

# The Danger of Following Worldly Thinking

It is human nature to fall into following ruts in our character. That is why the Christian life is both a battle against temptation and a withstanding of our nature. Every day is fresh warfare – but so few believers seem to understand that. As a result of that failure, very many Christians live constantly in their old natures and simply tack on a few Christian characteristics (such as daily prayer). Such folk never threaten the enemy and so have a certain peace – but their lives are almost pointless since their testimony is so poor.

The shocking fact today is that most church-goers have such an affinity with the world that a superficial observation shows absolutely no difference in lifestyle between Christians and pagans, with the exceptions of church attendance and a few short rituals.

This never used to be the case. In the early church period, and many subsequent times, Christians stood out and were noticeable for their different quality of life. For this reason many of them perished in persecution.

This is godliness. Scripture repeatedly exhorts believers not to love the world or follow it. Indeed, we are warned that loving the world makes one an enemy of God. Even our forbears in the faith avoided the world. Abraham was called out of luxury to live in tents the rest of his life. Israel had to be called out of Egypt before it could exist as a nation. Moses chose not to follow the enticements of Pharaoh's court and rebel, despite his privileged position. The exiles that were faithful had to leave the security and pleasure of Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem from scratch.

We could offer such Scriptures as these as a warning to modern Christians:

Friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Jm 4:4

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. 1 Jn 2:15-17

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of* the wicked one. 1 Jn 5:19

## Worldly thought patterns that hold us down

Loving the world often begins by subscribing to certain patterns of thought which establish a set of principles on which a person lives. Sometimes these patterns are summarised in aphorisms or proverbs, and these will often be mentioned as a defence of certain behaviour. There are very many of these proverbial thought patterns and it is common for Christians to adopt them without giving them a second thought; especially if they were brought up to do so

Christians can be just as guilty as those in the world for living on the basis of these earthly thought patterns. We will examine just a few and then explain what the problem is.

## Positive Thinking

There was a day when both church and society favoured serious-minded leaders and excessive zeal (positive or negative) was frowned upon. Indeed, the sort of zealous positive attitudes found in modern society were considered superficial. That has all changed.

The exhortation to think positively has done untold damage to Christian ethics and this began in the modern age with the development of Mind Sciences and the Power of Positive Thinking. Now we are all familiar with the book by Norman Vincent Peale of that name, a book which has sent many people to hell thinking that they were Christians, but he was simply a more recent proponent of a syncretistic move that originated much earlier.

The focus on positive thinking, and its supposed power, was highlighted in a series of heretical movements that developed upon each other, mainly in America. These included the syncretism of PP Quimby's teachings,<sup>1</sup> New Thought, Unity School theology, Divine Science, Religious Science and Christian Science, all of which had been influenced by the work of Anton Mesmer and the value of hypnotism. Beyond that they were also infected with Platonic dualism (spirit good, matter evil).

The chief failure of these sinful philosophies was twofold. First they failed to understand the transcendence of God, teaching a form of immanence of God in the world; so much so that it approached pantheism.<sup>2</sup> Second they denied total depravity, exhorting people to look within themselves for power by concentrating their sinful mind on good things (an impossible feat in the flesh). Thus they could even affirm the divinity of man. The goal of New Thought was stated to be:

To teach the Infinitude of the Supreme One, the Divinity of Man and his infinite possibilities through the creative power of constructive thinking.<sup>3</sup>

Thus sickness was the result of a wrong mental construct and healing would occur when this construct was changed in a positive way. Mary Baker Eddy would teach later that sickness and death did not exist at all but were mere illusions. This did not help her to avoid a slow painful death.

On the coattails of this burst of Mind Science thinking at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came sect upon sect and error upon error; The Church of Christ Scientist was just one. But it also had far reaching pernicious influences in the church and wider society. One of these led to the origins of the Word of Faith Movement, a branch of Pentecostal theology that centred upon positive thinking to get what you wanted (healing, power, money, influence, prosperity etc.). This was Peale's philosophy plus the Pentecostal baptism in the Spirit. But there were more general results.

