

Materialistic Thinking

A plague in modern churches

Previous generations of churchgoers tended to centre upon 'pie in the sky when you die' and being a mere 'channel of blessing'. This way of thinking was severely criticised by later generations of evangelicals, particularly those of the Charismatic variety, as neglecting real blessings available today; failing to live by faith. But the previous mentality was indicative of the real struggle facing many generations of believers whose life was full of hardship (for example the black workers in cotton fields) who set their thoughts on heaven as a comfort in their affliction. The hope of Christianity was a true anchor to their soul, as it is meant to be. Furthermore, the Victorian emphasis on being a channel of blessing was not intended to demean individuality but to exalt Christ.

Denying these two principles, modern evangelicals have set their focus upon what is available for them. Teachers centre on the blessings in the Christian life, and even promise things that are outside the scope of the Gospel. Charismatics constantly harp on about success, power, prosperity, healing, and joy that is the right of every believer, failing to see that Christ warned that his followers would face many tribulations, persecution and sufferings.

The problem is that modern Christians have adopted a materialistic outlook to the blessings of salvation. They have done this to such a degree that that, in many cases, their message is actually the opposite of the truth. But much worse is that their whole manner of thinking is detrimental to Christian discipleship; while seeking to gain power from God, they develop a completely wrong idea about God's personality and how he frames his counsel. Materialistic thinking is the very opposite of how a believer should live. For this reason modern churches are filled with people who have no idea about the truth and live a superficial life. Consequently their worship isn't worship; their prayers are not heard; their money is wasted; their deeds are not faith works; their righteousness is blemished and they are facing losing all their rewards on the Last Day, arriving in heaven naked but for salvation.

Brethren, this is a disaster of huge proportions!

This paper seeks to examine some aspects of this materialistic emphasis and reveal why it damages the Biblical faith and Christian growth.

A false view of Christ

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer. 2 Cor 5:16

When Jesus Christ ascended to heaven he was crowned with glory and authority as the King of the Universe. Although creation was made through him, by him and for him, his work on Earth in obedience to the Father ensured that he was raised as the God-Man to be head over all things.

And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church. Eph 1:22

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. Col 1:18

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.' Matt 28:18

This has many implications for us.

First, it means that Jesus is not to be spoken of in human terms any longer. He is God and our relationship with him needs to be respectful and reverent. The Lord Jesus is not our pal, mate or buddy, neither is he our business partner in some work. He is Lord and we must never forget that. When his disciples who had been physically close to him in his ministry saw revelations of him after the resurrection, they fell to the ground and worshipped (Rev 1:17). It was no longer conceivable to lie on his breast at table (Jn 13:23).

The way we speak about the Lord must be in terms of worship and reverence, not superficially or trivially. We do not think of Christ in materialistic terms any longer.

Secondly, he must have the pre-eminence in all things, especially in church life. We must no longer think of Christ as a human, teaching his disciples in relaxed circumstances and act as if this continues in church meetings. No! He is Lord and King and must have the first place in our meetings as divine sovereign. If anything is allowed to have the pre-eminence above him, then that meeting has fallen into blasphemy. This happens when men assume a high place over the Lord's people and dominate them. By focusing too much upon the earthly, materialistic ministry of the Lord it becomes easy to forget that he is with us now as King of the Universe. In our meetings we come into the presence of the Lord God and should be respectful. This is no place for superficial behaviour or frivolity.

A false concept of abundant life

We are all agreed that Christ promised his true disciples abundant life. He said,

I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly. Jn 10:10

But there is a great deal of confusion about what this really means. Many modern believers, following in the tradition of Higher Life and Charismatic teachings, take this to mean that there is a quality of living that is available to Christians by faith if, and only if, they believe. Through faith one can access a better quality of life than ordinary people; a life full of power and blessing. This is the right of all Christians if they are taught correctly and exercise faith in the teachings. Thus true Christians should be in good health, financially affluent, of good standing, gain all their material desires and know God's supernatural power. My contention is that this is a materialistic misunderstanding of this verse.

We know that the above list of promises is false because Scripture teaches otherwise and history proves that the best of godly believers were usually involved in great suffering. The many martyrs of the church would have little truck with such heresy. The Christian life is a pilgrimage on Earth, disassociated from its materialistic way of living, and the Christian is a citizen of a heavenly kingdom whose life and blessings are spiritual in this age.

