Love Not the World: Keeping the Church and the World Distinct

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Introduction

Worldliness in the church has been a recurring concern for many Christians. Church leaders continually warn believers not to be worldly or to allow the church to become worldly, yet worldliness continues to invade the body of Christ. In spite of the vast amount of discussion regarding worldliness, the distinction between the church and the world too often remains murky. At times it may appear that anything a church leader disagrees with is given the tag of worldliness, which means all other believers must now shun the practice he disapproves. Others react by removing anything and everything from the danger of being labeled worldly and basically nullify the concept of worldliness altogether.

Fortunately, God has not been silent on this issue. As in all areas of Christian practice, his Word establishes the guidelines for a discussion concerning the church and the world. Rather than simply fighting over whether or not a particular place, event, activity, look, etc., is worldly, believers should first allow God’s teaching on the distinction between the church and world to

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shape their thinking. Only then will they be able to properly apply the teaching to contemporary issues and avoid worldliness in the church. This workshop will consider the scriptural teaching concerning the distinction between the church and the world and how the church can maintain that distinction.

I. Definitions

Much of the confusion surrounding this issue has arisen from a failure to properly define the two entities in the discussion. It is impossible to determine if the church is like the world unless one knows what the church and the world actually are. Only after the nature of these two has been carefully established can the distinction between them be addressed.

A. Church

In discussions concerning the church’s relationship to the world, the term church is typically applied in two biblical ways.

1. First, it is used to refer to the Universal Church, or the body of Christ. The body of Christ is comprised of all redeemed, Spirit-baptized individuals from Pentecost to the Rapture.² It includes all true believers in the church age, both those in heaven and those on earth.

2. The second and more common usage of the term is in reference to the local church. The local church is the manifestation of the body of Christ in a particular location at a particular time. The body of Christ is invisible, but the local church is visible. While the body of Christ includes only regenerate individuals, the local church at times includes both regenerate and unregenerate individuals in its

²Some state that the church includes the redeemed from all ages, but this definition fails to consider the role of Spirit-baptism in the formation of the church (Acts 1:5; cf. 10:16; 1 Cor 12:13). Since Spirit-baptism did not start until Pentecost, the body of Christ cannot include Old Testament saints.
membership. In discussing the distinction between the church and the world, the local church should typically be under consideration, since believers in heaven can no longer be like the world. Therefore, while the body of Christ may be used to describe the nature of the difference between the church and the world, local churches serve as the primary arena to display that difference.

B. The World: Faulty Definitions

Before providing a biblical definition of the world, it will be helpful to consider two common faulty definitions, since these faulty definitions can lead to poor application of the concept of worldliness.

1. The Unsaved

Though the term world may be used to refer to the inhabitants of the earth (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), it seems unlikely that these usages refer to the unredeemed without including the redeemed. Thus the inhabitants of the earth cannot be in mind when referring to worldliness. This faulty definition leads to the erroneous conclusion that something is worldly solely on the basis of its association with unbelievers.

2. Culture

The correspondence between culture and the world is admittedly a complex issue. Since

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3 The local church should never intentionally include unregenerate members, but their presence is inevitable because of the inability of humans to definitively determine the salvation of other individuals.

4 At times these two aspects of the word church are mixed together, so that the speakers are not actually referring to either the body of Christ or the local church but to the collection of all professing Christians currently on earth. In this case, the term church is in essence used for many professing Christians today. Thus, the phrase “the church is like the world” really means “Many professing Christians today are like the world.” Though there is some value to this usage of church, it may lead to a faulty solution to the problem, as will be discussed below under the section “The Display of the Distinction.”

5 For example, unbelievers use computers for work, but this fact does not mean that believers should not use computers for work lest they engage in worldly behavior.
culture is a reflection of the values of a group, the majority of those engaged in cultural expressions are unbelievers, and the values of unbelievers do not match with God’s Word, it is easy to understand why many assume that believers should avoid all expressions of culture, especially popular culture. The problem again is that unbelievers may engage in things that are not inherently opposed to God’s Word. Thus culture is not necessarily equal to the world, but it might still embody the opposition to God that the world does. The world may be expressed through culture, but culture is not synonymous with the world. Equating culture and the world often leads to an isolationist or sectarian solution to the problem of worldliness. Believers may create their own “Christian” events and establishments, but too often the underlying worldly philosophies and attitudes still manifest themselves in these supposedly “Christian” venues. Believers can avoid all expressions of modern culture while still being extremely worldly. Thus, they can fail to be “in the world” while simultaneously being “of the world” (John 17:14–19). Christians may simply create a subculture and thereby stop being countercultural.