Peale's book was basically a self-help manual to succeed in life through positive thinking and this had a profound influence on modern society. If we ignore those who linked this form of positive thinking to Christianity, one effect was to imbibe a sort of need to be positive in character. Whatever ones' circumstances one had to be positive. After two world wars many ordinary folk felt this was a necessary attitude of life to get you through. Survival came to those who were positive, even in the most demanding circumstances; 'Yes there are German bombs coming down but at least I've got powdered eggs!'

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<sup>1</sup> Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-66) was the chief guru of the Mind Sciences, influencing all that followed. Quimby sought to unify occult ideas and practices with Christianity. Thus with positive thinking people could heal themselves, for example.

<sup>2</sup> Yes this is at odds with Platonism but New Thought contained a wide divergence of ideas, some that did not sit well with each other but were still maintained.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the International New Thought Alliance, 1915.

Several sketches, films, plays and dramas have milked this theme to comedic effect. One example would be the knight who keeps fighting and jeering in a bellicose manner, even though his legs and arms have been cut off; 'I'll bite you to death'.<sup>4</sup> It was latched upon because it is an attitude that leads to tunnel vision, ignorance of the facts and stupidity. I have known many cases where this overt positive attitude led people to seriously worsen a medical condition by insisting that they were fine, until hospitalisation was required. In such cases the positive attitude of the patient caused untold inconvenience and upset to other people; it is a form of selfishness.

One of the dangers with those who insist on being positive is that this attitude denigrates people who bring a warning of danger, such as in a warning of error in the church. Under the insistence of, 'we must be positive', the errors are ignored and the warning teacher is side-tracked or worse. Those who bring a multitude of warnings are severely castigated as trouble-makers, complainers or of just not being nice people.

Now this attitude does not sit well with God inspired Scripture, where denunciations, admonitions, warnings, threats, and so on, are commonplace. Indeed, most of some Bible books are warnings, sad reflections and denunciations.<sup>5</sup> The Psalms (an epitome of the Bible as a whole) are filled with condemnation, falling into sin and error, failings of history, sadness, self-dejection and guilt, as well as praise to God, a theology of hope, messianic prophecies and the blessings of the righteous. It is this reality that makes the Psalms so popular.

I can hardly think of any Bible book that does not contain severe threats, warnings, condemnation and denunciations – all supposedly negative things. Indeed, the life of Christ in the Gospels is interspersed with continual condemnation and denunciations, even of his own followers. I suspect that if the non-didactic passages were examined, the balance of denunciation and condemnation over against sweet nice sayings would be heavily in favour of denunciation. If, therefore, Christ refused to always see the positive side of things, how dare people today tell us that we should?

#### *The key issue*

The matter resolves (as always) on the truth. Everything we do is to be based upon truth and not something else; especially not false homespun philosophies. The Christian is to be a model of speaking truth, neither overtly positive or negative – he just tells things as they are. If things are negative, then his message will be negative reflecting the truth and issuing warnings; if things are positive, then he will thank God that they are positive.

Since he is so focused on the truth, the believer will also seek to earnestly defend the honour of God and the true doctrine of Christ. Thus he will be contentious in the face of error, and very combative if there are many errors. This is normal Christian behaviour. It would be an offence to God, nay close to blasphemy, to be nice to heretics regarding the truth. One cannot be positive in the face of heresy. This does not mean being nasty or not treating opponents with honour and respect, but it means being very negative about the false doctrines.

In the face of secular issues, the believer must again be set on the truth. In this case he is a weathervane demonstrating the mind of God in the world. Thus when governments act unrighteously and treat the poor and needy with disdain, then the believer must condemn

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<sup>4</sup> Monty Python's *Knights of the Holy Grail*.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and many prophetic books. Revelation is preoccupied with the war on the church, the plagues on mankind and the persecution of Christians.

that as breaking God's law. If this continues, then his speech will be very negative as regards politics.

In the face of a deteriorating society heading for destruction, again the believer must speak the truth. It would be a sin to be superficially positive in the light of the mass of negative things happening around him. Faced with a sea of negative degeneration in society, the genuine believer will not speak positively about such events; neither will he ignore them to make pleasant company at a dinner party. The believer must be true to his character and to the Lord Jesus Christ. Even in social circles he will, when asked, speak the negative truth about society, art, politics, and events and care nothing about how socialites think of him. Again, this is not being deliberately obnoxious or uncaring to others, but he must always speak the truth.

