

**DOCTRINAL ESSAY**

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by  
The Rev. Edward J. Worley, Pastor      St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington

*The Great Danger that Worldliness Presents  
in Our Congregations and in the Lives of Individual Christians*

**Introduction: The Holy Bible Is Our Foundation**

We believe, teach and confess that the Holy Bible is our only source and norm for faith and life, sufficient to tell us what we should believe and how we should live. The Bible is clear and able to make us wise unto salvation and to train us in holy living. This essay will apply pertinent proof passages to the problem and danger of worldliness. May God grant to all who hear open ears and hearts by His gracious Spirit through His Word for Jesus' sake, our only Redeemer. Amen.

**I. An Explanation: What Is Worldliness?**

As one studies the terminology, one realizes that the term "worldliness" has been defined in two ways. The secular dictionary includes both a **positive** and a **negative** meaning. As a positive aspect of character or a quality to be sought after and admired (obviously in the world's own view), worldliness is "the character of being intellectually sophisticated rather than naive and includes a predominant passion for obtaining the good things of life" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913). Here knowledge of the practices, usages and ways of men is considered to be an accomplishment denoting acquired shrewdness and the casting aside of illusions. As such it is praised by the world with such terms as "street-smart," "citizen of the world," "cosmopolitan," "having *savoir-faire* (F)," etc.. Ian Fleming's fictional spy, James Bond, is considered such a *bon vivant*, *connoisseur*, *gourmet*, etc., as "a man of the world" and someone the world would like to emulate, a true "sophisticate."

At once we see how basic meanings of terms reveal value judgments — the world commends itself for being worldly! But those that use self-chosen standards to commend themselves are not wise! (Cf. II Corinthians 10:12).

As "worldliness" is used in the present essay, it falls into the **negative** category: "Covetousness; addictedness to gain and temporal enjoyments; worldly-mindedness" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913); "devotion to worldly affairs, to the neglect of religious or spiritual needs" (*Oxford Dictionary*, 1955). Here we have a meaning akin to materialism, irreligion, secularism, carnality, etc. Charles Dickens put it this way: "'The world' is a conventional phrase, which being interpreted, signifies all the rascality in it." One recent author, Iain Murray, says:

Worldliness is departing from God. It is a man-centered way of thinking; it proposes objectives which demand no radical breach with man's fallen nature; it judges the importance of things by the present and material results; it weighs success by numbers; it covets human esteem and wants no unpopularity; it knows no truth for which it is worth suffering; it declines to be a "fool for Christ's sake." Worldliness is the mind-set of the unregenerate. It adopts idols and is at war with God. Because "the flesh" still dwells in the Christian, he is far from immune from being influenced by this dynamic. (Excerpted from Murray's *Evangelicalism Divided*).

The term "worldliness" does not occur in Holy Writ, but both "*the world*" in a *negative* sense (I John 2:15) and this present age as being *evil* are clearly delineated. The first term, *kosmos* in

the Greek, is “the present condition of human affairs, in alienation and opposition to God, ... the whole circle of earthly goods, endowments, riches, advantages, pleasures, etc., which although hollow, frail and fleeting, stir desire, seduce from God and are obstacles to the cause of Christ” (Thayer. *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*). A variation is *kosmikos* or “worldly,” i.e., having the character of this present corrupt age (cf. Titus 2:12, “**worldly** lusts”). Then there is *aion*, which literally means “an age, a period of time, marked by spiritual or moral characteristics.” Used in a similar way as *kosmos*, it denotes this transitory and corrupt present age in contrast to God and His children. As such, the *aion* has “*cares*” (Mark 4:19), “*children*” (Luke 16:8; 20:34), “*princes*” (I Corinthians 2:6 and 8), “*wisdom*” (I Corinthians 1:20; 2:6; 3:18), “*fashion*” or form (I Corinthians 7:31), character (Galatians 1:4), “*evil*” (John 17:15; Galatians 1:4), and “*god*” (II Corinthians 4:4). In the latter passage particularly we find the clear connection between the world and Satan (cf. also especially Ephesians 6:10 and 12; John 8:44). As Cyprian (ca. 200-258 A. D.) once said:

It is not persecution alone that we ought to fear, nor those forces that in open warfare range abroad to overthrow and defeat the servants of God. It is easy enough to be on one’s guard when the danger is obvious; one can stir up one’s courage for the fight when the Enemy shows himself in his true colors. There is more need to fear and beware of the Enemy when he creeps up secretly, when he beguiles us by a show of peace and steals forward by those hidden approaches which have earned him the name of the “Serpent”...Light had come to the Gentiles and the lamp of salvation was shining for the deliverance of mankind... Thereupon the Enemy, seeing his idols abandoned and his temples and haunts deserted by the ever growing numbers of the faithful, devised a fresh deceit, using the Christian name itself to mislead the unwary. He invented heresies and schisms so as to undermine the faith, to corrupt the truth, to sunder our unity. Those whom he failed to keep in the blindness of their old ways he beguiles and leads them up a new road of illusion. (Quoted from Cyprian of Carthage, Treatise I, “On the Unity of the Church,” from *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1867).