C. The World: Biblical Definition

Biblically, the world is viewed more in its orientation and direction than in its constituency and expression. It is not simply the number of the unsaved or the actions of the unsaved, but the underlying order dominated by Satan that creates opposition to God (John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor 4:4; James 4:4). The world’s greatest sin is its failure to accept the person

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6For example, the fact that many lost people watch a certain news program does not mean that the news program is worldly.


9To be sure, the Bible provides many expressions of the world that are to be avoided by the believer, but the emphasis is on the heart and motive. Believers live for God’s glory, while the world lives for itself. For examples of expressions of the world, see the discussion below under “Helping Christians Grow in Christlikeness.”
and work of Jesus Christ (John 15:22–24; 12:37, 47–50; 5:36; 10:25–38; 16:9). Thus, the heart of the matter is the issue of control—the world refuses to submit to God. Worldliness, then “is the enthronement of something other than God as the supreme object of man’s interests and affections.” It is a life dominated by the desires of the fallen nature that expresses itself by engagement in sinful activity and preoccupation with earthly matters (Matt 6: 24–33; Eph 4:17–19, 22; Col 3:1–4; 1 John 2:15–17).

These definitions lay the groundwork for understanding the distinction between the church and the world. In essence, the church lives under the lordship of Christ, submitting to his will, while the world lives in opposition to Christ, submitting to its own sinful desires. The church lives a holy life centered upon the life to come, while the world lives a sinful life centered upon the present. The difference between life in the church and life in the world is the difference “between life ordered under the rule of God and life in conformity to the human tradition of rebellion against God.”

II. Reasons for the Distinction

There are two reasons that the church should be distinct from the world: the holiness of God and the testimony of the church. These reasons serve as powerful motivations for the church to maintain its distinctiveness in the midst of a sinful world.

A. The Holiness of God

God’s holiness is his complete distinction from his creation—there is absolutely nothing

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12 This definition further clarifies the Christian’s relationship to culture. D. A. Carson points out that believers and unbelievers may both agree on a particular expression of culture yet do so for vastly different reasons. For example, believers and secularists may both support the concept of separation between church and state, but the underlying motive is drastically different because the worldviews are antithetical. *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 119.
like God in this world. Included in his holiness is his separation from sin and evil. Thus, God is completely pure and cannot stand to look upon evil (Hab 1:13). His holiness creates a demand of holiness in his followers so that they can no longer live as they did before they believed in Christ (Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 1:14–16). God’s holiness also serves as the basis for the believer to hope that he, too, will one day be holy. This hope of future holiness motivates him to pursue holiness in the present. Just as a bride eagerly prepares herself to be ready when her bridegroom comes, the church pursues holiness to be ready when her Lord comes. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2–3).14

B. The Testimony of the Church

Since God is holy, the church must display holiness if it is to properly display God’s glory on the earth. In order to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light,” Christians must be “a holy nation” that “as sojourners and aliens…[abstains] from the passions of the flesh” so that unbelievers can “see [the Christians’] good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet 2:9–12). The church will provide no evidence of the majesty of God if it maintains no distinction from the world. Though some argue that the church must adopt the practices of the world in order to be relevant, in reality the only way for the church to be relevant is for it to be “otherworldly.”15

III. The Basis of the Distinction: Regeneration

The distinction between the church and the world is created by the regeneration of the

14 All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the ESV 2001.
members of the church. When a person is regenerated, he is transferred from the “domain of darkness” to the “kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). Regeneration is “a drastic act on fallen human nature by the Holy Spirit, leading to a change in the person’s whole outlook. He can now be described as a new man who seeks, finds and follows God in Christ.” Thus the believer is no longer “of the world” because Christ “chose [him] out of the world” (John 15:19).