The deeper a person goes in the life of the Spirit, the closer he gets to God, the more he is centred in God's word, then the more he will speak his mind in a resolute and absolute manner regarding what goes on around him – just as Jesus did. Jesus could suddenly bring a dinner party to a halt and even condemn the host – if it was necessary for truth.

Christians today are far too centred upon being sociable, polite, peaceable, nice and empty. If faced with Peter's desertion of the truth, like Paul was, they would find a way to be positive – 'at least he has welcomed the Judaisers and socialised with them'. No, Paul's reaction was, 'when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;' (Gal 2:11). 'Withstood' could be translated as, 'I set myself against him'; and his target was the foremost apostle at a time when his own apostleship was being questioned. Paul was not afraid to be negative.

### *The modern problem*

It is almost a hidden law that every decent person in modern society should be positive all the time; their glass is always half-full. Those who have a more pessimistic or realistic nature are viewed with suspicion or worse. This often prevails amongst church folk too.

Yet optimistic thinking often gets people into serious problems, when pessimism would avoid such traps. For instance, I know of many young people for whom nothing is impossible; thus they continually say they are able to do something or are going to do something, and yet they continually fail because they were really unable. Their optimism led to them being completely unreliable. Many business ventures have failed on this rock.

In social concourse there are those who think that unless you can say something positive then you must not speak at all. What foolishness is this? Such an attitude would be no good if pointing out an iceberg to a captain was speaking negatively. That metaphor can be applied to a million lesser personal warnings.

Such rules are downright dangerous. What is needed is to always speak the truth and nothing but the truth. Only this avoids problems either way. The demand for positive thinking and positive speaking, in every circumstance, is folly or worse. It is not a command in God's law. What is required is to always speak the truth. It is not a matter of the glass being half-full or half-empty, but rather – is the glass in the process of being emptied or filled! Only by knowing the truth can we respond properly.

### **I'm all right Jack**

Many people believe that it is a failing to be open about your state of health in friendly conversation. Now in passing superficial, polite greetings to strangers, or ad hoc meetings, this is acceptable. It is just a simple means of greeting someone: 'How are you'. 'I am Ok, thank you'. Even if you are feeling poorly, this is a normal protocol because the chance

meeting does not provide the time for a proper evaluation, or the person is not a close enough friend.

However, amongst close and trusted friends, and particularly brethren in the church, this is not the case at all. We are meant to be fully open and honest with each other, and this means telling the exact truth about our health.

There is a great failing in the church these days in this issue of open fellowship. Very few people in churches really trust each other in an open and frank manner. So many people are aloof and keep their cards too close to their chest. This is not meant to be.

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 Jn 1:5-7

In John's first chapter of this letter he is concerned about our fellowship with God and being in the light. Sin interrupts this fellowship and so requires cleansing, which God provided in the blood of Jesus his Son.

The key things to notice are, firstly, that God is light and there is no darkness in him. That is to be an example to us – no darkness; no hiding things from our brethren.

Secondly, if there is any darkness, then there is no fellowship. This is true regarding walking with God, but it also applies to walking with brethren. Darkness, deliberately hiding things (whether wrong things, relevant good things or important neutral things), ruins fellowship.

Thirdly, we walk in the light, and by doing so have fellowship both with God and one another. Walking in the light with one another means being open, transparent and honest. Genuine Christian fellowship does not harbour important secrets.

So, when it comes to being asked about your health by a friend or a brother, you must tell the truth, simply and honestly. You don't need to keep going on an on all the time about how terrible you are; neither do you keep it a secret. You just tell the truth. Of course if your health is in a serious state, then you will talk more than normal about your situation.

The notion that you always insist on saying 'I am all right' when you are clearly not, in the bounds of Christian fellowship, is a sin – plain and simple. You are telling a lie to your closest friend.

Putting away lying, *'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbour,'* for we are members of one another. Eph 4:25

This idea of always saying, 'I am all right', is just another worldly way of thinking that has no place in the church, which is a place of openness, trust and honesty. Walk in the light.

### **When in doubt, don't**

This is also found in another form, *'If it's doubtful, it's dirty'*.