Furthermore, the teaching is contradicted by the example of Christ himself. Christ was, above all people, the purest spiritual human being. His relationship with God was perfect and he demonstrated absolute obedience to the divine will. His experience, therefore, should manifest the same blessings promised by modern teachers. But it did not. Christ was from a poor background; his parents could only afford the meanest offering at his circumcision (Lk 2:24 with Lev 5:7, 12:8). His father was a carpenter in a rural village, a fairly poor tradesman, and the Lord became his apprentice (Mk 6:3). He grew up with no stable financial background and nowhere to live, owning no property (Matt 8:20). Though he sometimes received expensive gifts (such as a costly tunic, Jn 19:23) he had no ready money to pay his taxes when required (Matt 17:25). He came to his people as their promised Messiah, but he knew constant rejection and fierce opposition, being continually slandered, derided, attacked, and even threatened with death. Many times he was weary and went without sleep (Lk 6:12; Jn 4:6), at other times he went hungry and thirsty (Jn 4:7, 19:28). If abundant life means materialist affluence and personal success, then Jesus did not have it.

Furthermore, the apostles signally failed to have this materialistic success as well. Paul constantly explained his tribulations and afflictions, suffering slander, rejection, personal attacks, threats, and constant anxiety for the churches, to say nothing of hunger, thirst, shipwreck, poverty and fatigue. This is not surprising since Jesus promised that his disciples would suffer the same problems that he had (Matt 10:24-25; Jn 15:20).

What Jesus promised his people was eternal life; the 'life more abundantly' is the quality of eternal life, the life that God possesses (which is not simply everlasting life). The Gospel preached by Jesus continually referred to the gift of eternal life upon believing (Matt 25:46; Jn 3:15-16, 36, 4:14). When a person is truly converted they receive eternal life; they share communion with God through union with Christ and this is a union of life. They are born again and made new creatures in Christ, possessing eternal life. This life is spiritual being that is not available to sinners who are spiritually dead in sins. However, the fulness of this life is not received until salvation is consummated at the return of the Lord Jesus. When the Earth is restored and rebuilt by God after its destruction by fire, then saints will live in the fulness of eternal life, which will then have a material component – life will be blissful, secure, and full of blessing; there will be no sickness or tears (Rev 21:4). This blessing is also available to dead saints who are presently waiting in heaven with God, though the blessing is not in material terms (Rev 7:16-17). But this materialistic aspect of salvation is reserved for the future day and is presently experienced by faith and hope during this vale of tears (Jer 29:11; Heb 6:11-20, 10:23).

This hope was the strength of the Old Testament saints who shunned their sufferings on Earth and fixed their faithful hope upon the final revelation of God's salvation in the future (Heb 11:8-10). The way we exercise faith in the promised hope teaches us how to please God (Heb 11:6). Abraham could allow his nephew Lot (who was not called by God) to have the best land in Canaan (the Jordan plain) since he was focused upon the final outcome of the covenant, which was a heavenly city (Gen 13:10-11). In the same way he could even have killed his only son, the son of the covenant promise, since he was looking at resurrection life not materialistic success (Heb 11:19).

A false expectation of automatic healing instead of grace

A key part of materialistic thinking in the Gospel is the modern expectation of automatic healing, or healing in the atonement. What was once a minority Classic Pentecostal viewpoint has come to dominate modern churches through the Charismatic Movement, and particularly the Signs and Wonders subset of it. This teaches that:

1. All Christians have the expectation of full healing since they are beneficiaries of the Gospel. This is based upon wrongly interpreting Isa 53:5 as teaching that Christ died on the cross to give us physical healing as well as forgiveness [in fact the healing refers to healing from sin - 1 Pt 2:24].
2. All Christians are able, if they have the faith, to manifest the same signs and wonders that Jesus did. This expertise is vital in proclaiming the Gospel since it gives a platform for acceptance. This fails to see that the miracles, which authenticated Christ and his apostles, was temporary and for the establishment of the church. In an age of many sects claiming divine authorship, genuine miracles proved that the Christian message was really divine amongst cults that were not (Heb 2:4).

