

Is the Church In the World as Much as the World is In the Church? (Part 1)

Admittedly, the title of this series of articles is quite lengthy. Perhaps its length represents its complexity. There are two issues on the table here. First, the Lord's church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14). As we're moving about in this earthly realm we are to "preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15). Obviously, as living beings we are in the world, but in the sense presented here, we are to be amongst people of the world so that we can influence them, teach them and lead them to Christ. The second issue is closely related. While the church is in the world, it seems that we have allowed the sin of the world (aka, "worldliness") to creep into the church. Being in the world to lead the lost to Christ is good. Taking on the sinful habits of the world is bad. The title, then, would have us consider if we as the Lord's church are actually influencing the world or if we are allowing the world to influence us. This article will focus on the influence we are supposed to be having on the world.

In I Corinthians 5 we read Paul's rebuke to the church at Corinth for the fornication it was overlooking within its own ranks. In the midst of this he said, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with the idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world." (I Corinthians 5:9-10). Through Paul, the Lord expressed His knowledge of the fact that we will walk among sinful men and women on a daily basis. Even without seeking them out, we will walk among them. On any given day, whether we go to a store or even take a stroll through the neighborhood, we will see and perhaps have interaction with some who live ungodly lives. Are we supposed to jump to the other side of the street? Are we to rush in and out of public places so that we have nothing whatsoever to do with these men and women? To ask these questions is almost to answer them. How can we teach them the Gospel, how can we be their salt and light, if we avoid them? We cannot escape the world. To the contrary, if we as Christians don't take the light of the Gospel and show the light of the Gospel to the dark and sinful world, who will?

Paul was disgusted with the church in Corinth when he wrote what is recorded in I Corinthians 5. A brother had his father's wife in an unscriptural relationship. Both the brother and the woman were in sin. The other members of the church there had exercised no discipline in the matter so they too were displeasing to God. Now notice this phrase in verse one and think about it in relation to the discussion at hand: "there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles..." The church is to be the influence for holiness and righteous living in this world. This congregation was involved in and approving of actions of which even the people of the world would be ashamed. In this matter, at least, the world was a better influence than the church! It's the church that is supposed to be showing the world how to live righteously, not the other way around.

What does the world see when they look at the church of Christ? Do they see anything different than what they can see in denominations or even in godless living? We don't have to wear signs saying, "I'm a Christian." We don't have to dress strangely or talk in an unusual manner to distinguish ourselves as people of God. All we need to do is be people of the Bible, people who know God's Word, strive to know it better each day and then make every effort to live our lives according to the Book Divine. Seeing our purity in action and talk, observing our endurance through trials, beholding our faithfulness to serving and worshipping God, and taking note of our hope, peace and joy, people of the world will see what the Lord expects the world to be able to see when they encounter a true Christian. They will see "Christ in us." (Galatians 2:20).

Paul exhorted the Romans, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may approve what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Romans 12:2). To be conformed is to be shaped by a mold. The world has a mold. God has one too. We can see what the world shapes when men and women conform to its mold. Are we showing the world what one looks like when he or she is molded by and conformed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is God's Word the rule and guide for our lives? It absolutely must be if we as the Lord's church expect to influence the world for Him.

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