. The moral law has become the very emblem of immorality.

[J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (Spence Publishing Company, 2003), p. 10.]

Obviously, Christians and Christian institutions cannot afford to continue on as in the past, functioning under the false assumption that we live in a Christ-friendly society and culture (or even a *neutral* society and culture) and mindlessly consuming and absorbing the values of this world. More than at any time since the first few centuries of church history, serious Christians must understand that our calling is to think and to live as a radical countercultural community that offers spiritual Light and Truth in the midst of an increasingly dark, degenerate, and dysfunctional society.



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