It is very easy to prove that this teaching is unbiblical since the apostolic record demonstrates the opposite. Firstly, apostolic teaching is that we will experience many sufferings in the Christian walk. These sufferings not only include sickness, but also persecution, slander, rejection and other forms of tribulation (Acts 14:22; Rm 8:17; 2 Tim 1:8, 3:12; 1 Pt 4:12-14; Rev 2:10). Secondly, not even the apostles were able to heal their fellow-workers. Beloved colleagues were left sick as the work continued (2 Tim 4:20) or continued to work despite sickness (1 Tim 5:23). The reason is that healings were at God's disposal with a view of authenticating the apostolic message; there was not a gift of healings that was automatic to be used willy-nilly. Thirdly, there is no single record of a NT believer being healed at all; not one. In time, as the church became established and known, even apostolic miracles began to dwindle. By the last quarter of the first century they had virtually died out.

Finally, very godly men in history, with a first-rate testimony, have not had the supposed miracle working gifts that are claimed by modern Charismatics. Are modern signs and wonders enthusiasts really asking us to believe that they are more gifted and blessed than Wycliffe, Tyndale, Calvin, Luther, Spurgeon, Whitefield, Bucer, Hudson Taylor, Brainerd and so on, men who moved nations? Worse still, are those supposed miracle working Pentecostals and Charismatics better men despite having committed gross public sins? These scandals are publicly documented; some have resulted in criminal prosecution; others are the stuff of documentaries and movies.

The truth is very different. The glory of the Christian's testimony is that he suffers, but does so with divine patience and joy.

That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy. Col 1:10-11

Suffering is guaranteed for the true Christian. This suffering takes many forms and is a sharing in the sufferings of Christ; as Christ the Head suffered, so does his body on Earth. Some people will know sickness, others reproach, others persecution, others bereavement, others poverty; some folk experience all these things, particularly sound teachers who are judged more strictly than others (Jm 3:1). But the grace of God is seen in the midst of these sufferings in the provision of divine power to be long-suffering and even joyful. There is no testimony in just suffering, but there is when one does it with patience, honour and joy. Genuine Christians receive grace to do that which they could never do in their own

character – but they do it in God’s power. That is grace. Indeed, grace is only made available to those who are weak and need it:

‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Cor 12:9

Modern folk have totally misconstrued the benefits of the Gospel and turned them on their head. They are not materialistic, but spiritual.

A false notion about the kingdom of God

What is the kingdom of God? It is the place of God’s rule, the place where there is perfect submission to God’s will and reign; where God’s sovereignty is most honoured. Where is this? It is only in Christ and nowhere else. There is no perfect obedience to the Father’s will except in Christ, and by extension, to all those in Christ – the church. Thus the kingdom is the church, the place of God’s rule. It is not just the church gathered, but all the elect. Thus the kingdom is seen in the godly family where the Lord is honoured; the kingdom is in the individual at secular work where that man truly submits to God and honours him.

Modern churches teach many perversions of this to push a certain agenda.

The first is the dominionism of modern Charismatics, sometimes called ‘Kingdom Now Theology’. This is a materialistic concept of the kingdom where supposed heavenly benefits are experienced on Earth today. Consequently, dominionists are postmillennial in eschatology – they expect things to get better and better until the church rules the world and the kingdom is fully manifested materialistically on Earth. Some forms of this merely expect a rigorous expression of the Law of Moses on Earth (Theonomy or Reconstructionism) or a materialistic expression of the kingdom on Earth where the Law rules through the church.

The most heretical forms of dominionism emanate from old Latter Rain Pentecostal ideas, which claim that, in a golden age on Earth, super apostles and prophets will reign to dominate the church and the secular world. These men will be able to fly, will be invulnerable to bullets and can pass through walls. Inspired by the contemporary appearance of super hero comics in America, such as Superman and the Justice Society, the Latter Rain enthusiasts developed their heresy by extreme mangling of a few Biblical texts. Nevertheless, this has not stopped modern Charismatics fully adopting these crazy ideas and developing a worldwide movement based upon this teaching.

In opposition to this dominionism another movement developed in the last 15 years which is equally materialistic about the kingdom but which castigates the former teaching. This is the Jewish Root heresy, expressed in a variety of forms from a focus upon Israel and adoption of Jewish forms, to extreme political Zionism. As expected, its eschatology is Dispensational Premillennialism, expecting a secret return of Christ before the establishment of a 1,000-year fleshly, Jewish kingdom on Earth.