Now this isn't necessarily bad advice when it is applied to sanctification. If one is considering a doubtful pleasure then it may well be wrong. However, as a general aphorism it is full of problems; and especially when given as advice to the young.

At the superficial, practical level, it is just stupid. A child is wondering whether or not to clean her teeth. She remembers, 'When in doubt, don't', and so fails to clean her teeth. A boy is uncertain about whether to give part of his pocket money to charity, thinking on this aphorism he fails to do so. A husband wonders whether to buy his wife flowers. As a result of this proverb he chooses not to.

Now these may seem superficial hypothetical situations, but they show the problems of universal laws set in worldly proverbial forms.

This proverb could be a real stifling to faith. All trusting in faith has its origins in a certain amount of doubt. If there were no doubt there would be no need for faith. It is only when we have clear conceptions and guidance that there is no doubt (such as when obeying an objective law of God). When faced with a faith issue, there is always doubt first. This proverb, at this point, thus ruins all faith.

When Hudson Taylor was pacing Brighton beach considering his thoughts on the great venture of forming the China Inland Mission, there must have been many moments of doubt. If he had been brought up with, 'When in doubt, don't', then the CIM would never have been initiated and millions of Chinese would never have been saved.

A similar situation occurred in the considerations of William Carey to start a mission in India. He not only had to face his own doubts, but the serious doubts of others. In fact he was directly told by ministers not to go and that God was able to save any elect in India on his own. If he had followed this proverbial advice he would have not started modern evangelical world missions.

God calls us to do everything in faith. In fact, if it is not in faith it is sin. Faith is trusting in something invisible, holding on to something not seen. Doubt is the way that the old nature approaches this venture; faith and determination is the way the new nature approaches it. Doubt has to be cast aside and put off as old nature. Yet this proverb would have us focus on doubt and choose against the path in view.

In a nutshell, what this proverb does is to ruin faith completely. When faced with an uncertainty, the proverb demands capitulation ('don't do it'). However, God's will may be to do it.

Sometimes we are faced with overwhelming pressures against following a certain course of action. This is always true when God initiates something new in the church (such as Carey's mission). Often there are multiple good men who are opposed to the venture. There are not only personal doubts, but a host of voices saying, 'don't do it', and yet the way of God is to go forward. This was the case when Paul was set to go to Jerusalem. He not only had many church leaders try to stop him but an accredited prophet warned him that if he went he would end up in chains. Yet Paul went and God's word affirms that this was the right thing to do, to witness at Rome. If Paul had followed this proverbial advice, he would have disobeyed God.

This proverb is just another way of worldly patterns of thought ruining righteousness. The believer must think for himself and find the will of God on his own, not trusting in any saying of men.

### **Selfishness**

The thought pattern here is a focus upon self-centredness.

All Christians would agree that this matter is dangerous; however, selfishness is sometimes very tricky to spot. I have known people who were extremely good, serving, generous people, who were nevertheless self-centred. Their acts of generosity and charity only served to establish their security and were not disinterested.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus told us not to let the left hand know what the right hand was doing; a hyperbolic figure to emphasise that serving and giving must be disinterested; there must be an aloofness about our giving so that we are almost oblivious to it – we just respond to God's will.

The problem with selfish people is that everything is all about me; every facet of life is viewed from the perspective of how it affects me. Such people have failed to understand that the beginning of the Christian life is a death whereby 'I' was killed off and instead I received a new resurrection life making me a new creation in Christ. For the Christian living by faith my old self-life no longer exists at all. Thus any attempt to live on the basis of selfishness is living in a realm of death. There is no spirituality in selfishness, only futility. We live for others, not ourselves. Spiritual life is a sacrifice to God.

Thus the Christian life is a corporate experience; it is not centred upon the self. Even the Lord's prayer, the model for daily prayer, begins with 'Our Father'.

Everything in the world today pressurises people to focus upon themselves. To survive in this world, we are told, one has to be ruthless and centred upon what benefits you. Some church movements come close to this with a theology of prosperity that centres spirituality on what you can get; everything is subjectively about you gaining something. All of this is old nature and something to be condemned.

The centre of the Christian life is the pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ and the revelation of him in Scripture is one of total self-sacrifice for those who did not deserve mercy. This is our model to follow.

### **Idolatry**

The thought pattern here is holding something in the heart that obscures focusing completely on God.

