



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

The world would not hate angels for being angelic, but it does hate men for being Christians. It grudges them their new character; it is tormented by their peace; it is infuriated by their joy.

—WILLIAM TEMPLE

Being of the world means being controlled by what preoccupies the world, the quest for pleasure, profit and position.

—J. I. PACKER

THIS WORLD IS ~~NOT~~ MY HOME

Thomas N. Smith

It sure feels like home. From the air we breathe to the reassuring pull of the earth's gravity, from the delight we take in the perfect harmony between the colors of nature to the pleasure given by the sound of rain on leaves or the sight of snowflakes the size of goose feathers, we feel at home here. This is our home, our place. Air, water, sunshine, breeze, the smell of flowers or leaf-rot, the touch of familiar skin or flannel sheets, the wonder of the rainbow's transience or the Rocky Mountains' permanence—all of these, and much more like them, speak comfortingly to us, saying, "You belong here."

In contrast, we fear and dread the nonearthly. From primeval times, the void, the abyss, the sea, death, and the afterlife have made us humans singularly uncomfortable. (And with the advent of extra-terrestrial exploration, we may now add deep space to the list.) They are so strange. Something of this can be felt even in this world. Anyone who has traveled for the first time to a foreign country knows what I mean. The very air and light are unfamiliar. The sun rises and sets in odd directions. Even familiar things like Coke taste different. All of this produces a sensation of unease, of not being "at home," and when our stay in such places is prolonged beyond our wishes, the inevitable "homesickness" sets in.

There is no radical disjunction between Christ, who redeemed the world, and Christ, who created it. Thus, there is none between the creation and man, the image of God. Early in Christian history this point was debated and established. Against Marcion and the Gnostics, who posited a radical chasm between God and creation, the Fathers maintained the biblical testimony to their essential unity and harmony, and this without making the creation an extension of the divine essence.



None of this comes as a surprise to the Christian. After all, God created both the world and us. Indeed, He created each for the other. Creation is not just a "glorious theater" (Calvin) in which God displays His glory, but a home, well furnished and felicitous in every way, for His human sons and daughters. This understanding is at the heart of the Christian assertion, "the Redeemer is the Creator." There is no radical disjunction between Christ, who redeemed the world, and Christ, who created it. Thus, there is none between the creation and man, the image of God. Early in Christian history this point was debated and established. Against Marcion and the Gnostics, who posited a radical chasm between God and creation, the Fathers maintained the biblical testi-

mony to their essential unity and harmony, and this without making the creation an extension of the divine essence. Amen! God has created man *and* the world, so that "the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God," and "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19, 21). In both divine acts, creation and new creation, man and the world belong with each other.

The incarnation of the Son of God also bears witness to this oneness and harmony. While allowing fully for the amazing self-abnegation of the Son in coming into a fallen creation and assuming a human nature and body "in the likeness of sinful flesh," there is a rightness, a naturalness to all this in that the Son who is the image of God should assume the nature that is itself, from the beginning of creation, this image. He thus became "like His brothers in all things," living in their world, facing their temptations, experiencing their joys, dying their death—in short, a human being like them in every respect, with the exception of sin.

Another point may also be made (and the early Church Fathers got lots of mileage out of this). The elements of the sacraments are *earthly things*: water, bread, and wine. Perhaps the closest we get to heaven in this life is our participation in these mysteries. Yet, here, in the sacraments, heaven chooses to come to us in these earthly forms! Once more there is no radical disjunction, but, rather, a glorious union between heaven and earth, between the reality that is unseen and that which is seen, tasted, and touched.

All of which leads us to investigate further just what the relationship of the Christian, as a human being and as a saint, is to this present creation.

FALLEN, BUT STILL "VERY GOOD"

Let me begin by saying: The creation, though under the curse of the Creator, is still "very good." This is so because it is still God's creation. He who pronounced it from the beginning "good" and "very good" (Gen. 1), still maintains it as His good creation. Even under the curse, the world is the subject of God's love. "The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds" (Ps. 145:17).