Many of the folk in this movement (which comprises a lot of women) escaped the extremes of radical Charismaticism after the Toronto experience and sought something they thought had better historical foundations. But they merely went from the frying pan into the fire. Jewish Root ideas are just as materialistic and false as Charismatic, triumphal dominionism, but they have a superficial appearance that is comforting with Jewish terminology and rituals. They fail to see that Jesus himself finished the Jewish expression of the kingdom with a categorical statement:

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. Matt 21:43

The very fact that the kingdom of Christ is based on a *New Covenant*, and that 'all things are new' (2 Cor 5:17) means that the Jewish kingdom ended at the cross, with Christ himself being the fulfilment of all that it expected and promised. The kingdom is Christ not a fleshly Jewish mockery of him.

Jesus clearly explained that his kingdom was spiritual and heavenly.

My kingdom is not of this world. Jn 18:36

The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you. Lk 17:20-21

The kingdom is spiritual and heavenly. If it is not of this world then it cannot be a Charismatic imperial kingdom ruling the world, and neither can it be a fleshly, Jewish millennial reign after the great tribulation. If the kingdom doesn't come with observation (something seen and established by ritual observance) then it cannot be Jewish. If the kingdom is within the hearts of those who serve God, then it cannot be external and materialistic. These statements are simple to understand and only fools ignore them to their peril.

The kingdom of God is not materialistic but is spiritual.

False ideas about spiritual blessings

God has richly provided all the blessings and provision that his people can ever need, both in this life and the next. There is no shortage of grace to meet every need of the Christian; but this needs to be correctly understood. Every blessing is spiritual and is in Christ:

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ. Eph 1:3

I say again, every blessing from God for our benefit is spiritual and is in Christ. In other words, these blessings are not strictly materialistic.

Believers often fail to understand how God blesses us in Christ and seek certain blessings as a separate entity, or gift from heaven, apart from Christ. But all God's promises are 'Yes' – IN HIM (2 Cor 1:20). We only receive blessings as we live them out through living in Christ; we don't need more blessings but more of Christ.

Each day we are called to put on Christ, to put on the new man, to walk in the Spirit of Christ and to put on the armour that is Christ. The new man is the place of blessing because it is Christ in us the hope of glory. When we have need of patience we do not ask God for a gift of patience to be sent down from heaven as a separate blessing; that will never happen. What we must do is put off the old man and deny our natural impatience and then put on the new man, which has all the long-suffering of Christ. It is as we walk in Christ spiritually that we will then be patient above and beyond what our old man could ever hope for. Thus all the glory is to Christ; our need of patience is fulfilled in walking in Him by faith. The focus is, therefore, not the gift but the Lord.

When we need to activate our defences against the onslaughts of the enemy we do not seek deliverance as a separate gift from God, but we put on Christ. Paul illustrates this in terms of putting on spiritual armour, the belt, breastplate, helmet etc. (Eph 6:13ff.); our defence involves a putting on of Christ not a receipt of a special dispensation from heaven.

When we need grace to intercede we do not ask God for a spirit of intercession or a spirit of prayer as a special gift (there is no such thing); we put on Christ who is our mediator to God. In the Old Testament the chosen High Priest from among the Levites represented the people to God. In himself he was no more special than any other Israelite, but when he put on the priestly garments of beauty and glory he changed. Standing as the High Priest, clothed in these garments, he stood as Christ to the people before the Lord. As a result of a putting on he was able to minister to God acceptably. When we put on Christ we too are acceptable to God and he hears our prayers; he does not listen to the prayers made in the flesh, the old nature, but he hears those made in the Spirit of Christ (Jude 1:20).

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Rm 13:14

Thus we must not expect mere materialistic blessings or gifts to strengthen our walk, but must simply put on Christ. Remember that the blessings are not materialistic but spiritual. This means that there are times when there is no apparent 'blessing' or change in our circumstances, but there is grace to meet those circumstances. Many times those suffering persecution in history did not meet with materialistic escape (some did) but suffered terribly. Yet they endured with grace because God gave them the strength in Christ to suffer with honour and faith. Others survived great poverty and famine; God did not change their circumstances with materialistic blessing but enabled them to continue, as they trusted in Christ. God did not alter their poverty for riches, but gave them the strength to survive.

God's blessings to his people are spiritual and not materialistic.

False worship

One of the greatest problems to be ruded in the modern church is the offering of profane fire in God's house. A form of 'worship' has developed throughout the decades of the Charismatic Movement that has no warrant whatsoever in Scripture. This 'worship' is materialistic in content and mystical in its effect on people.

