

## The Trend Away from God

### Watchman Nee:

Having every one of us been in bondage to sin, we readily believe that sinful things are Satanic; but do we believe equally that the things of the world are Satanic? Many of us, I think, are still in two minds about this. Yet how clearly Scripture affirms that "the whole world lieth in the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Satan well knows that, generally speaking, to try to ensnare real Christians through things that are positively sinful is vain and futile. They will usually sense the danger and elude him. So he had contrived instead an enticing network, the mesh of which is so skillfully woven as to entrap the most innocent of men. We flee sinful lusts, and with good reason, but when it comes to such seemingly innocuous things as science and art and education, how readily do we lose our sense of values and fall a prey to his enticements!

Yet our Lord's sentence of judgment clearly implies that everything that constitutes "the world" is out of line with God's purpose. His words, "Now is the judgment of this world," clearly imply the condemnation of all that goes to make up the cosmos, and would never have been uttered if there were not something radically amiss with it. Further, when Jesus goes on: "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out," he is stressing not merely the intimate relation between Satan and the world order but the fact that its condemnation is linked with his. Do we acknowledge that Satan is today the prince of education and science and culture and the arts, and that they, with him, are doomed? Do we acknowledge that he is the effective master of all those things that together make up the world system?

When mention is made of a dance hall or a night club, our reaction as Christians is one of instinctive disapproval. To us that is "the world" par excellence. When, however, to go to the other extreme, medical science or social service are discussed, there may be no such reaction at all. These things command our tacit approval, and maybe too our enthusiastic support. And between these extremes there lie a host of other things varying widely in their influence for good or bad, between which we should probably none of us agree on where to draw an exact line. Yet let us face the fact that judgment has been pronounced by God, not upon certain selected things that belong to this world, but impartially upon them all.

Test yourself. If you venture into one of these approved fields, and then someone exclaims to you: "You have touched the world there," will you be moved? Probably not at all. It takes someone whom you really respect to say to you very straightly and earnestly: "Brother, you have become involved with Satan there!" before you will so much as hesitate. Is that not so? How would you feel if anyone said to you: "You have touched education there," or "You have touched medical science," or "You have touched commerce"? Would you react with the same degree of caution as you would if he had said, "You have touched the Devil there"? If we truly believed that whenever we touch any of these things that constitute the world we touch the prince of this world, then the awful seriousness of being in any wise involved in worldly things could not fail to strike home to us. "The whole world lieth in the evil one"-not a part of it, but the whole. Do not let us think for a moment that Satan opposes God only by means of sin and carnality in men's hearts; he opposes God by means of every worldly thing. Oh, I agree with you that the things of the world are all in one sense material, lifeless, intrinsically without power to harm us; yet even that should itself suggest that they are resistant to the purpose of God, as indeed is everything in which there is no touch of divine life.

The recurring phrase "after its kind" in Genesis 1 represents a law of reproduction that governs the whole realm of biological nature. It does not, however, govern the realm of the Spirit. For generation after generation, human parents can beget children after their kind; but one thing is certain: Christians cannot beget Christians! Not even where both parents are Christians will the children born to them automatically be Christians, no, not even in the first generation. It will take a fresh act of God every time.

And this principle applies no less truly in the affairs of mankind more widely. All that belongs to human nature continues spontaneously; all that belongs to God continues only for as long as God's working continues. And the world is all inclusively that which can continue apart from divine activity, that is, which can go on by itself without the need of specific acts of God to maintain it in freshness. The world, and all that belongs to the world, does this naturally-it is its nature-and in doing so it moves in a direction contrary to the will of God. This statement we shall now seek to illustrate both from the Scripture and from Christian experience.

Let us take first the field of political science. The Old Testament history of Israel affords us the example of a highly privileged nation and its government. The people of Israel, we are told, wanted to be on terms with the nations around them, so they set their heart on a king. We will leave aside for the moment their election of Saul, and move on to the point where eventually, in his own time, God gave them the king of his choice who would establish the kingdom under his own direction.

Now even when this was clearly God's doing, the natural trend of the kingdom proved to be, "like the nations," away from him. For a kingdom is a worldly thing, and in keeping with all worldly things it tends to come into collision with the divine purpose. Wherever in the world a nation's government is left to itself, it follows its natural course which is further and further away from God. And what is true in secular national politics worked itself out equally surely even in divinely chosen Israel. Whenever God discontinued his specific acts on their behalf, the kingdom of Israel drifted into idolatrous political alignments. There were recoveries, it is true, but every one was marked by a definite divine intervention, and without such intervention the trend was always down hill.