This can be a subtle matter. Some forms of idolatry are very obvious, such as gambling, fornication, money, power etc. and it is hoped that these would never even be mentioned in the church. But other forms of idolatry are much subtler, even obscuring the problem to the person with the problem.

I once knew a man who had developed as a believer for about 15 years, and had grown in knowledge and conviction, but fell appallingly. The cause of this fall was his virtual idolatry of his only son, conceived fairly late in life. He constantly played out his own life through his son, seeking to make him all the things his father had failed in. He so idolised his son that he once said that he would kill himself if anything happened to him. Shortly after this he fell into deeper and deeper problems and ended badly.

Someone who had once spoken against outward idolatry found himself the victim of it when it was close to his heart. We must ever be on guard against idolatry. That this form of idolatry is not uncommon is shown in the fact that writers have frequently mentioned it in history, such as Charles Spurgeon.

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<sup>6</sup> Literally: not influenced by considerations of personal advantage.

Idolatry is old nature, but there are forms of it that can easily obscure God if believers are not zealous in putting the old nature off.

### **Follow your heart**

Now the folly of this is just too obvious to comment upon (you would think); nevertheless this terrible aphorism has crept into church circles in various ways (often through watching movies).

Let's get basics straight first; the heart is deceitful and corrupt; following it will lead to ruin.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. Gen 6:5

You have done worse than your fathers, for behold, each one follows the dictates of his own evil heart, so that no one listens to Me. Jer 16:12

Cursed *is* the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. Jer 17:5

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it? Jer 17:9

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. Prov 28:26

Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. Eccles 9:3

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. Heb 3:12

If you are in the old nature, your heart will lead you astray because all sins arise first in the heart (Matt 15:19). The heart is only safe when you are in the new nature, when the heart is following the Spirit of God within it. The heart can choose to follow God or Adam.

I have personally known apparent good Christians completely fall away and ruin their lives because they followed this aphorism. There are many cases of adultery and marriage breakdown because someone followed their heart instead of remaining faithful to their vows.

The Scriptures above make it clear that this is not just a matter for unbelievers, but Christians too can be led astray by a deceitful heart (that is, a heart given over to false teaching).

Now this aphorism is absolutely universal these days; the world throws it at people every day in a million ways. The most obvious example is found in films where a young person (usually a girl) is told to follow their heart and begin a forbidden romance. But it extends to all sorts of ventures, such as starting a very unwise business venture because you want to follow your desires, or mixing with bad company.

All important life-decisions must be made on the basis of wisdom, and this is gained through rational consideration of all the facts, taking into account wise counsel. The very last thing that is needed is to follow your heart without any such counsel or consideration.

Following your heart is following your base desires, but these are the source of sin,



Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Jm 1:14-16

For this reason we are commanded to guard our heart to ensure that it is God's will that fills it and not the desires of the old nature, 'Keep [guard] your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life,' (Prov 4:23).

So, the worst possible advice anyone could give is for a person to follow their heart. It is symptomatic of the evil age that we live in and it is anathema for Christians.

## What this is all about

### **The failure to see the real battle**

The root of the problem in all these things is a failure to see Biblical truth about ourselves and the world around us. It is a failure to understand the warfare that we are in and how that warfare operates. The key issue in this warfare is a battle for the mind. Ignore the nonsense portrayed in Charismatic books on spiritual warfare and fighting demons, that is all froth and bubble. The crucial issue, and one far more dangerous, is how to win the battle for the mind. This is why Scripture talks about the need to renew the mind and take thoughts captive.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Rm 12:2

[May] the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened. Eph 1:17-18

Since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Col 3:9-10

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. 2 Cor 10:4-5

Personal transformation does not occur by using mystical methods of prayer and meditation (as proposed by many New Calvinist false teachers) but by taking thoughts captive and renewing the mind. We prove what is good and God's will by renewing and training our mind – that is by teaching it the truth and obeying it.

Now worldly paths of thinking, such as we have described in this paper, are methods that are used by Satan to trick us into following worldly paths instead of the truth.

### **The failure to understand what putting off the old man really means**

Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22-24

We make a great mistake if we think that putting off the old man is just putting off sinful aspirations. Sin is obvious – we know when we have committed it and we mourn for it. Satan can't win the battle for our minds by sin, except in very troubled, addictive people.