As the *father of lies* and spiritual *soul-murderer* (John 8:44), Satan does all he can with “*doctrines of devils*” (I Timothy 4:1) to assault the church-at-large and to turn it into *his* kingdom. Every apostate is in his power. He continues his deceit begun with Eve (II Corinthians 11:3), and we are not to be ignorant of his devices and strategic assaults (II Corinthians 2:11; cf. also 11:14).

The Scriptural use of the term “world” in the context of our topic is an essence far removed from God and ever opposed to God. Spiritually considered, its so-called “standards” and “values” are rejected by genuine believers (cf. *Godly* sorrow vs. *worldly* sorrow, II Corinthians 7:10). The world, as a corrupt entity, is ruled by the devil (John 12:31), is in utter, hostile opposition to God (I John 2:17), and shall pass away (I John 2:17). It “*lieth in wickedness*” (I John 5:19) and hates all those not of the world (John 17:14). As such, Christians overcome the world by faith alone (I John 5:4) through the victory of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 16:33). We must beware of the temptations of the world and resist them by Gospel-engendered faith (cf. Galatians 6:14; Romans 12:2). The basic problem is simply this: Every true believer has the world fully represented in his own sinful flesh; the “*carnal mind*” of the Old Adam is the hostile “world” in each of us (Romans 8:7). The world considers Christians “*foolish*” in character, “*weak*” in ability, “*base*” in value, “*despised*” in reputation, and “[*nothings*]” in significance and relevance (I Corinthians 1:27-28). The Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, prayed for us in this regard in His intercession, John chapter 17: “*I have given them Thy Word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil*”

(John17:14-15).

We, as Christians, are *in*, but not of, the world. The Apostle Paul speaks of this in I Corinthians 5:9-10, saying: *“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 idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.”*

Dr. Stoeckhardt points out:

This is, of course, not meant as though Christians must avoid each and every contact with the world, must break off each and every association with the children of the world. There is an association with the world that is permitted. In an earlier letter, St. Paul had briefly written to the Corinthian Christians that they must have nothing to do with fornicators. He had meant this in the way he now explains in I Corinthians 5:11, that, when a person who is called brother is revealed to be a fornicator or a covetous person or an idolater or a blasphemer or a drunkard or extortioner, Christians must no longer have anything to do with such a person; they must break off brotherly association and contact with such a person. The Corinthians, however, had understood the apostle to say that they were generally to have nothing [at all] to do with fornicators, the covetous, extortioners, idolaters in this world, with the godless, unbelieving men of this world. This is not what Paul had meant. For were that a Christian duty, Christians would have to vacate the world. A certain contact with the godless, unbelieving world is unavoidable if Christians are to live in this world. And in such altogether necessary things, in earthly, worldly things, which belong to existence and life on earth, to converse with the children of the world, to do business with them, to have contact with them...God’s Word has approved or freely granted. ...The prohibition covers sharing in their evil: Ephesians 5:11 – “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” (George Stoeckhardt, *Exegetical Lectures on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*. Fairmont, MN: H. W. Degner, 1969, pp. 31-32.)

**Pertinent Proof Passages:** Romans 12:2, I John 2:15-17 —

The theme passage for this 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of our Concordia Lutheran Conference is Romans 12:2— *“And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”* Kenneth Wuest offers this expanded translation: *“And stop assuming an outward expression that does not come from within you and is not representative of what you are in your inner being but is patterned after this age; but change your outward expression to one that comes from within and is representative of your inner being, by the renewing of your mind, resulting in your putting to the test what is the will of God, the good and well-pleasing and complete will, and having found that it meets specifications, place your approval upon it”* (Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I, “Romans in the Greek New Testament.” Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973, p. 209). As he notes:

Christians must not change their outward expression from that of a true expression of their inmost natures, to an assumed expression not true of their new regenerated inmost being, that assumed expression patterned after the world. He exhorts them instead to be transformed, and here we have the same Greek word which is used in the Matthew passage (Cf. Matthew 17:2) and translated “transfigured.” Saints are to change their outward expression from that which was true of them before salvation, when they gave expression to what was in their indwelling sinful nature, to an expression of their inmost regenerated being. Thus Paul exhorts the saints not to assume as an outward expression the fashions, habits, speech expressions, and artificiality of this evil age, thus hiding that expression of themselves which should come from what they are intrinsically as children of God. How saints sometimes like to have just a dash of the world

about them so as not to appear too unworldly! How a coat of worldliness can cover up the Christ within! But instead, saints are to be transformed, that is, give expression of what they really are. (Wuest, *op. cit.* Vol IV, 1966 Ed., “Golden Nuggets,” p. 27.)

The word “world” here is *aion*. Trench states this refers to “an age, that is, a period of time characterized by a certain type of life or economy of government or other social regulating agency.” In the passages just mentioned it refers to “all that floating mass of thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims, aspirations, at any time current in the world, which it may be impossible to seize and accurately define, but which constitute a most real and effective power, being the moral or immoral atmosphere which at every moment of our lives we inhale, again inevitably to exhale, the subtle informing spirit of the world of men who are living alienated and apart from God” (Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*). It is the “age,” the “spirit of genius of the age.” This is the present age in which we are living.