It will scarcely surprise us that the same thing proves to be true in the field of commerce. I can think of no sphere where the temptation to dishonest and corrupt dealing is so great as here. We all know something of this. We all know how hard it is to remain straight and to conduct affairs honestly in the competitive world of trade. Many would say that it is impossible, and certainly to do so calls for a life that is cast upon God in an unusual way.

We recall that our Lord Jesus tells us of two contrasting men, one who gained the whole world and forfeited his life, and another, a merchant, who went and sold all that he had to buy one priceless pearl. To the latter of these Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:26; 13:45, 46). The Spirit of God has not infrequently moved men in business to action of a like character. There have been not a few well-known business firms whose profits have been turned over to divine ends in the spread of the Gospel and in other ways.

I think of one such enterprise that, at the outset of its history, was the creation of a God-fearing business man. Now godly fear is a quality that can only exist as it is sustained from heaven, but business acumen and the efficient organization which it creates can be self-perpetuating. In the first generation of this firm's history we find divine life being mediated through its founder sufficient to hold what was even then a worldly concern securely under the authority of God. But by the second generation that restraint was gone and, as one would expect, the business gravitated automatically into the world system. Godly fear had drained away, but the firm itself is still flourishing.

Suppose we take now so apparently innocent a matter as agriculture. Here Genesis, written in a primitive world of flocks and husbandry, has something to tell us. After Adam's fall God was compelled to say to him, "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground," No one would suggest that in Eden, where the tree of life flourished, farming or gardening was wrong. It was God appointed. But as soon as it was let go from under the hand of God it deteriorated. Man was condemned to an endless round of drudgery and disappointment, and an element of perversity marked the fruit of his toil. The deliverance of Noah was God's great recovery movement, in which the earth was given a fresh start. But how swift, how tragic was man's reversion to type! "Noah began to be a husbandman, and planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent." Of course agriculture is not in itself sinful, but here already its direction is away from God. Just let it follow its natural tendency and it will contrive to take a course diametrically opposed to him. Do we know something of this today in such physical disasters as the drying out of continents?

How different is the Church, God's husbandry! Through the grace of God and the indwelling Spirit she possesses an inherent life power capable, if she responds to it, of keeping her constantly moving Godward, or of recalling her Godward if she strays.

When we turn to education, both the Bible and experience have something to say to us. Speaking allegorically we might say that in rejecting Saul and choosing David God was passing over a man distinguished by his head (for he was that much taller than his peers) in favor of the man after his heart! But more seriously, the men such as Joseph and Moses and Daniel, of whose wisdom God made public use, each received in a direct way from God himself the understanding they needed. They took little account of their secular education. And the apostle Paul clearly placed scholarship among the "all things" that he counted to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord (Phil. 3:8). He draws a clear distinction between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom that comes from God (1 Cor. 1:21, 30).

But it is experience that demonstrates the essential worldliness of scholarship as such. Most of the historic university colleges of the West were founded by Christian men with a desire to provide their fellows with a good education under Christian influence. During their founders' lifetimes the tone of those foundations was high, because these men put real spiritual content into them. When, however, the men themselves passed away, the

spiritual control passed away too, and education followed its inevitable course toward the world of materialism and away from God. In some cases it may have taken a long time, for religious tradition dies hard; but the tendency has always been obvious, and in most cases the destination has by now been reached. When material things are under spiritual control they fulfill their proper subordinate role. Released from that restraint they manifest very quickly the power that lies behind them. The law of their nature asserts itself, and their worldly character is proved by the course they take.

The spread of missionary enterprise in our present era gives us an opportunity to test this principle in the religious institutions of our day and of our land. Over a century ago the Church set out to establish in China schools and hospitals with a definite spiritual tone and an evangelistic objective. In those early days not much importance was attached to the buildings, while considerable emphasis was placed on the institutions' role in the proclamation of the Gospel. Ten or fifteen years ago you could go over the same ground and in many places find much larger and finer institutions on those original sites, but compared with the earlier years, far fewer converts. And by today many of those splendid schools and colleges have become purely educational centers, lacking in any truly evangelistic motive at all, while to an almost equal extent, many of the hospitals exist now solely as places merely of physical and no longer of spiritual healing. The men who initiated them had, by their close walk with God, held those institutions steadfastly into his purpose; but when they passed away, the institutions themselves quickly gravitated toward worldly standards and goals, and in doing so classified themselves as "things of the world." We should not be surprised that this is so.