Putting off the old man includes all that the old man is – and that means all the supposedly good things that were strengths of our old life that we relied upon instead of God. We must

die to our old nature's good deeds as well as our bad ones. Most people do not understand this. Putting off the old man is an act of faith in the word of God. If we do not do this we are not living by faith. Since everything that is not of faith is sin (Rm 14:23) then everything we do in the old life is also sin. If we do not put off the old man our whole life will be a waste of time. This is not just putting off sins, but putting off all the strengths of the old man that stop us depending solely on God.

Jesus told us to carry our cross and deny ourselves. He did not say deny our sins, but deny our very selves. Dying to the old nature is exactly what it says – dying to all that you were in the strength of your old life – both good and bad. The Christian life is one of total dependence upon God for everything, trusting him as a Father to supply all our needs. Jesus, though being God in the flesh, modelled this life for us by constantly relying upon God at all times for all things and not using his own power of divinity. Jesus led a dependent life as a man. We too are called to live a dependent life, and that is what repentance means. We fail to work out our repentance when we trust in the mannerisms, philosophies and characteristics of our old life – even if they seem to be good.

The strengths of our old life are really a mimicking of the virtues that must flow from the cross – the fruit of the Spirit. By adopting worldly philosophies we appear to be doing good in the strength of the old Adamic life instead of trusting in God and working out his salvation by the Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

These worldly philosophies are many and varied but they are elementary things of the world, and thus the devil:

When we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. Gal 4:3

How *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? Gal 4:9

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. Col 2:8

Such elements of the world bring us into bondage. We do not live the Christian life by following the traditions of men but the truth of Christ.

These elements take different forms. The elementary principles for Greeks were chiefly Platonism and other speculative philosophical schemes; intellectual frameworks. For Jews the elementary principles were pharisaic / rabbinic adherence to forms of Mosaic Law and human traditions; legalism. For modern western people the elements are a host of different things, some of which have been mentioned. What they all have in common are the appearance of wisdom that is separated from God's truth and power. Whatever good they have in themselves is useless because it does not emanate from God.

The apparent good in these elementary systems were the best that the old nature could offer – and that must be rejected. Christians need to understand that ALL the old nature must be put off and not trusted in.

## **Knowledge**

It is a shocking fact that most believers that I have ever met have no clue when they are in the old nature or the new nature. Even when they clearly manifest their old nature they

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<sup>7</sup> Phil 2:12-13, 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.'

show no compunction about it and continue as if all were normal. That is not normal – it is failure.

Now one thing that the NT does is to give clear examples of old nature behaviour, such as:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like. Gal 5:19

So, if someone has an outburst of wrath then they are in the old man (the ‘flesh’ is the term for the old man in expression through the soul, showing that it is behaviour like other fleshly people; the old man is the principle of Adamic life behind that expression). So, if you are provoked to anger in unrighteousness,<sup>8</sup> then you are in the old man; plain and simple. Murder is old nature behaviour and Jesus told us that hating someone was equivalent to murder in the heart. So hating someone is old nature. Being jealous is old nature. These sins are obvious; but a proper study of the NT warnings give us many other examples, showing that even tittle-tattle backbiting or gossip in church is old nature behaviour; and modern churches are full of that.

We all have to learn, from our understanding of the truth and our communing with God what our own personal weaknesses and strengths are. If we do not see the need to do this, we will never learn how to put off the old nature.

Sadly, even an academic discussion of this has been absent in many churches. I have met Christians of 50 years standing who have no clue that they have to put off their old nature. Yet this is clearly important apostolic teaching.

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ... But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him ... Therefore, as *the elect* of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*. But above all these things put on love. Col 3:5-14

Paul’s teaching on putting off the old nature comes out most clearly in his prison letters. In other words, it is the product of deep mature thinking when he had fewer outward pressures.

### **The problems of our personal historical development**

The attitudes that many people have in mature years are often generated by experiences they went through in their younger years.<sup>9</sup> In cases of forms of abuse, this often results in character problems that require very specialised counselling. Abused people are frequently insecure and make up for this either by over-compensating or by assuming the form of a victim. People that grew up with an alcoholic parent sometimes find that they have an addictive character, even if it is not for alcohol.