Dr. Luther says that conformists to the world are “those who rely only on their own feelings and experience rather than the will of God, the self-willed, those wise in their own conceits, who trust in their own counsels and strength” (*Luther’s Works*, American Ed., Vol. 25, p. 428). We are not to run to the same excess of riot as we did prior to our conversion (I Peter 4:4) but put off the old man with the deceitful lusts (Ephesians 4:22ff.). Only the Gospel can empower us to do so (“*the mercies of God*” in Christ Jesus, Romans 12:1). Compare also Romans 11:26-27 — “...when I shall take away their sins” [by] “*the Deliverer*” (cf. Romans 6:4, 8:5-6, 14).

In I John 2:15-17 we read: “*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.*” This triple proof passage gives us three specific internal, heart-based worldly attitudes that comprise “*all that is in the world*” and define what God means when He forbids us to “*love the world*” or “*the things that are in the world.*” Note well: A Christian cannot love the Father and love the world. It is an either/or situation (cf. “*Ye cannot serve God and mammon,*” Matthew 6:24).

First we have “*the lust of the flesh.*” The depraved nature, the Old Adam, the carnal mind, places its spirit upon all that God forbids, so that a constant craving, longing and desire impels world-lovers to seek to gratify and satisfy this passion. The problem with this attempt is obvious: Since the flesh never changes, the desire is never met; so the Old Adam is on a continuous quest for a sensual fulfillment without ever reaching the goal. The lust is a monster never satiated, whose appetite only increases the more it is fed! Trench remarks on the Greek word translated “*lust*” (*epithumia*) that this word includes “the whole world of active lusts and desires, all to which the flesh, as the seat of desire and of natural appetites impels” (*Synonyms*, p. 324). Examples of the use of this term are as follows: Mark 4:19 — “*the lusts of other things entering in, choke the Word;*” I Corinthians 10:6 — “[*We*] *should not lust after evil things*” (as did Israel of old in idolatry, etc.); John 8:44 — “*The lusts of your father [Satan] ye will do;*” James 4:2 — “*Ye lust, and have not;*” etc. Although these lusts are called “*worldly*” (Titus 2:12) and the cause of the corruption that is in the world (II Peter 1:4), Scripture tells us that the source is also every man’s own sinful flesh (James 1:14-15). The range of lusts is extensive (“*all manner of concupiscence,*” Romans 7:7; “*led away with divers lusts,*” II Timothy 3:6). Some objects of lust include *people* (“*lust after her,*” Matthew 5:28; “*the lusts of their own hearts,*” the “*vile affections*” of homosexuals and lesbians, Romans 1:24, cf. v. 26ff.); *money* (Acts 20:33; cf. I Timothy 6:9); and *false teachers* (“*after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears,*” II Timothy 4:3). The flesh considers lust so natural that, as the

Apostle Paul states, only “*the law*” reveals its sinful character (Romans 7:7-8). Lust is deceitful (Ephesians 4:22), as it flows out of the ultimate deceitful source, the depraved heart, of which Jeremiah, the prophet, declares: “*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?*” (Jeremiah 17:9, cf. Genesis 6:5). Although this word is also used for legitimate desire (e.g. of the hungry Lazarus, Luke 16:21; of the prodigal son, Luke 15:16; of Jesus’ desire to eat the Passover, Luke 22:15; of the angels’ desire to examine the Gospel revelation, I Peter 1:12; of the desire for the pastoral office, I Timothy 3:1); it is *usually* used of that which is “*against the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:17), “*evil*” (Colossians 3:5), “*ungodly*” (Jude 18), “*foolish and hurtful*” (I Timothy 6:9), and of all those not converted (I Peter 4:2, Colossians 5:16), who are all under Satan’s power (John 8:44, Ephesians 2:3). Lust marked the days or generation just prior to the Flood (Jude 16 and 18) and shall mark the last generation as well (cf. Luke 17:26-27; II Timothy 4:3; cf. also v.1).

The second phrase in I John 2:15-17 is “*the lust of the eyes,*” which connects the same word “*lust*” (*epithumia*) with the physical gift of vision or an ophthalmic source “and includes the lust that reaches out beyond what a person can actually get hold of in his sinning, the lustful eyes rove afar for sinful pleasures” (R. C. H. Lenski. *New Testament Commentary*, Interpretation of First John, p. 426). Immediately we think of David beholding Bathsheba washing herself (II Samuel 11:2), connecting Matthew 5:28 and II Peter 2:14, “*having eyes full of adultery.*” (See also Potiphar’s wife, Genesis 39:7). But any visual cue can arouse lust. Note how seeing was connected with the very first sin (Genesis 3:6 – “*saw,*” “*pleasant to the eyes*”) when Eve permitted what she saw to influence what she “*desired*” at the prompting of Satan. Because the eyes, since the fall of man, are connected to the carnal mind and depraved heart, they are often used in the service of sin (Romans 6:12-21). The objects of lust to the eyes thus are not restricted to the *sexual*, but include anything in the world. Compare Satan’s visual, panoramic temptation as he “*showeth [Jesus] all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them*” (Matthew 4:8) “*in a moment of time*” (Luke 4:5). Money, also in the form of precious metals and rich clothing, are just two examples of other things to which “*the lusts of the eyes*” are connected (cf. Achan in Joshua 7:20-22 and Gehazi in II Kings 5:20-24).