Nowhere in the Bible is this more evident than in Psalm 104. This great Psalm displays God's "tender mercies over all His works" in declaring His providential care and control over this world. This providence is rooted in the original act of creation (104:1-9). We can scarcely miss the delight which God Himself has in His incessant work with the various aspects of the world. From the rushing torrents of the mountain streams (104:10-11) to the frolicking whales in the seas (104:26), God is here in this world, working, providing, caring, delighting in His creation.

And the darker side is not absent either. The world of Psalm 104 is a fallen world. The dust of death is present (Ps. 104:29 with Gen. 3:19). The beast of prey sheds blood here (104:21). The "unclean" coney and stork (104:17-18 with Lev. 11:5-19) are mentioned. But, God the Creator of all things is busily caring for them all, delighting in them all (104:31-32). Man is here, too. Fallen man, laboring man (104: 23). But, though fallen, he is the recipient of God's tender care, being supplied not just with those things necessary for existence, but with that which enhances this existence with joy (104:14-15).

Psalm 104 is foundational for any view of life in the world that claims to be Christian. It demands the conclusion: "This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems off' so strong, God is the Ruler yet."

I must look at this world as God's world. I must look at nature, even in its crueller and darker manifestations as under His rule and care. I must see the world, not as totally alienated from God nor from myself. I must see myself as not entirely alienated from the creation. As God rejoices in this creation, I must through prayerful meditation join Him in His joy (Ps. 104:31, 34). Such a vision of the creation and my place in it with all its creatures, its wonders and its mysteries, calls forth praise and thanksgiving, worship and song! "Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord" (104:35). This is because this world, though fallen, is still good and under the care of the good Lord.

*From the morbid self denial of a
David Brainard to the endless self-doubts
of a young Jim Elliott, the fear of a
good time has too often distorted Christian
self-denial and biblical mortification
of sin into a denial of the good creation
and of the pleasure principle which
God has built into it*



FOR OUR JOYFUL USE

The very idea that we should enjoy ourselves in this world is alien to certain forms of Christian belief. Though often parodied as the inevitable conclusion of

Christian orthodoxy, this kind of thinking has been evident enough in every age and in every quarter of the church as to require our attention. Parody or not, the fact is this: certain Christians and certain forms of Christian belief and practice have too often presented true Christianity as a "killjoy" thing. From the asceticism of Augustine to the monasticism of the medieval church, from the morbid self denial of a David Brainard to the endless self-doubts of a young Jim Elliott, the fear of a good time has too often distorted Christian self-denial and biblical mortification of sin into a denial of the good creation and of the pleasure principle which God has built into it.

Perhaps our own day is a dangerous time to make this point. A pleasure-driven religion seems to dominate many, if not most in our day, even among so-called evangelical Christians. But, even this mutation is likely to be an overreaction to a Gnostic asceticism of only a few decades ago. For example, if evangelicals seem to have discovered the pleasure principle in the sexual realm from the 1970s on, this may have been because this was considered taboo among the same subculture up until that time. My own father-in-law was a student at a Bible college in the late 1940s and was told along with the rest of the graduating class by the then dean of men that God had ordained the sexual union between a husband and wife for one purpose only—the procreation of children. Things had changed radically by the time I was a student at that same Bible college in the early '70s when the dean of men and the pastor of a leading evangelical church in Chicago openly discussed sexual things with the men. The fact that men by nature tend to become "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" does not negate the fact that pleasure is inherent in the world as God made it and that pleasure in many

realms is His gift. Those who pervert the truth are not our teachers.

But, in fairness to all those I have just criticized, I appreciate the fact that sin inclines us human beings to "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). Most of mankind are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). How can those who are called "out of the world" in the sense of a change of spiritual and moral dimension, live in the world and use the world in a spirit of joyful thanks to God, the Creator? The answer to this question lies in part in the strange Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes has been called everything from " . . . reasonings about life . . . the best (the natural man) can do . . ." ¹ to a book in which "wisdom with a capital W is impossible. . . ." ² I believe that Ecclesiastes is the sober reflection of a believer who has looked at life in general and his own life in particular from the standpoint of the world as having been made by the Creator but subjected by Him as Judge to cruel vanity on account of man's sin. As such, meaninglessness, vanity, enigma, injustice, repetitiveness, folly, and madness are woven into the whole of life; they are inescapable. "For who is able to straighten what He has bent?" (Eccl. 7:13). All of which is a commentary on Genesis 3:14-24. To put it bluntly: Life reminds us that God is still mad about Genesis 3. The author of Ecclesiastes has thought long and hard about this, and the book is the sum of his inspired cogitations. It is a jungle out there. Life is hard, unfair, and short. Death is impartial and inevitable. Judgment is certain.