However, even people that had a more ‘normal’ childhood and adolescence have loads of baggage that they are often unaware of. This is because most people just progress in their lives (one way or another) and do not stop to check themselves and assess their character.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a righteous provocation to anger, such as a godly reaction to injustice.

<sup>9</sup> I have chiefly in mind a secular upbringing here, though many kids in Christian families also fall into the issues raised here.

In the Christian life we are told to do this on numerous occasions, beginning with checks to ascertain whether we are in the faith or not.<sup>10</sup> Such character checks are necessary for the godly man to approve or disapprove of personal character traits and act accordingly.

The case of a man weak in faith that cannot eat food offered to idols is a case in point. This person had not yet learned of the liberty of mature Christians to eat anything with thanks. His conscience needed to be renewed; his character needed re-assessment.

Now there are some types of personal background that come to dominate the way we do nearly everything and often this does not change when we become Christians. It is the way we have always behaved. Now if this behaviour was overtly sinful, then we would stop it immediately. If a person said, 'I have always been a thief, therefore I can't change because I am a Christian', then church leaders would discipline him. But when the behaviour is less serious, nobody bothers to do anything at all.

There are many people who continually live in their old nature as a result of this sort of problem. They were brought up that way (at home, at school, in the army, in prep school etc.) and they know no other way of living. This is not being brought up in the school of Christ but in the school of the world. Let us take a case that does not involve obvious sin.

For instance, someone is brought up in an army home, with an army education and is taught to do absolutely everything that anybody in authority tells him. Throughout his whole life, this person succumbs to all authority figures and all establishment protocols and never questions them.<sup>11</sup> If someone says, 'Jump', he says, 'How high'. The idea of rebelling against them (even if required for righteousness sake) is beyond him. Such folk even fall in line in apostate churches though they disagree; they just cannot rebel against an authority figure – it just seems wrong to them.<sup>12</sup>

Let us take a Biblical example.

**Martha was distracted with much serving. ... Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.' Lk 10:40-41**

Martha had grown up fussing. This was her natural way of dealing with things; as such she was always distracted, fussing about, rushing around filling her life with busyness. She probably learned this from her mother and just followed her mom's way of dealing with social life – be pressured doing things, '*The devil finds work for idle hands to do*'. If you are very busy working, you are safe.

Jesus, very clearly, destroys this idea, telling her that it just results in worrying about many things and distracting her from seeing what was important – Him. The Lord was only with men for a very short time and every minute with him was precious. Some people rejoiced that they had seen Jesus for a few moments and wrote about it years afterwards. A very few

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<sup>10</sup> The massive failure of preachers telling folk that that they are truly saved eternally just because they came forward at a meeting is the worst kind of folly. Such guarantees of salvation can never be given to anyone, and individuals must confirm that they are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). I have known people rise to church leadership and be a Christian for forty years only to fall away in gross sin, revealing that they were never truly saved at all.

<sup>11</sup> The layers of authority figures and establishment authorities that I have in mind are far more than government and laws. Doctors and schoolmasters are authority figures for example. In the modern world, media personalities are authority figures and the influences of the media and trends in society are establishment protocols.

<sup>12</sup> I am not encouraging rebellion in society. The law of the land must be obeyed as far as it is godly to do so. However, there are multi-levels of establishment protocols in society, from setting a table for dinner to voting for Parliament. Many protocols are just plain folly, or sinful. One legal protocol that is sinful is the recent legislation for gay marriage.

people saw him more frequently; Martha was one, being a personal friend and supporter who housed him when he was local. But here, instead of listening to the Lord, Martha was distracted – doing what she always did, fussing with many spinning plates. As a result she was wasting what little time she had with the Lord – even though she was doing a good work. Her sister saw this and sat at Jesus' feet listening to his word; 'one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part' (v42). Martha is the old nature, Mary is the new nature.

This personal background is the old nature and it has to be died to. Jesus has told us that it is already dead, laid on the cross and co-crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20), but one has to believe this truth and act upon it in practice before it becomes real. All the time people are thinking that it is wrong to go against their background, they are actually committing sin because it is trusting in the old nature and not following Christ. It is trust in their upbringing and not God's will.