Finally, we have the third phrase, “*the pride of life,*” “that haughty, puffed-up arrogance, that braggart show and vain glory, which causes men to make a show of the things of this life. It makes men wish to be great in the sight of others, excel in luxuries, look down on the less fortunate. Others are eaten up with envy as they behold the prosperous. Men forget that everything comes from God” (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1937, p. 123). Louis Wessel in his *Proof Texts of the Catechism*, p. 42, describes “*the pride of life*” in these words: “It is the lust of shining and making a boastful display of one’s possessions, the effort to outshine our neighbors in our mode of life.”

Dr. John H. C. Fritz writes:

Of such vain-glorious display in one’s style of living the rich man is an example; he “*was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day*” (Luke 16:19). Likewise the daughters of Zion, of whom Isaiah says that they are “*haughty and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go and making a tinkling with their feet.*” He furthermore describes their dress and “make-up” in the following words: “*In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon, the chains, and the bracelets, and the mufflers, the bonnets, and the ornaments of the legs, and the headbands, and the tablets, and the earrings, the rings, and nose jewels, the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples, and the crisping pins, the glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods, and the veils,*” Isaiah 3:18-23. Sounds very modern! The Bible warns against the danger of riches. Even Christians may have

and enjoy them. “*Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold,*” Genesis 13:2. Yet Abraham “*was strong in faith*” and is presented as an example to believers. God Himself gave to Solomon “*riches and honor,*” I Kings 3:13. But riches and honor became a snare unto him. His very luxurious way of living, his “*pride of life,*” which imposed a burden on his overtaxed people, contributed to his downfall. And it has proved to be the downfall of many; not only the wealthy at that. Pomp and show and putting on airs appeals to the sinful flesh. Much money is spent in that direction, frequently even by such as can ill afford it. (John H. C. Fritz, *The Preacher’s Manual*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941, p. 316.)

It is this that makes boasters (Romans 1:30, II Timothy 3:2): “*But now ye rejoice in your boastings* [i.e., of future plans, independent of God’s will and control]; *all such rejoicing is evil*” (James 1:16). The examples of this attitude are myriad in Holy Writ: The children of men and the tower (Genesis 11:4ff); the people of Sodom (cf. Genesis 19 with Isaiah 3:90); Goliath (I Samuel 17:10, 44); etc. Show-offs and braggarts, those who live to impress, whose life is one of “conspicuous ostentation,” who seek to outdo each other constantly, “these are the most glaring culprits ruled by the pride of life.” Power, prestige and popularity are the unholy triad in the pride of life, that “hollow arrogance which presumes that it can decide and direct the course of life without God, determine what it will do, gain, achieve, enjoy” (Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 426).

As one author explains:

The pride of life is self-satisfaction in who we are, what we have, and what we have done. It reveals itself in reading magazines about people who live hedonistic lives and spend too much money on themselves and wanting to be like them. But more importantly, worldliness is simply pride and selfishness in disguises. It’s being resentful when someone snubs us or patronizes us or shows off. It means smarting under every slight, challenging every word spoken against us, cringing when another is preferred before us. Worldliness is harboring grudges, nursing grievances, and wallowing in self-pity. These are the ways in which we are most like the world. (Dave Roper, *The Strength of a Man*, quoted in Steve Farrar, *Family Survival in the American Jungle*. Multnomah Press, 1991, p. 68.)

To sum up, we offer Wuest’s expanded translation of I John 2:15-17: “*Stop considering the world precious with the result that you love it, and the things in the world. If anyone as a habit of life is considering the world precious and is therefore loving it, there does not exist the Father’s love* [i.e., the love possessed by the Father] *in him. Because everything which is in the world, the passionate desire of the flesh [the totally depraved nature], and the passionate desire of the eyes, and the insolent and empty assurance which trusts in the things that serve the creature life, is not from the Father as a source but is from the world as a source. And the world is being caused to pass away, and its passionate desire. But the one who keeps on habitually doing the will of God abides forever*” (Wuest, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, “In These Last Days” — The Exegesis of I John, p. 128). All those who live for all that is in the world, loving the craving for sensual gratification, the greedy longings of the mind, the assurance in one’s own resources or in the stability of earthly things (KJV *Amplified Bible*) will be damned in their unbelief. As James clearly declares: “*Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God*” (James 4:4).

The key term here is *love*. Love of God excludes love of the world; to be a friend of God makes you the world’s enemy. As one author puts it: “Buying, possessing, accumulating, this is not worldliness. But doing this in the love of it, with no love of God paramount — doing it so that thoughts of God and eternity are an intrusion, doing it so that one’s spirit is secularized in doing

it — this is worldliness” (Nerrick Johnson, selected). The connection is clear and decisive: “What I love, to that my soul clings. What I love is what I live, what I delight in; and this becomes part of my unconscious life, of my meditation, my dreaming. What I love becomes more and more part of my very self. He who loves the world becomes worldly, a man filled with the world” (Melanchthon’s friend Dryander, quoted in Josiah Hotchkiss Gilbert, *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers*. New York: Wilbur B. Ketcham Publisher, 1895, p. 622.)