So how shall we then live? We must, as the old people in the mountains of West Virginia say, "take it as it comes." But, I quickly add, not with the fatalism that too often lurks behind that sentiment. We must accept

life with its repetitive cycles (Eccl. 3:1-8), with its toil and sorrows (4:1-8), with its unfairness and injustice (6:1-12; 9:13-18), and its inevitable and cruel end (9:1-6). But because we are the people of God, we accept all these things in a spirit of faith, hope, and joy. Because "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Ecclesiastes is full of "wisdom with a capital W" (cf. 3:4; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13). From this fear comes confidence in God, a confidence that enables Him to say, in the face of all the contingencies and vicissitudes of life, "Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly" (8:12). He can live in hope and even daring enterprise (11:11). And he can do all of this in the humility that comes from knowing that God's ways are to him strange, and, often, incomprehensible (11:5; with 3:11).

It is because of this hard-headed faith and hope that the godly man can enjoy the gifts of God in this life "under the sun." "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24). The pleasures which remain despite the vanity of this present life are gifts of God. He gives them for us to richly enjoy. This is surely behind the apostle's word in 1 Timothy 6:17. And this emphasis is repeated throughout the book of Ecclesiastes (cf. 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7; 12:13).

Nor is this a heedless hedonism. This is not pleasure for pleasure's sake. No, it is pleasure as received from the hand of God—the God we take utterly seriously in the enigmas of this life and in the judgment to come (Eccl. 3:14, 17; 11:9). Augustine, whom I criticized earlier, was very near to the truth of this book when he said, "Please God and do as you please." And the anonymous medieval poet who wrote the following was even nearer:

Man:
Fear God,
And be merry.
And give not for this world
A cherry.

The man who fears the Lord, who lives in light of God's final judgment, this man only is capable of living in this world, marred as it is by the Fall, subject as it is to God's curse, and full as it is of God's good gifts.

LET THE USER BEWARE

The Christian has by the Spirit entered into the New Creation; he is, himself, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Paul in particular is fond of using creation terminology to describe that amazing thing that has already happened in the lives of Christians (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6; Col. 3:9-10; et. al.). While the new creation is a "not yet" in respect to the present creation and even the Christian's mortal body, the powers of the age to come have become apparent in the Christian's moral life. There is a difference between a man who is a Christian and a man who is not. This new reality is an enviable one.

But the Christian finds himself in the unenviable position of living in two ages at the same time, and because of this he finds himself in conflict with himself and with the world he lives in. Body, death, and sin coexist with Spirit, life, and righteousness in the believer and shall do so until "the adoption, that is, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:10; 7:14-25; 8:23).

One of the results of this state of affairs is the fact that the Christian must deal with ever-present lusts. Now, "lusts" in the New Testament cover a much greater scope than our human sexuality. Indeed, to desire to have anything that God has forbidden is, from the

standpoint of new covenant ethics, lust. Hence, the recurring warning against these things in our lives (cf. James 1:13-15; 1 Peter 1:13-15; 2 Peter 1:4; Gal. 5:16; 1 John 2:15-17; Rom. 6:12; 13:14; et. al.).

It is just here that we find ourselves at the heart of what makes life in this present creation dangerous for Christian life and perseverance. The Christian is in a world that is good, despite the ever-present reality of God's curse and the resultant effects of it. But because sin in the form of various lusts is residual in him, the Christian is ever in danger of "fulfilling the lusts of the flesh" through his idolatrous, malicious, and covetous abuse of God's good gifts. A ready illustration of this is money. Money and what it buys are the gifts of God (Deut. 8:18; Prov. 10:22; Eccl. 6:1). But because of the deceiving and corrupting power of lust, "the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10a). Because of the presence of such lusts "some [people] by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many a pang" (1 Tim. 6:10b). Hence Paul's further warnings regarding this issue in verses 17-19. Yet all this is said in the presence of the truth of verse 17, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy." The problem does not lie in God's gifts which here are all defined in terms of this world, this creation. Money has no inherent power to corrupt any more than the other things that God gives us. To suggest this, as has been done in recent years by Richard Foster and others, is to fall into the Gnostic heresy. The root of all kinds of evil is a false and malignant love, which is just another way of saying "lust."

