

# PASSING THROUGH



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PILGRIM LIFE IN THE WILDERNESS

Jeremy Walker



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## PASSING THROUGH

I walk as one who knows that he is treading  
A stranger soil;  
As one round whom a serpent-world is spreading  
Its subtle coil.

I walk as one but yesterday delivered  
From a sharp chain;  
Who trembles lest the bond so newly severed  
Be bound again.

I walk as one who feels that he is breathing  
Ungential air;  
For whom as wiles, the tempter still is wreathing  
The bright and fair.

My steps, I know, are on the plains of danger,  
For sin is near;  
But looking up, I pass along, a stranger,  
In haste and fear.

This earth has lost its power to drag me downward;  
Its spell is gone;  
My course is now right upward, and right onward,  
To yonder throne.

Hour after hour of time's dark night is stealing  
In gloom away;  
Speed thy fair dawn of light, and joy, and healing  
Thou Star of day!

For thee its God, its King, the long-rejected,  
Earth groans and cries;  
For thee the long-beloved, the long-expected,  
Thy bride still sighs!

—HORATIUS BONAR

## A WAY IN THE WORLD

Who are you? What are you? The answers to these questions will effectively establish the way you live, because your sense of identity substantially governs your modes of activity. Being precedes and determines doing. So, for example, if you are a king, then the way that you think of yourself and of others in relation to you is going to be very different from your expectations and relationships if you are a servant. Your whole demeanor and every part of your conduct will shift in accordance with your sense of yourself.

So it is with Christians in relationship to God in Christ and to the world around them. Our sense of who and what we are will substantially determine our attitudes, affections, appetites, and actions as we make our way in the world. In brief, if you do not know who and what you are, you will not know how to behave in your various relationships to the world around you.

Sadly, too many believers barely consider their identity, if at all. Some think about it carelessly or misguidedly, out of a position of ignorance or negligence. Some do so under the influence of false or foolish teachers, and go badly awry. The result is wrong and often, ultimately, very damaging conclusions. These have an impact on the individual, on the church, and on the character and reputation of the triune God as He is known in the earth through the testimony of His saints.

I was once asked to preach on the question of the Christian's relationship to the world. The question was posed this way: Should we relate to the twenty-first-century world? You will appreciate immediately the issue that the question intends to raise, and yet—as I pointed out at the time—the question itself can be badly misinterpreted. It at

least implies that Christians have a choice as to whether or not they relate to the world. Of course, we have no choice in the matter. All of us, by very definition, are relating to the world around us. All our attitudes, affections, appetites, and actions are manifestations of that relationship. If we immerse ourselves in the world, we are relating to the world. If we attempt to cut ourselves off from the world, the very desire to have no relationship is a way of relating. The key question is not so much whether we should, must, or need to relate to the world. The concern is, *how* are we relating to the world? As professing disciples of Jesus Christ and followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2), are we relating to the world around us foolishly and sinfully, or wisely and righteously? If we have not grasped our identity and our calling, we will not be able to answer that key question accurately and righteously. As a consequence, we will not live as we ought to as we make our way in the world.

We need, therefore, to consider our identity and our activity in the light of Scripture. This is especially necessary because the issue of worldliness—the implied dangers of a too-close walk with the world in its opposition to God—is a topic much neglected and often reinterpreted, even twisted, in the church today. Exegesis is strained and applications are contorted to provide believers with strange counsels and to direct them in dangerous ways. Under such influences sincere Christians can undermine not only their own gospel comforts but also damage the church’s reputation and dishonor God in the eyes of men. By and large, the church and her members, especially in the modern West, seem to be losing sight of who and what they are. The Puritan preacher Jeremiah Burroughs suggested that there are no men upon the face of the earth who darken the glory of God so much as those who profess to be followers of Jesus and yet live carelessly. He claimed, “If our forefathers who were godly and holy and maintained a strict walk with God were alive again, they would spit in the faces of many who think themselves eminent professors of religion, because of the looseness of their conversations [carelessness of their conduct]. And this is the worst, that they can all put it upon Christ and the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Confusion, carelessness, and

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1. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Conversation* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 22–23.



even outright carnality—sometimes in the very name of Christ—are great enemies of the gospel and the souls of men, a screeching brake on the progress of true religion.