How this manifests itself is shown in the lists of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) and the vivid descriptions of the life of the unconverted (Ephesians 2:2-3; 4:17-19; 5:3-5; I Corinthians 7:9-10; I Peter 4:2-4; etc.). Of special note is the description of the last days in II Timothy 3:1-8:

*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof; from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith.*

Dr. John H. C. Fritz speaks of the worldliness of his day (the 1940’s) this way:

While this tendency and temptation toward worldliness is a danger which Christians at all times must face because of their sinful flesh, the evil world in which they live, and the attempts of Satan to ensnare them, yet at certain times this danger is more pronounced and greater than at other times. It is even so today. Money is more plentiful than it was forty or fifty years ago, even many of our Christians have become wealthy; they have entered the business world and have been financially successful; their circle of acquaintances takes in a much larger number of the people of the world and of a doubtful religious character; their social circle is not as limited as it was; they also more frequently inter-marry; worldly amusements have much increased and have been made conveniently accessible to the masses; salacious literature is openly displayed; the relation between the sexes is much less restricted; the moral standard has been much lowered, not only among the people of this world but also among many calling themselves Christians; what formerly horrified is now condoned or even defended; marriage is considered less sacred; youth seeks to throw off the shackles of parental and other authority; law-breaking has become less of an offense; many of the higher schools are teaching things subversive of the Christian religion; the magazines (even the better ones) carry articles that break down Christian morality; many churches have yielded to modernistic teachings; even conservative churches are not much inclined to resort to disciplinary proceedings against their members; and to this we must add the present unsettled conditions in the world and the war situation, all of which does not make for better morality and the improvement of mankind. All this much increases the danger of worldliness (and its effect on the Church). (Fritz, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311).

We shall add some comments about present conditions in our day in the last section of this essay.

## **II. A Survey of Bible Examples: The Effect of Worldliness in Individual Lives**

The scope of this essay does not allow an intensive study of these tragic examples: Lot’s wife (Genesis 19:26; Luke 17:32-33); Judas Iscariot (John 12:6; Acts 1:16-20); Demas (II Timothy 4:10 – “*having loved this present world,*” literally, “the now age” – *ton nun aiona*); nor of the many who loved the uppermost seats (Luke 11:43), the praise of men (John 12:43), the wages



of unrighteousness (II Peter 2:15), and the darkness of this world (John 3:19) at the cost of their immortal souls. Both the fall of David and of Peter are examples of a temporary triumph of worldliness due to presumption and conceit, lust and fear.

We will look at a chronic problem of worldliness among the Lord's twelve Apostles: Greediness for honor. The disciples had been arguing among themselves who deserved to be considered the greatest. The Lord intervened with a direct question which they were too ashamed to answer out loud (Mark 9:33ff.). The Lord dealt with the problem with a spiritual axiom: "*If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and the servant of all*" (Mark 9:35). He also used a child as an object lesson (cf. Mark 9:36 with Luke 9:46-48). This was a heart problem which brought forth "*a reasoning among them,*" that is, a disputation, contention, argument (Greek: *dialogismos*). As John Ylvisaker explains:

Such is human nature when it has its way. But they did not believe that Jesus would approve of this dissension. So they found it advisable to remain silent like naughty children. Jesus then takes a little child and places it in their midst, showing them in a speech which He connects with this act that He needs no answer. He knows it all in advance... Jesus would inform the disciples that in the Kingdom of God there is no such distinction as we find in civic and worldly affairs. Their altercation was the result of pride, love of glory, and ignorance of the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God. Here repentance is necessary. They must return to the gentle submissiveness of the child, the truly childlike mind. The point of comparison is not innocence, but ingenuousness, the absence of arrogance, simplicity, humility. These are distinguishing traits of the child, even though the perverse spirit is early manifest. The smaller we grow in our own estimation, the greater do we become in the sight of God. True greatness before God consists in that humility of spirit which excludes every vestige of selfishness and pride." (John Ylvisaker, *The Gospels: A Synoptic Presentation of the Text in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with EXPLANATORY NOTES*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1932, p. 421).