The need for regeneration arises from the depravity of man. Man is spiritually dead, and, thus, can never love and serve God without being given spiritual life (Eph 2:1–5). The only way to remove worldliness from the heart of a person is for the person to get a new heart. Regeneration enables believers, and the church by extension, to be distinct from the world, for “everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4). This new birth produces characteristics in believers that set them in opposition to the world.

A. Love

1. Love for God

True believers love God (Rom 8:28–30). This love for God is the natural response to the love He showed to believers in bringing them salvation (1 John 4:10, 19). Those who are unregenerate do not love God, but hate him. This world’s hatred for God was most clearly displayed in the rejection of Jesus Christ (John 15:18, 23–24). In fact, a love for the world and a love for God are mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15–17). The change from hating God to loving God is only possible through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

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17The fact that the world hates God only magnifies God’s love for the world. D. A. Carson points out that God’s gift of Jesus Christ for the world, “far from being an endorsement of the world...is a testimony to the character of God. God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad.” The Gospel According to John, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 122-123.

18It is important to note that the Pharisees are included with those who are worldly and, thus, hate Christ. This again illustrates that worldliness cannot be determined solely on the basis of external criteria. The Pharisees, though very conservative and very religious, were also very worldly.
2. Love for Other Christians

One of the clearest indicators of regeneration is a love for fellow believers (1 John 2:10; 3:14; 4:20–21). Jesus said that the world would recognize his followers by their love for each other (John 13:35). The world is recognized by its fighting and strife, for those who are involved in these quarrels display worldly lives in opposition to God (James 4:1–4). A life that consists of bickering and strife belongs to the old man, but a life that is being transformed displays genuine love for fellow Christians (Rom 12:1–2, 9; Eph. 4:22–24; 32).

B. Faith

Faith in Jesus Christ is another evidence of regeneration (1 John 5:1, 4–5). As seen above, the world’s ultimate failure is its unbelief in Jesus Christ. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would “convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. Concerning sin, because they do not believe in me” (John 16:8–9). Those who believe in the Son have life and are born again, but those who do not believe remain under God’s wrath (John 3:3, 15, 36).

C. Good Works

“Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him” (1 John 2:29). “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in Him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9). The world’s works are evil, and it hated Jesus for revealing the truth concerning its works (John 7:7). Though good works play no part in salvation, they are a necessary result of regeneration. God purposed for believers to practice good works (Eph 2:10). A faith that is not accompanied by works is not a saving faith, and thus has no ties to regeneration (James 2:14–26).

D. Sound Doctrine

Only those who have the right content for their faith are born of God (1 John 5:1, 5).
Those who deny the truth about Jesus, like the truth of his humanity, are unregenerate (1 John 2:22). Those who are God’s listen to his Word, but the world listens to its own message (1 John 4:5–6). Regenerate believers maintain pure doctrine, discerning truth from error.

These marks of regeneration place the church in direct opposition to the world. The distinction between the church and the world is not simply a matter of external patterns of behavior but is a result of a changed nature. Regeneration takes those who formerly hated God and fought with other people, those who lived in unbelief, sin, and false teaching, and changes them into those who love God and other Christians, those who live in faith, righteousness, and the truth. In essence, this transformation is a change from a lifestyle committed to fleshly desires to one that places God at the center of everything. The distinction between the church and the world is fundamentally a distinction in their natures. They must be in opposition to each other for they are different at their core. Therefore, believers do not need to establish the distinction between the church and the world—God already established it. The role of the church is to display the distinction that is already there.

IV. The Display of the Distinction

Though the church is by nature separate from the world, the reality of that separation is often hidden from the eyes of the watching world. The church many times fails to live out the distinction established by God in its day-to-day life. Thus, the church at times may behave as though it were the world, even though it is intrinsically different from the world. The cause of this problem is two-fold.

First, local churches are too often composed of a mixed company of regenerate and unregenerate people. The problem in this case is not that believers are living like the world but that the world, in the form of unbelievers, has been granted membership in the church. Many

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make the false assumption that the church is like the world because born-again Christians are continuing to live as though they had never been saved, but a more biblical mindset is that the church is like the world because unconverted people have infiltrated the church. The remedy for this problem is to keep the world out of the church by guarding the regenerate membership of the local church.