So how does a believer relate to the world? Our Lord Jesus Himself puts us on the right track when He made intercession for His disciples, as recorded in John's gospel. Considering His people, He prayed in this way to His Father and to ours:

"I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth." (John 17:14–19)

Our Lord self-consciously identifies Himself as the determining factor and the abiding paradigm for our relationship to the world in which He has put us. Our union with Him, our saving relationship to Him in accordance with the sovereign grace of God, determines and sets the tone for all other relationships. He Himself models our relationship to the world.

Here in John 17 the Lord speaks of Christians as those who, having been given His world, now sustain a relationship to the world that is conditioned by their likeness to and connection with Him: "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." But notice further that the Lord does not pray that the world would be taken away or that we would be taken out of the world. Instead, He pleads that we would be protected and preserved from the evil one as we make our way in the world. Our relationship to the world is conditioned by and patterned after His own. So the Savior prays that we would be holy in the world—living distinctively and increasingly as those who belong to and are set apart by and for God—under the influence of the truth of God. He desires that we should conduct ourselves in accordance with the purposes for which we have been sent in just the same way that the Son was sent by the Father. To this end and for this purpose, on our behalf the Son sanctified Himself: He consecrated Himself entirely and without reserve, committing

Himself entirely to His duty before God in such a way as to secure the same end for His people.

If this is so, then we come back to the question, Who and what am I as a follower of this Christ in my relationship to the world? In addressing this matter of identity and activity, we must define our terms and recognize that Scripture has at least three broad categories, linguistically or conceptually, for defining or describing *the world*.

### **What Is “the World”?**

First, sometimes the Word of God speaks of the world in a *creative* sense. So we find Elihu asking of the Lord, “Who gave Him charge over the earth? Or who appointed Him over the whole world?” (Job 34:13). The Psalms employ the language in this sense repeatedly. Consider Psalm 8, for instance:

O LORD, our Lord,  
How excellent is Your name in all the earth,  
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!...  
When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,  
What is man that You are mindful of him,  
And the son of man that You visit him?...  
You have made him to have dominion over the works of  
Your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet. (vv. 1, 3–4, 6)

The psalmist considers the realm of the whole cosmos, and—more specifically—the habitable earth where mankind dwells and in which he has been given responsibility. The Psalter continues to express this sense:

The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness,  
The world and those who dwell therein. (Ps. 24:1)

“If I were hungry, I would not tell you;  
For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.” (Ps. 50:12)

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,  
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (Ps. 90:2)

Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,  
The world and those who dwell in it. (Ps. 98:7)

The New Testament employs the same concept. For example, the Lord asks, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). Here the primary sense has to do with all the riches of the created world. Also, Paul on Mars Hill proclaims to the Athenians the God they do not know, the one "who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24).

In this sense the general idea of the world covers the whole created order of things, all that the Lord has made and sustains. Sometimes it is the heavens and the earth, the cosmos as a whole, sometimes more specifically the earth as the realm in which mankind dwells and governs, a place populated by creatures and things, animate and inanimate.

Secondly, the Bible sometimes describes and discusses the world in an *extensive* sense, dealing with the human inhabitants of the earth, the nations of the world. This concept takes account of mankind as a race. Often it means all peoples in all places simultaneously. In Romans 3 the apostle uses it to describe the whole human race, asking, "How will God judge the world?" (v. 6), and demonstrates his broad sense of this by going on to declare that

we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written:

"There is none righteous, no, not one;  
There is none who understands;  
There is none who seeks after God.  
They have all turned aside;  
They have together become unprofitable;  
There is none who does good, no, not one." (vv. 9–12)

The same essential idea is captured in Matthew 28:18–20: "'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen." Christ's cosmic authority

entitles Him to send the disciples to all the nations of the earth. A slightly different but related sense is found in Luke 2:1, where the historian records that “it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Here it is used to designate the Roman world, all those under the particular authority of Caesar. So, in this category, the notion of the world is most often used comprehensively and even universally, without making any contrast or distinction, to identify the peoples of the earth. Within this, it can also be used comparatively and relatively restrictively, comparing or distinguishing between the Jewish people and the other peoples of the world, for example, or vice versa.