As Dr. Luther says: "The man whom He would bring to honor, to salvation, to lordship, high and great, He completely puts to shame; He condemns him, turns him into a servant, lowly and small. Here the passage applies: *'The first the last, and the last the first'* (Matthew 19:30). Let him who would be great, be small (Luke 22:26); let him who would be before, follow after" (Ewald M. Plass. *What Luther Says*, Vol. III, p. 1264, #4029). The sinful hearts of the twelve were fixated on the being "*great*" (Greek: *me-gas*), because each sought to be "*greater*" than another and ultimately "*greatest*" of all. They wanted God to be "*a respecter of persons,*" believing themselves to be "*somewhat*" ["something special"] in comparison to each other (cf. Galatians 2:6ff.; 6:3; II Corinthians 10:12; 5:12; Romans 3:9a). Peter later expressed a similar idea of superiority over the rest (Matthew 26:33ff). But this attitude was not unique to Peter (Matthew 26:35, cf. with Luke 22:24). A similar problem is mentioned in III John 9-10, where there was a certain man named Diotrephes, "*who loveth to have preeminence among them.*" Jesus warned against this attitude with these words directed against the Jews that sought to kill Him: "*How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?*" (John 5:44). God resists the proud; God would have us all clothed with humility (I Peter 5:5-6). Any good we do should be attributed to God's all-sufficient grace (cf. I Corinthians 15:9-10; II Corinthians 3:4-5). Our glory and boast must be entirely in God for Jesus' sake (I Corinthians 1:29-31). Our gifts are the result of God's will and gracious bestowal (Romans 12:6), the work of His grace and Spirit within us (Philippians 2:13; I Corinthians 12:4-7) for the mutual edification of all (I Corinthians 14:26; I Corinthians 13:4-7). As Paul declares "*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others*" (Philippians 2:3-4). Everything that we do for Christ is done by the strength that Christ Himself supplies (Philippians 4:13). How then can we take the glory

away from our Savior?

The Apostles show us how insidious the worldly lusts of our deceitful flesh are and how pervasive. They arise from within our own depraved hearts! The world does not so much invade the Church and our personal lives as it operates continuously through our sinful flesh and must be constantly opposed, lest it gain dominion: “*Let not sin reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof, neither yield....*” (Romans 6:12ff.). Grace through the Gospel of Christ gives us the victory: “*For sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the Law but under grace*” (Romans 6:14). Note that this is a statement of fact, not a command. John declares: “*For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?*” (I John 5:4-5).

Only the Gospel can empower us to this day-to-day victory over our flesh, to obedience and sanctification, following the exhortation of the Apostle: “*And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day, not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof*” (Romans 13:11-14).

Dr. Luther warns in his *Large Catechism*: “Great and grievous, indeed, are these dangers and temptations which every Christian must bear, even though each one were alone by himself, so that every hour that we are in this vile life where we are attacked on all sides, chased and hunted down, we are moved to cry out and to pray that God would not suffer us to become weary and faint and to relapse into sin, shame, and unbelief” (*Large Catechism, Triglot*, p. 727, §105).

The general influence of the world is to lead away from God’s Word into outright unbelief, to make the true believer become entirely “*flesh*” (Cf. Genesis 6:3ff.). An article in *The Abiding Word* points out:

The world is the sum total of human minds unstirred by the Spirit of God. Hence its companionship, its speech and amusements and business and culture and philosophy tend to move the Christian into pursuits and channels which weaken the hold on God; they tend to make God unimportant (I Corinthians 1:33; 2:11 ff.). The objectives of natural human life are not for God, but always for man (James 4:4). Making money, competing for existence, enjoying the sensual stimuli of food and drink and sex and success and approval are activities common to the unregenerate life of the Christian also [i.e., “*the carnal mind*,” (Romans 8:7; 7:14ff.) – E.J.W.] and hence potent devices for destroying the will to live for God (Luke 21:34; I Corinthians 7:33). Our own civilization is particularly subject to the temptations of this sort. It stresses material wealth as a standard of happiness and worth, and physical enjoyment as an objective for wealth. It is thus a vast conspiracy for belittling the power of God and the life for God, a shouting down of the Savior’s reminder, “*What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*” (Matthew 16:26). Furthermore, many Christians fall out of the ranks and, like Demas, forsake the company of the faithful, “*having loved this present world*” (II Timothy 4:10). Many Christians retain connection with the Church, but actually are driven by the motives of fleshly lust as are the men of the world. This causes confusion and becomes a temptation to evil for those who are unwary. The Epistle of James is the great document in Scripture on the world in the Church. It attacks the spectacle of men in the visible Church with respect of persons (2:1ff.), evil speech (3:2ff.), envy and strife (3:14ff.), accumulation of property by fleshly means (4:13ff). All of that, James would say, is a confusion of the very foundation of the Christian faith and religion, a temptation to evil which is an erring from the truth (1:20 ff., 27). (*The Abiding Word*, Vol.

II, p. 171ff.).

Dr. Luther explains the problem and the solution this way:

If a person could with firm and constant faith hold to this, and comprehend the magnitude of this gift, that he is a child and heir of God, he would regard all that there is of power and treasures in all nations in the world as filth and dung in comparison with his heavenly inheritance. He would turn with disgust from all that the world considers high and glorious; the greater the glory and pomp of the world is, the more he would hate it; in short, all that the world most admires and praises to the sky would be ugly and worthless in his sight. For what is the whole world with its power, riches, and glory compared with God, whose heir and child he is? ...But the law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, will not permit faith to become perfect. (*Luther's Works*, St. Louis Ed., IX, p. 516.)

Obviously, then, everything that strengthens and renews faith will help toward our day-to-day battle and victory over worldliness. We are given the Word of God which effectually works to renew our faith (I Thessalonians 2:13; Romans 10:17); for the Gospel "*is the power of God unto salvation*" (Romans 1:16).