Second, though believers are changed at the point of conversion, they are never completely sanctified in this life. Instead, they will continue to advance in Christlikeness until the day they go to be with Christ in glory. Thus, progressive sanctification means that believers will at times fail to live in distinction from the world, but will be moving ever closer toward that end. The remedy for this problem is to work toward the purity of the church by helping Christians grow in Christlikeness.

A. Guarding the Regenerate Membership of the Local Church

The local church should be a reflection of the body of Christ, which means it should only be composed of regenerate, Spirit-baptized individuals. Though it is impossible to guarantee that all those who are members of a local church are truly regenerate, there are three important means to guard a regenerate membership. These three means were considered the marks of a true church by the Reformers: faithful preaching of the Scripture, proper administration of the ordinances, and consistent practice of church discipline.

1. Faithful Preaching of the Scripture

The preaching of the Scripture is perhaps the most important and fundamental of the three marks of the church, since it in essence governs the administration of the ordinances and

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21See “Church” under “Definitions” above for a further explanation of the body of Christ and the local church.

the practice of church discipline. Paul exhorted Timothy to “devote [himself] to the public reading of the Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). He charged him “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [to] preach the word” (2 Tim 4:1–2a). The preaching of God’s Word must always be central to the life of the church.

Faithfully preaching God’s Word is vital to a regenerated church membership, for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Rather than assuming that the current members of the church are truly regenerate and understand the gospel, pastors should continually explain the true nature of salvation. As Dever reminds fellow pastors, “Assumption on our part leads to presumption on theirs. That is, when we assume the Gospel instead of clarifying it, people who profess Christianity but don’t understand or obey the Gospel are cordially allowed to presume their own conversion without examining themselves for evidence of it—which may amount to nothing more than a blissful damnation.”

If the mark of a true church is faithful preaching of God’s Word, a failure to clearly proclaim salvation by faith through grace will not only lead to unregenerate people in the membership of a church, but will ultimately lead to an apostate church—which is not a church at all. Grudem rightly notes: “When the preaching of a church conceals the gospel message of salvation by faith alone from its members, so that the gospel message is not clearly proclaimed, and has not been proclaimed for some time, the group meeting there is not a church.”

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23Ibid., p. 844–45

24Continued preaching of the gospel is not to be confused with mere evangelistic preaching or a simple presentation of the steps to salvation week after week. Instead, the preaching of the gospel emphasizes the themes of the gospel as found throughout Scripture, including the warnings against false faith and falling away. Those who practice expository preaching will find no lack of opportunity to present the truth of the gospel as it is found in the text of the Scripture.


Word in all its fullness and especially the truth concerning the gospel must be proclaimed every Sunday to help ensure the regenerate membership of the church, for “in so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

2. Proper Administration of the Ordinances

There are two ordinances which have been entrusted to the care of the local church: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When properly administered, these ordinances are an effective means of guarding the regenerate membership of the church.

a. Baptism

Baptism is a physical symbol, or picture, of spiritual reality. It pictures the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:4). It is a physical display of the invisible act of Spirit baptism that occurs at the point of salvation (1 Cor 12:13). Since Spirit baptism places one into the body of Christ, water baptism rightly serves as the means to joining a local church. As the first step of obedience in the life of a Christian, baptism is a necessary prerequisite for membership in a Bible-believing church. It is incumbent upon the church to obtain a credible testimony from all candidates for baptism. Though baptism need not be delayed for an extended period of time to observe the evidences of salvation in a person’s life, no one should be baptized who does not possess a clear understanding of the Gospel or who gives evidence of an unrepentant heart by living in open sin. The requirement that all candidates for membership have received believer’s baptism is vital for guarding a regenerate membership:

This is the primary way that we protect the regeneracy of church membership. That is, by being baptized as a believer, each potential new member is publicly stating that his heart has been circumcised by the Spirit, that he has been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ. He is testifying by his own symbolic actions that he has in fact genuinely repented and believed in the Gospel. In so doing, he identifies himself as one whose heart has truly been regenerated—a new creation in Christ, and as such a member of God’s people.27