Thirdly, and finally, the Scriptures speak of the world in a *moral or ethical* sense. This is a particular favorite of the apostle John, quoting or following the Lord Jesus:

“The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil.” (John 7:7)

“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.” (John 12:31)

“I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me. But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here.” (John 14:30–31)

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. (1 John 4:4–5)

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

Also, Paul uses the concept in this sense when he speaks of the Lord, “who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age,<sup>2</sup> according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal. 1:4). Again he testifies, “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the

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2. The idea of the world in this sense lies beneath the language of “this present evil age.”

world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). He writes to the Ephesians of the work of God in them: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:1–2). He warns these same Christians that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). James employs it, too, when he asks believers, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (4:4).

Here we are clearly speaking of creation as fallen, considered in its systemic corruption and systematic opposition to God, often explicitly contending against the kingdom of heaven to which disciples belong. It designates those who are antagonistic to God and to His reign. It regularly involves an identification of Satan as "ruler of this world," the great and chief adversary of God and His people. This fierce enemy leads the rebellion against the Lord, driving on his slaves in their senseless and self-destructive campaign against the righteous authority of the Most High God. The Scottish theologian George Smeaton captures the sense when he speaks of Satan as "the head of all who attach themselves to that natural life which lies in estrangement from God, or who set themselves in banded opposition to the Christ of God. How fitly the name applies to the world in its moral and intellectual condition under ungodly influences that come from the evil one, the first cause and father of corruption, scarcely requires to be pointed out."<sup>3</sup>

It should also be noted that these various usages, or shades of usage, are often in close connection with one another, in combination or even with a degree of overlap. So, for example, consider Psalm 2:

Why do the nations rage,  
And the people plot a vain thing?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,

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3. George Smeaton, *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 307.

And the rulers take counsel together,  
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,  
“Let us break Their bonds in pieces  
And cast away Their cords from us.”

“He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;  
The Lord shall hold them in derision.  
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,  
And distress them in His deep displeasure:  
“Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

“I will declare the decree:  
The LORD has said to Me,  
‘You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
Ask of Me, and I will give You  
The nations for Your inheritance,  
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron;  
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”

Now therefore, be wise, O kings;  
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
And rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,  
And you perish in the way,  
When His wrath is kindled but a little.  
Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.

Here there is an extensive sense, in which the whole world is encompassed within the designators of “the people” (the Jews) and “the peoples” (the other nations). And yet it is quite clear that this is a world that is considered in its essential hostility to God the Lord, the moral or ethical sense. The great and the not-so-good of all the earth are uniting to express a shared antagonism to the rule of “the LORD and...His Anointed,” a deep-rooted antipathy to the one “who sits in the heavens” (vv. 2, 4). This rebellion among the world extensively is an expression of its antagonism morally to the rule of God. But again,

God's promise to Messiah concerns the nations and the ends of the earth, bringing in the extensive and the creative senses together.

Or take John 1:9–10: “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.” When the apostle speaks of “every man coming into the world,” he uses a word that speaks to us of the creative sense, but “every man” points us also to the extensive notion. Christ “in the world” and “making the world” probably refer almost exclusively to the world as created, but how much of the moral and ethical sense is there in the declaration that “the world did not know Him”?

Or, finally, what of our Lord's words in John 16:33? “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Almost certainly the primary meaning of overcoming the world has in view the world opposing God and His Christ. Even so, the warning that “in the world you will have tribulation” hints at both the creative sense and the moral sense. As we make our way through this created world we will have the tribulation that arises from being “children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15), to draw in a little of Paul. We are reminded that tribulations will often come through the men who inhabit the earth. There is an implication, too, that when we leave this fallen world or it is renewed, there will be no more tribulation.

These shades, nuances, and combinations of meaning are important to note because one of the right and proper rules of biblical interpretation is that, generally speaking, the same word is used in the same way in the same context. And yet, as so often, exceptions exist, and these shades of the concept can lurk in various linguistic forms and different phrases. It is important that we ask how and to what purpose these various shades of sense are employed.

### **Flawed Relationships to the World**

Christians must appreciate that they are called to relate to the world in a certain way in each of these different spheres in accordance with their different definitions. What happens if we fail to distinguish

between them or to cultivate a properly nuanced understanding with an unwillingness to discern and direct our responses accordingly? We may be bewildered and betrayed, confused and compromised, indecisive and ineffective.

One result of such a failure will be the likely adoption of a lazy, blanket approach to the whole matter. In such a case, the child of God might—for various reasons and perhaps because of a too absolute rigidity or a too careless fluidity—be betrayed into one of three flawed approaches.