In the early chapters of the Acts we read how a contingency arose which led the Church to institute relief for the poorer saints. That urgent institution of social service was clearly blessed of God, but it was of a temporary nature. Do you exclaim, "How good if it had continued!"? Only one who does not know God would say that. Had those relief measures been prolonged indefinitely they would certainly have veered in the direction of the world, once the spiritual influence at work in their inception was removed. It is inevitable.

For there is a distinction between the Church of God's building, on the one hand, and on the other, those valuable social and charitable byproducts that are thrown off by it from time to time through the faith and vision of its members. The latter, for all their origin in spiritual vision, possess in themselves a power of independent survival which the Church of God does not have. They are works which the faith of God's children may initiate and pioneer, but which, once the way has been shown and the professional standard set, can be readily sustained or imitated by men of the world quite apart from that faith.

The Church of God, let me repeat, never ceases to be dependent upon the life of God for its maintenance. Imagine a living church in a city today with its fellowship and prayer and Gospel witness, and its many homes and centers of spiritual activity. Some years hence what do we find? If God's people have followed him in faith and obedience it may be a place filled more than ever with the life and light of the Lord and the power of his Word; but if in unfaithfulness to him they have forsaken their vision of Christ, it may equally well have become a place where people preach atheism. By then as a church it will have ceased to exist. For the Church depends for its very existence upon a ceaseless impartation of fresh life from God, and cannot survive one day without it.

But suppose alongside that church there is a school or hospital or publishing house, or other religiously founded institution, originating in the faith of the same church members. Assuming that the need for its service continues still to exist ten years hence and has not been met by some alternative private or State enterprise, then the probability is that that work will still be operating then at a no less efficient and commendable standard of service. For given ordinary administrative know-how, a college or a hospital can continue efficiently on a purely institutional level without any fresh influx of divine life. The vision may have gone, but the establishment carries on indefinitely. It has become no less worldly than everything else that can be maintained apart from the life of God. And every such thing is embraced in the Lord's sentence: "Now is the judgment of this world."

Suppose I put to you the question, "What work are you engaged in?" You answer, "Medical work." You say that without any special consciousness other than pride in the compassionate nature of your calling, and without any sense of the possible danger of your situation. But if I tell you that medical science is one mote unit of a system that is Satan-controlled, what then? Assuming that as a Christian you take me seriously, then you are at once alarmed, and your reaction may even be to wonder if you had not better quit your profession. No, do not cease being a doctor! But walk softly, for you are upon territory that is governed by God's enemy, and unless you are on the watch you are as liable as anyone else to fall a prey to his devices.

Or suppose you are engineering, or farming, or publishing. Take heed, for these too are things of the world, just as much as running a place of entertainment or a haunt of vice. Unless you tread softly you will be caught up

somewhere in Satan's snares and will lose the liberty that is yours as a child of God.

How then, you ask, are we to be delivered from his entanglements? Many think that to escape the world is a matter of consecration, of dedicating themselves anew and more wholeheartedly to the things of God. No, it is a matter of salvation. By nature we are all entrapped in that Satanic system, and we have no escape apart from the mercy of the Lord. All our consecration is powerless to deliver us; we are dependent upon his compassion and upon his redemptive work alone to save us out of it. He is well able to do so, and the means whereby he does it will be the theme of our next chapter. God can set us upon a rock and keep our feet from slipping. Helped by him we may turn our trade or profession to the service of his will for as long as he desires it.

But let me repeat again that the natural trend of all the "things that are in the world" is toward Satan and away from God. Some of them may have been set going by men of the Spirit with a goal that is Godward, but as soon as the restraint of the divine life is removed from them, they automatically swerve around and take that other direction. No wonder then that Satan's eyes are ever on the world's end, and on the prospect that at that time all the things of the world will revert to him. Even now, and all the time, they are moving in his direction, and at the end time they may be expected to have reached their goal. As we touch any one of the units of his system, this thought should give us pause, lest we be found inadvertently helping to construct his kingdom.