In such cases there has to come a point of crisis when there is a battle between following God's truth or following one's upbringing, and this can be most unsettling. However, when this battle is won it results in a life of freedom in God's will afterwards. However, if this battle is lost then it leads to a life of confusion and bondage.

### **The hope of glory**

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Col 3:1-5

Do we want to appear with Christ in glory when he returns? Then we need to obey what it says here. Let us list the items logically:

- Seek those things which are above (v1).
- Set your mind on things above (v2).
- Do not set your mind on things on the earth (v2).
- Why? For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (v3).
- Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry (v5). Put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds (v8-9).

The fact that we have died and been raised with Christ means that WE MUST NOT set our minds on things of the earth. This not only means sinful things, or innocent pleasurable things, but worldly attitudes that form our character. Nothing worldly must dominate us. We must be dead to the world and the world to us (Gal 6:14). If elemental worldly forms dominate our thinking, then we must reject them by taking thoughts captive and throw them out. We must deny ourselves.

Following this we must set our thoughts upon heavenly things; upon the truth of God in Christ.

Then, as a result, we must actively put to death those risings in our bodies that would lead to sin.

The dealing with thought patterns must come first. There is no hope for a change of behaviour if the thoughts have not first been taken captive. The basis for this is renewing the mind in the truth of what God has already done in salvation for us.

## Conclusion

The point of this paper has been to show that there is a great danger of following worldly ways of thinking, even if they appear to be beneficial. The way we have been brought up to think has to be jettisoned as a part of the old nature (unless we had a very favourable Christian upbringing). The believer must be centred upon the truth as revealed in God's word. He must also put off the old nature in all its forms, including apparent fleshly strengths.

Homespun philosophies and archaic sayings have no place in the Christian life unless they undergird what God says in Scripture.

### **A key failure that results from such worldly philosophies**

Many Christians just simply have no understanding about their need to be a testimony to God. At the end of the day, believers stay on the earth (instead of being immediately raptured on conversion) so that God has a witness to his character and will.

Before Jesus, God's witness was in the law and in godly men, such as prophets. Israel was called to be a witness but mostly failed. When Jesus came as a man, he was the absolute witness; the standard of perfection for all men. When one looked at Jesus, one saw God in the flesh. When one wants to know what God thinks about a certain matter, one looks at what Jesus said and did in regard of that matter.

Today it is the church that stands as this witness and testimony to God, as the body of Christ. The church is called to be that testimony that, if a person wants to know what God is like and what he wills, he should see it evidenced in the church. In social life, every believer is called to be a witness to God.

Believers stand for God as ambassadors on the earth; in every believer there is an expression of the kingdom in them.

**Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ. 2 Cor 5:20**

Christians are not like the world at all; they stand in the earth as representatives of God – they are different and other-worldly. Therefore, their opinions and behaviour must manifest what God thinks and not what man thinks.

Just as an ambassador may have his own opinions on things, but can only speak what is the policy of his home country, so a Christian denies himself and only represents what is of God because he is God's envoy. Believers do not have the privilege of saying what they like, behaving as they have always done, or of parroting the aphorisms of men. Believers are the repository of the word of God and their words should be the counsel of God. Men should be able to see what God is like through the words and behaviour of Christians.

Sadly, this is far from the case today. However, there have been times in history when this was far more true. The Puritans, for example, were, in general, a fine model of godly behaviour in many forms, so that people did understand more of God by examining their words and lives. To this day one can see a fine testimony to God in their sermons and letters. Their lives also witnessed to the character of God, whether in peace or in suffering.

What worldly patterns of thinking do is they distract a man from the truth of God and lead him into ruts of thinking and behaviour that is not dependent upon God. We are not necessarily talking about overtly sinful behaviour; very often it is neutral or even altruistic behaviour, but it is still not originating in God but is part of the old nature. This is what the believer has to learn to die to and live a life of self-denial.

Sadly the world has so much entered the church and her thinking that teaching on self-denial is few and far between. Instead many churches actuality teach the very opposite, proclaiming that believers have the right to gain everything they want from God, whatever it may be. Instead of self-denial, we have a Gospel of self-centredness, self-esteem, self-gain, self-love and self-trust.

No wonder that the church is filled with worldly patterns of thought.

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