Arising from a failure to study Scripture properly, its foundation is an emphasis on instrumental music. Failing to see that there is no mention of instrumental music by the apostles, and no music performed in the church generally for hundreds of years, the Charismatic Movement has been virtually undergirded by a growing presence of musicians and performers on stage so that the basis of worship services is now entertainment of the senses rather than expression of praise to God. It is true that most evangelical churches use some forms of instrumental music and that is to be regretted, but Charismatic churches have taken this to intense levels whereby meetings in some places are more like night clubs and rock concerts. It is not uncommon to hear of people attending such meetings who complain of pain from the sheer volume of sound.

But it does not require such intense levels to be unbiblical; any focus upon production, staging, performance and professionalism through musicians on a platform is enough to distract the Lord's people from true worship. Much worse any further compromise through what accompanies the musicians: drama, media presentations, light shows, mime, flag waving, marching, dancing, falling down, and so on.

All this is materialism – the focus upon the external, fleshly, superficial and sensual.

Worship is spiritual and pre-eminently the attitude of heart in a true believer, which is expressed in obeisance to the King, manifested in a stooping down to kiss the hand of a superior. It is reverent submission, expressed both in praise (external) and communion (internal). The true believer is always worshipping, always in submission, always praising

God and this will be expressed in church gatherings. But formal worship is not actually the prime reason for coming together. The Bible does not teach that we come together to worship; it expects us to always be worshipping if we are saved. The reason we gather is to: a) focus upon Christ in celebrating the Lord's Supper in a Biblical manner; b) edify one another through the mutual sharing of gifts. This can only be done in a small meeting, and this is why Scripture shows us that the local church only meets in homes where there is a basis of family life undergirding the fellowship.

This Biblical meeting precludes any platform ministry and eradicates any ideas of professional rock bands. True believers will also recognise that the Bible does not teach that we should use any music at all. The apostles never commanded it, promoted it, or encouraged it, recognising that, as part of Old Covenant worship, instrumental music was cancelled along with sacrificial offerings, vestments, and temples. Any Charismatic musician must first grapple with the fact that instrumental music is never mentioned in the whole of the New Testament in connection with church life and that church fathers condemned its early appearance in some erring churches as pagan and fleshly emotionalism.

Worship is spiritual not, materialistic:

True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. Jn 4:23-24

Modern Charismatic worship is fleshly, materialistic, sensual and often pagan in origin. It is dangerous and damaging to spiritual health when it leads to passivity, suggestibility and lack of self-control. From this mystical passivity and lack of self-control comes all sorts of evils: falling down, screaming, dancing, jigging about, blind acceptance of commands, and even descent into making animal noises. All of this is external, materialistic nonsense that angers a holy God with its profanity.

False ideas about church venue and structure

The church is God's possession and is a company of people called together out of the world; it is the family or household of God on the Earth. For this reason the Biblical church meets in homes where family principles predominate and leadership is informal, based upon a plurality of elders of equal authority. These do not dominate the meeting but act as fathers when necessary, ensuring that teaching is sound and appropriate and that order is kept.

Thus all church structure is organic, informal and interdependent. There are no strict divisions or departments and no hierarchical layers of authority. There is no formal order of service and definitely no dedicated church building.

Modern churches have established the exact opposite of all these things by setting up a materialistic approach.

They are all based in a dedicated building, and usually one that cost a great deal to purchase and even more to maintain. This is in direct opposition to the fact that God does not dwell in buildings made of stone any longer but in the hearts of his people (Acts 17:24). All the apologetics to defend this practice are materialistic not Biblical (e.g. it creates opportunities; it enables us to have offices; it gives us a presence in the community etc.).

Then the church structure is taken straight out of the materialistic world, being established on various forms of pyramidal hierarchy. There is a prime leader: in Charismatic churches this is often a supposed 'apostle' but in more conservative churches this is a senior pastor.

Below this figure there are usually pastors or elders of various sorts. Below these is a series of officers, none of which has any Biblical basis or authority at all. There are myriad forms of these: deacons that have an unbiblical spiritual authority, administrators, family leaders, children's leaders, worship leaders, and so on. Very often the secular materialistic support for these unbiblical structures is openly admitted by recourse to leadership training from worldly sources, whether John Adair or the latest marketing guru.

There is nothing spiritual about this because none of it is Biblical in the slightest. It is a means to a materialistic end; it is an organisation based on man not God.

Conclusion

We could continue in this vein ad infinitum, so far has the modern church departed from God's ordinances; but enough has been given to demonstrate that the proposed thesis is accurate. Much in current church doctrine and practice is materialistic, and this is why it is failing and not bearing any spiritual fruit.

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