27Dever and Alexander, The Deliberate Church, p. 106 (emphasis original).
b. The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper serves several functions for the church. It provides an opportunity to remember or memorialize the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 11:24–26). It pictures the believer’s individual participation in the body and blood of Christ and the benefits therein (John 6:53–56; cf. Matt 26:26–29). It looks forward to the second coming of Christ to establish his millennial kingdom (1 Cor 11:26). It also pictures the unity of the church in Christ (1 Cor 10:15–17; 11:17–22).²⁸

The Lord’s Supper is only intended for believers. Christ initiated it with his disciples, and there was even a need to purify the group by Judas’ leaving in the middle of the supper.²⁹ To protect the Lord’s Supper from unbelievers, there should be three basic requirements for those who wish to partake. They should be regenerate individuals, who have been baptized, and are members in good standing of a Bible-believing church. A mere profession of faith is not sufficient to maintain the purity of the Table. Those who do not wish to follow in obedience in baptism do not have a credible profession of faith and should be excluded from communion. Since the ordinance has been entrusted to the local church and membership is the only way for a church to approve of a person’s profession and conduct, church membership should be a prerequisite for participation in the Lord’s Supper.³⁰ While baptism is the initiatory rite of the church that protects the front door,

the Lord’s Supper takes its post at the back door. Communion is a symbol of the unity and fellowship of the church. The prerequisites for participation in that symbol are continued repentance and belief. Those giving either no evidence or contrary evidence regarding genuine repentance and belief should be excluded from the Lord’s Supper. In barring an unrepentant member from the Lord’s Table, we are treating him as an unbelieving outsider.

²⁹Ibid.
³⁰Members of other Bible-believing local churches may be allowed to participate on the assumption that their church has given its approval of the person’s profession and life.
That is, we are barring him from the primary symbol of church unity and fellowship, and thereby clarifying the boundary between the church and the world.”

3. Consistent Practice of Church Discipline

Though often ignored or neglected today, church discipline is a necessary and important aspect of the local church. Jesus instructed that those who refuse to repent of a sin against a brother, after being confronted privately, pluraly, and publicly, should be treated as an unbeliever and put out of the church (Matt 18:15–20). False teachers, though they may arise from within the church, must be marked and avoided by believers (Acts 20:28–30; Rom 16:16–17). Paul urged the Corinthians to remove the man who was living in immorality with his father’s wife. When they gathered as a church, they were “to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor 5:1–5). Anyone who refused to obey Paul’s teaching was to be removed from the fellowship of the church with the hope that the resulting shame would bring about repentance (2 Thess 3:14–15). Al Mohler is in line with Scriptural teaching when he states, “Authentic biblical discipline is not an elective, but a necessary and integral mark of authentic Christianity.”

When a church fails to practice church discipline, it allows unbelievers to remain firmly entrenched within its ranks. Thus the purity of the church is lost and its distinction from the world is blurred. Though discipline is always a difficult step for a church, it must be taken to keep the church from becoming worldly. Those who live like the world, walking in lawlessness and darkness, worshipping false idols of the heart, can have no fellowship with true believers for they have nothing in common (2 Cor 6:14-16).

The neglect of church discipline has been one of the leading causes for the growing worldliness of the church. Since worldliness is not just external action but an issue of the control


of the heart, churches must warn those who are not living their lives with Christ at the center that they need to repent or be put out of the fellowship of the church. The world must be removed from the church, for continued worldly practice reveals an unregenerate heart:

Myriads of so-called Christians today think like the world, look like the world, and act like the world. They may appear morally decent, but Christ is not the focus of their lives. They are at home in this world and lack a passionate commitment to Christ and His Great Commission. They forget that when the worldly man thinks he has conquered the world, the world has conquered him. Then he is no longer salt and light in the world, and provides evidence that he is not born again after all.\(^{33}\)

Many today have accepted the false idea that born-again Christians can continue to live like the world, when the Scripture is clear that regeneration brings about a change. The problem is not that regenerated people continually live like the world but that unregenerate people are allowed to continue to live in the church. The church is distinct from the world because it lives in submission to Christ, seeking to glorify God in everything, while the world continues to pursue its own pleasures and earthly treasures. If the church is to display its distinction from the world, it must guard its regenerate membership by faithfully preaching God’s Word, properly administrating the ordinances, and consistently practicing church discipline.