Because of this, the Christian must beware of living in this world and using the good gifts of God while making

"no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:14). He must through the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:13). He must "use the world as though [he] did not make full use of it" (1 Cor. 7:31). He must "guard [himself] from idols" (1 John 5:21).

With this caveat clearly in mind, the believer is ready to live in this world, God's world, and, as God's gift, his world. And, without denying the pilgrim nature of his life here, he is not "just passing through" the world. As God's priesthood, the Christian community is engaged in something far grander and significant.

"EVERY BUSH A BURNING BUSH AND ALL GROUND HOLY GROUND"

It was the Dutch theologian, preacher, politician, and cultural critic, Abraham Kuyper, who coined the above phrase. To Kuyper, this world is the Christian's home—not ultimately, but really and presently. One could even say that Kuyper was consumed with this vision of life. Listen to him again: "There is not a single square inch of the whole of human existence over which the risen Christ, who alone is Sovereign, does not say, 'That is mine!'" What a different perspective is this from the self-pitying doggerel that whines "This world is not my home, I'm just a-traveling through. . . ." There is firm biblical support for Kuyper's faith at this point.

Paul, in 1 Timothy 4:1-5, speaks clearly to this matter. In a warning concerning what seems to have been a kind of pre-Gnostic dualism, Paul affirms the goodness of the fallen creation (v. 4), the purpose of God in creating these things to be "received with gratitude" (v. 3), and the propriety of Christian believers using these gifts "by those who believe and know the truth" (v. 3). All of this confirms what I have been maintaining throughout this article.

*I am now free to live, free to obey,
free to use this world, free to give
thanks to the Giver of every good and
perfect gift. I am, in a word, free to be
human in the fullest sense of the word!*



But there is more to it than this. There is a *priestly* activity involved in the believer's use of the everyday blessings of this creation. Because he receives these gifts of God with thanksgiving and in the knowledge that they have come from Him, even these common things become holy. It is consecrated (sanctified) by the Word of God and prayer. Just as the Levitical priesthood consecrated the various offerings and sacrifices by prayer and the command of God under the old covenant, so this new covenant priesthood does the same with "everything created by God" (v. 4). (Cf. 1 Peter 2:5; Heb. 13:15; Rom. 12:1-2; 14:6.) In this manner "every bush becomes a burning bush and every parcel of ground, holy ground." The effect of this truth simultaneously destroys two impious dualisms in one sweep. First, it destroys the false dualism between the spiritual and the material that was at the base of heretical Gnosticism. Second, it kills the medieval and fundamentalist dualism between the sacred calling and the secular life. Under the call of grace, every Christian is a priest, a part of the larger Christian priesthood, and therefore he is engaged in the priestly activity of sanctifying the whole of life, even in its "common garden variety" aspects, to

the Creator-Redeemer God. The only valid category which remains for the Christian is the lawful/unlawful one. If God has permitted it, it is lawful; if He has forbidden it, it is "off-limits."

What a wonderful door to life is opened with this truth! I am now free to live, free to obey, free to use this world, free to give thanks to the Giver of every good and perfect gift. I am, in a word, free to be human in the fullest sense of the word! So, while we look for a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells, we live out the days of our pilgrimage here in training and anticipation of this, and we live as priests, acknowledging God in the whole of our existence. This is life indeed! This is the promise that Paul speaks of when he says, ". . . godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8).

Let us, then, replace "This World Is Not My Home" with something finer. Immersed in Scripture and in Reformation thought (which went a long way in recovering the thesis of this article) George Herbert wrote in 1633:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean
Which with this motive, "For Thy sake,"
Will not grow bright and clean.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

Author

Thomas N. Smith is associate editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal* and pastor, Randolph Street Baptist Church, Charleston, West Virginia. He is a conference speaker, writer and artist who lives with his wife and three children in Charleston.

Notes

1. C. I. Scofield, editor, *The Holy Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 696.
2. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 281.