### **III. Self-Examination: "What is the World to Me?" (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 430, 1)**

In Dr. Luther's *Christian Questions With Their Answers*, he admonishes us how to become sensible of spiritual trouble in specific reference to the world: "Secondly, that he look around to see whether he is still in the world, and keep in mind that there will be no lack of sin and trouble, as the Scriptures say in John 15 and 16; I John 2 and 5." In this serious matter, we are soberly to examine ourselves from the inside out. Our standard is God's holy Law. Unlike the Pharisees and the sectarians of every stripe, we do not make elaborate lists of man-made laws and commandments and practice a hypocritical externalism, thanking God that we are better than others. Nor do we fall into the morass of subjectivism with the philosophy, "I know worldliness when I see it (especially in everybody else!)" We must, as individuals, fully accept moral responsibility for our worldliness, as Dr. Luther notes:

Since you are evil, you are made worse through the use of good things, depraved (further) by their affluence; the entire fault lies with your lust and your depraved will and reason. Example: A woman is beautiful. Very well, this is a gift of the Lord and Creator. But I am inflamed with desire. Does this make beauty an evil thing? Not at all! It is you who are evil because you are unable to make good use of a good thing. Thus the good things which are called useful and delightful convict us of the corruption of our nature, because neither the will nor the intellect is right; otherwise we would make good use of good things. (*Luther's Works*, American Ed., Vol. II, p.347).

Can you use without abusing? That is the key! Sad to say, our flesh cannot use without abusing (Romans 7:15-20); and this is why Christians must battle continuously against their own flesh.

God gives us warning examples "*to the intent we should not lust after evil things*" (I Corinthians 10:6ff.) and that we remain humbly dependent on His grace in every temptation (I Corinthians 10:12-14).

In applying God's Law to ourselves, we may ask such serious questions as:

"Do I consider God's Word and worship the prevailing priority in my life, so that all other considerations are over-ruled by *the one thing needful*?" (Luke 10:41-42, Matthew 6:33).

“Do I actively listen when God’s Word is taught, and do I apply it to myself no matter how uncomfortable it makes me feel?” (I Timothy 6:3ff.).

“Do I obey what God says, even when others around me think and do otherwise; or do I go with the prevailing attitudes and actions of my ‘peers’?” (I Peter 4:1-5).

“Do I speak up when an opportunity arises earnestly to contend for the faith, and do I give answer to those who ask?” (Jude 3, I Peter 3:15).

“Do I waste precious time on selfish and material pleasures at the expense of my church, my family, and my soul?” (Ephesians 5:16-17).

“Do I view my identity and personal worth according to how I feel, where I live, what I drive or wear, my material net-worth, or the opinions of others?” (Luke 12:15; Matthew 6:21).

“Do I justify myself when I am confronted with reproof? Do I offer excuses, minimize and shift blame?” (Luke 16:13-15; Luke 18:9ff).

“Do I fear to discipline my children because of the effort involved and the potential negative reaction they might express, not wanting them to ‘feel bad’ and to take it out on me?” (Ephesians 6:1-4).

“Do I allow my children to do things that they want to do against my better judgment, so that they won’t feel ‘left out’ or face rejection by their peers?” (Colossians 3:21).

“Do I own up to wrong decisions regarding the things of this world; or do I refuse to condemn myself, lest I be proven wrong or embarrassed?” (Proverbs 3:7; Proverbs 8:13).

“Do I search the Bible for answers, pray for enlightenment from God’s precious Word, and turn to my pastor for wise Scriptural counsel; or do I boldly follow my “gut hunches” and go in the way that I think or feel is ‘right’?” (Proverbs 2:10-14; Psalm 119:105, 130; II Timothy 3:15-17).

“Do Matthew 5:16, II Peter 3:14, II Corinthians 6:17-18 and I Thessalonians 5:21 find concrete application in my life?”

These are just *examples* of the kind of heart-searching questions one must answer to deal with that internal “worldling” called the “sinful flesh” according to the second use of the Law, namely, to **reveal its sin**. Then God-wrought contrition and Gospel-engendered faith must follow unto the renewal of the convicted sinner’s mind. The Apostle exhorts us: “*Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves*” (II Corinthians 13:5). Test and evaluate **your** heart and **your** life, and look for evidence of true repentance and faith in their “*fruits*” (Matthew 3:8). Do **you**, as a Christian, “*prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*” by “*faith which worketh by love*” (Romans 12:2; Galatians 5:6)?

#### **IV. Areas of Ingress for the World in the Personal Lives of Christians**

We live in the so-called “information age” in which the world is literally “at our door” and “through our door.” The audio-visual media via television and computers can put everything that the world is about before our eyes and ears. Moreover, the print media is also more available than it ever has been in the history of the world. This translates into the world’s influence on our

thoughts, that is, upon our minds and hearts, like never before — *if we allow it*.

The *prodigal son* today can engage in “*riotous living*” and do virtually everything from his computer desk that the one in the Bible did by taking his journey. Think of the ramifications! Do you *allow* indiscriminate worldly influences into your home by not supervising your children when they are online or watching television? What about books, magazines, DVD’s, video games, etc? Is the telephone another unsupervised area for your children? What about instant messaging, e-mail and chat rooms?