B. Helping Christians Grow in Christlikeness

When a person is born-again, he becomes a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). He dies to sin and becomes alive to God (Rom 6:1–11). However, regeneration is not the completion but merely the initiation of a process that will continue until the believer is glorified.\(^{34}\) It is the beginning of God’s working in the believer’s life, but God will continue to bring about change until the day of Christ (Phil 1:6). Believers, formerly dead in sin, were given new life and are now able to walk in the good works God has prepared for them (Eph 2:1–10).

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\(^{34}\) Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:945.
This process, often called progressive sanctification, does not occur instantaneously. Though the believer is radically changed in his nature at regeneration, his practice may still reflect many aspects of the world. However, because of the change of nature he will not be able to remain indefinitely in the same state as the unsaved. All true believers will progress in holiness, though the progress may be slow and erratic. Romans 8:29 reveals that the destination for all believers is conformity to Christ.\textsuperscript{35} This conformity will ultimately happen when the believer is glorified (1 John 3:2), but even now believers are slowly being changed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). As Sider explains, “we do not expect absolute perfection now. But there is no room whatsoever in this verse for Christians to continue year after year in the same sin, repeating a confession every week and making no progress in holiness. Year by year, genuine Christians are transformed more and more into the very character of God.”\textsuperscript{36}

Since conformity to the image of Christ is an inevitable but gradual process, believers may be more or less distinct from the world at different periods of their lives. This means that a church of regenerate members will always be distinct from the world, since regeneration creates a fundamental change of nature, but the distinction may not always be as pronounced as it should be. Therefore, if a church is to better display its distinction from the world it must strive to help its members grow to be more like Christ by encouraging Christian virtue, unity, and heavenly-mindedness while renouncing worldly vice, strife, and materialism.

1. Virtue vs. Vice

Worldliness is often viewed as a list of things to be avoided. However, the pursuit of Christlikeness, in opposition to worldliness, includes many virtues that must be put into practice. Hayes lists nine qualities to be lived in front of the world: blamelessness and purity (Phil 2:14-16), good works (1 Pet 2:12), loving responses to evil (1 Thess 5:15), a blameless reputation (1 Thess 2:5).

\textsuperscript{36}Sider, \textit{The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience}, pp. 42–43.
Tim 3:7), humility (Titus 3:2), love (James 2:8; John 13:35), mercy (Luke 6:36; James 2:13), peacemaking (2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 3:11; Heb 12:14), and unity (Jn 17:21, 23). Sider uses Romans 12 to provide further descriptions of the lifestyle that will manifest a difference from the world: giving to those in need (12:8), sincere love for brothers and sisters (12:9-10), blessing those who persecute you (12:14), and sharing in others’ joys and sorrows (12:15).

As mentioned above, discussions of worldliness often emphasize the negative characteristics that must not be practiced. But too often the vices listed are a series of social or cultural taboos, and the lists of negative qualities that Scripture mentions as worldliness are overlooked. The prevalence among believers of many of the vices detailed in Scripture reveals a lack of Christlikeness, or a tendency toward worldliness, by those who have deceived themselves into thinking they are not worldly at all.

Galatians 5 lists several deeds of the flesh: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” Those who practice these things have no part in the kingdom of God, because they are worldly actions that are incompatible with a regenerate person’s life. Peter records other actions that are practiced by the unregenerate world: “living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry” (1 Pet 4:3).

Ephesians 4 details several examples of the difference between the vices of the unregenerate man and the virtues of the regenerate man. The old person lies, but the new person always speaks the truth (4:25). The old man is sinfully angry, but the new man is angry without sinning (4:26). The old self steals, but the new self works in order to provide for the needs of

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39Clearly the list is meant to be representative rather than exhaustive. It can be surprising to some believers that things like strife, jealousy, and fits of anger are included with sexual immorality and drunkenness as worldly actions. This surprise further illustrates that worldliness is more internal than is often conveyed.
others (4:28). The old person has rotten speech, but the new person always builds up others with his speech (4:29). The old person is full of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, malice, and slander, but the new person is kind and forgiving to others (4:32). Believers must put off the vices of the old person and put on the virtues of the new person if they want to become more like Christ.

2. Unity vs. Strife

One of the glorious truths of the church is the unity that is created amongst people of vastly different backgrounds and classes. Christ tore down the barriers that divided the Jews and Gentiles to create a new man, the church (Eph 2:14–16). All believers are baptized into the same body of Christ, “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (1 Cor 12:13). Thus believers are urged to maintain the unity that the Spirit has created (Eph 4:3). The unity displayed in a local church, where people who would never associate with each other in the world join together in a common faith, is a powerful testimony for Jesus Christ to the watching world (John 17:21, 23).

The destruction of that unity through fighting and quarreling is listed as the action of worldly people that reveals their failure to submit to God’s Word and will. James 4:1–4 speaks of those who fight with each other because they are driven by their own desires and passions. Those driven by personal desires are called enemies of God and spiritual adulteresses. “Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” are sourced in worldly, not heavenly, wisdom (James 3:14–15). Philippians 2:14 teaches that grumbling and questioning are hindrances to being blameless and pure in the world. Galatians 5:20 lists “rivalries, dissensions, [and] divisions” as deeds of the flesh. Titus 3:10 indicates that those who cause unnecessary divisions are to fall under church discipline. Therefore, they must be displaying an unregenerate, worldly heart rather than a regenerate, Christlike heart. Those who would grow in Christlikeness and avoid worldliness must maintain unity in the church and avoid quarreling and strife.
3. Heavenly-mindedness vs. Materialism

Believers, as citizens of heaven, live as aliens and sojourners on this earth (Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11). They realize there is nothing lasting here, so they look forward to the eternal city to come (Heb 13:14). This world and its desires are passing away, “but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). They recognize that suffering and loss in this world is of little consequence, because their true treasure lies in heaven (Matt 6:19–21; Heb 10:34).

The world is essentially materialistic. They are constantly concerned with temporal matters (Phil 3:19). They are anxious about the provision of their earthly needs (Matt 6:32). They cling to their lives, but in so doing lose them (John 12:25). Their passions are set on the present, passing world (1 John 2:15-17).

Since believers recognize the temporal state of the present world, they live in this life continually cognizant of the next. In 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Paul urges the Corinthians to adopt “the radical new perspective the ‘foreshortened future’ gives one with regard to the present age. Those who have a definite future and see it with clarity live in the present with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not.”

The normal “social orders” do not hold the same meaning for the believer as for the world because the believer lives in light of eternity. By living as if this world were all the Christian would deny the next age and thereby lose his distinctiveness as a believer.

Conclusion

The church is obligated to display the distinction that God established between the church and the world by guarding a regenerate membership and by helping its members grow in Christlikeness. The arena where this distinction becomes most evident is the local church. The

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world, which refuses to submit to the lordship of Christ, is dominated by its own passions and temporal treasure. The church must be distinct from the world if it is to properly reflect the holiness of God and maintain its testimony for God. The distinction between the church and the world has been established by God through the regeneration of individual believers. These believers have been set in opposition to the world because of their new nature which is now in submission to God. Local churches will display this distinction in two ways. They must maintain a regenerate membership by preaching God’s Word, administrating the ordinances, and practicing church discipline. They must also help their members grow in their conformity to Christ by continually calling for virtuous, unified, heavenly-minded living.

The problem of living in the world while remaining distinct from the world is not a modern phenomenon. Unfortunately, many modern churches have failed to understand the problem and have thereby failed to properly glorify God. The churches today must follow in the steps of the believers of the past who were exemplary testimonies to the grace of God because their proper understanding of “otherworldliness” was evident to all:

The Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle.

This teaching of theirs has not been contrived by the invention and speculation of inquisitive men; nor are they propagating mere human teaching as some people do. They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship.

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens, suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children just like every one else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed.

They are at present ‘in the flesh’ but they do not live ‘according to the flesh’. They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives.

They love every one, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonoured and yet gain glory through dishonor.

Their names are blacked and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return.
They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.

To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians are through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.\(^42\)

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