Besides all this worldly influence coming into homes *electronically*, what about the *places* in the world which your children frequent? Do you know where they are, with whom they associate, and what they are doing? Are you a “hands-on,” responsible parent? Do you set an example for your children in how *you* speak and act, and in what types of “entertainment” *you* enjoy?

The following list is a real-world example of the inroads of worldliness over a ten year period in a Lutheran congregation. Are any of these worldly influences present in *your* life? Each one led to someone’s *leaving* an orthodox Christian congregation! Examine yourself accordingly!

• ***Family Loyalty/Influence*** —

—Following the wicked example and leading of a dominant family member in order to keep peace in the family.

*Problem:* Failure to recognize the importance of orthodoxy and the cost of true discipleship (cross-bearing) as a Christian’s duty and privilege; false priority set on earthly peace rather than on a clear conscience.

*Application of Scripture:* Acts 2:42; Matthew 10:32-38; Mark 3:33-35; Luke 9:59-62; Matthew 6:33; Luke 10:41-42.

• ***Influence of a False Teacher*** —

—Allowing oneself to be influenced by the heterodox, or actively seeking them out as an excuse to forsake orthodoxy and to leave an orthodox fellowship.

*Problem:* Failure to value true orthodoxy on the basis of God’s Word and to recognize the dangers of false teachers; placing a self-serving priority on finding doctrine that pleases the flesh.

*Application of Scripture:* Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:20; Romans 16:17; Matthew 7:15ff.; I John 4:1; Acts 20:29; Galatians 5:7-9; I Timothy 4:1; II Timothy 3:2a; 4:3-4.

• ***Neglect of the Means of Grace*** —

—Failing to attend worship and opportunities for Bible study with regularity and thus despising the Means of Grace due to various factors flowing from the flesh (laziness, pride, impenitence, worldliness, etc.).

*Problem:* Sins against the *Third Commandment* occasioned by the flesh, worldliness, etc.

*Application of Scripture:* Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:42; John 8:47; Luke 10:16; Ecclesiastes 5:1; Luke 11:28; Hebrews 13:17.

• ***Marriage to a Non-Member*** (See also *Family Loyalty/Influence* above.) —

—Marrying one who is not of the same faith and allowing the heterodox spouse to influence the member-spouse and the children, or using the non-member spouse and his (her) pressure on the

family as an excuse for neglecting the Means of Grace.

*Problem:* Seeking to please one's spouse, particularly an ungodly spouse, rather than God, and yielding oneself and one's children to his (her) influence in order to keep "peace" in the family is a sin against the *First Commandment* [Fine Idolatry] and against the *Third Commandment*.

*Application of Scripture:* (See passages included under *Family Loyalty/Influence* and *Neglect of the Means of Grace*.)

• ***Offense Taken*** —

—Taking offense where none has been given —due to uncharitable judging, preconceived notions, etc.

*Problem:* Fleshly pride and selfishness results in unjust fault-finding; and the resulting "offense," laid at the door of an innocent brother or sister, is used as an excuse to leave the fellowship.

*Application of Scripture:* Matthew 7:3-5; 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1-2; Luke 6:37; Zechariah 8:17; I Corinthians 13:7; Ephesians 4:31ff.

• ***Gross Outward Sins*** —

—Engaging in fornication that lead to divorce or excommunication.

*Problem:* Sins against the *Sixth Commandment* and subsequent impenitence due to selfishness and pride divide both families and the fellowship.

*Application of Scripture:* I Corinthians 6:18ff.; Proverbs 1:10; Genesis 39:9; Psalm 51:10; Proverbs 28:13; I John 1:8-9.

## V. Conclusion

In order to overcome the world and its evil influences in our lives, we are to:

1. *Make use of God's Word:* Ephesians 6:10ff; I Peter 5:8-9; Matthew 4:4, 7, 10.
2. *Confide in God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake*, also as the motivation to live unto our Savior: II Corinthians 5:15-17; Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 4:32.
3. *Crucify our sinful flesh with the affections and lusts:* Galatians 5:24; Colossians 3:5; I Corinthians 9:27.
4. *Avoid subjecting ourselves to temptation:* Romans 13:14; I Corinthians 6:18; II Timothy 2:2.
5. *Pray fervently for God's help:* Matthew 6:13; 26:41; Luke 22:40.
6. *Rely upon God promises to help us:* Isaiah 40:29; I Corinthians 10:13; II Thessalonians 3:3; John 15:7.

One life-line binds us to God: The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is to this day "*the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth*" (Romans 1:16). May we cultivate our use of God's Word and Sacrament, not as dreary and haphazard tokens of church membership, but as carriers for the current of the Spirit of God. May we apply them to ourselves in the precious habit of prayer and joyous fellowship of worship. May we bind ourselves in our earthly pilgrimage to Christ Jesus, "*the Author and Finisher of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2) and "*the Captain of [our] salvation*" (Hebrews 2:10). For He has prayed for us, too, that our faith fail not; He has said:

*“In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). (From *The Abiding Word*, Vol. II, page 199.)

***Soli Deo Gloria***