The first flawed approach is *isolation*. We might describe this as the bunker mentality, when a church or a Christian seeks to back off or simply to cut themselves off from all contact with the world in any form. Some might adopt it as an offensive strategy, often sincerely seeking to promote a high degree of holiness. Though perhaps rooted in a right desire to show distinctiveness as the people of God, this often degenerates into a crass “them and us” attitude. It can be a breeding ground for the kind of pride that—like the Pharisee in the temple—begins to thank God that we are not like other men (particularly those dreadful sinners *outside*) but are rather well endowed with the kinds of good works with which God is obliged to be pleased. Others adopt this approach as a defensive maneuver, attempting to shut out everything that is unholy, making the walls high, the ditches deep, the doors thick, and the bars strong. They persist in their notion that they can create some kind of spiritual hermetic seal around a church, a family, or a person and so keep everything spiritually contaminating at a distance. The assumption seems to be that if they can establish and maintain such a seal, eventually the world might just go away and they will not have to deal with it.

There may be some degree of truth and wisdom in elements of this approach. However, the problem with isolation is that no matter how many others I might be able to keep out, I am left inside. But I know that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mark 7:21–23). Anyone who invites and shuts me into that community or space has shut in a man who carries sin in him. Furthermore, even our Lord did not pray that we would be taken out of the world, but



that we would be kept from the evil one (John 17:15), preserved in the world and maintained in godliness despite the environment into which He has sent us. We should remember the apostle Paul's words to the Corinthian church: "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9–10). In the context, Paul is explaining that there is a righteous distance that must be maintained between the church and a professing Christian who commits such sins without repentance. However, to attempt to cut ourselves off from all such people would require that we remove from the world entirely. This is not only unreasonable to attempt or expect, but it would also sever our contact with the very people for whose benefit the church has been entrusted with the gospel.

The monastic tendency ultimately fails. This miserable truth has been discovered whenever men and women have tried to cloister themselves, imagining that everything unholy can be excluded and that this will ensure the holiness of God's people (for these offensive and defensive postures often coexist). Martin Luther, for example, discovered it in an Augustinian cloister. Tragically, this failure also betrays one of the very purposes for which Christ has called us, commanding us to "let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

A second flawed attitude is *inattention*. This is the congregation or saint who maintains a kind of distant ignorance, perhaps with something of a sneer. To such people the world is irrelevant, the object of casual neglect and carelessness. Perhaps there is pride here, or ignorance of how to handle the world, or fear that they are not equipped to do so. It may be that the language of holiness is used to put a veneer on what is actually a thoughtless disregard for the world and the things in it. This is cultivated not in the sense of esteeming and holding such things lightly for Christ's sake, but is the absence of any genuine concern, legitimate interest, sincere compassion, and real care. Have we forgotten that in Iconium Paul and Barnabas "went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1)? How could they speak so as to catch the ears and win the hearts of the

people of Iconium without considering them and desiring to do them good? Or again, Paul in Athens is righteously provoked not because he has been trying to ignore the world around him but because he has been observing it. He is able to say, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). As he engages with them, he goes on to quote their own poets to prove the correctness of some of his fundamental assertions, truths which ought to be—and are, in measure—evident to clear-thinking men in the world. And if not Paul, what of Christ Himself, who clearly did not go through the world with his eyes half shut, but was able to ask His hearers to consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, the sower at his work and the children at their play?

The church and the world often drift along side by side in a strange relationship, neither one really acknowledging the other. The church can even become something of a parasite. It exists among the people of the world and feeds off the profits and processes of society and the culture at large, but makes no genuine and righteous investments and seeks no gospel influence. Again, there may be something of an appropriate and righteous disregard—the absence of any obsession—with the world, but there is also a grand mistake being made. In the beginning, before sin entered the world, the Lord gave a charge to our first parents: "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). The entrance of sin may have altered the circumstances under which that charge is to be obeyed as seen in the curses that fall upon sinful mankind, but the charge itself has not been suspended or revoked. What is called the "dominion mandate" remains as a binding obligation upon men and women made in God's image.

Furthermore, while we should not ignore the specific context of the people to whom Jeremiah spoke, there is a principle in his words that those who are in exile in a fallen world might still embrace: "And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace" (Jer. 29:7). This disposition is not simply to be one of remote concern. The apostle Peter wrote in this way to the Christians of his day: "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims,

abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:11–12). The way in which such a child of God lived before and among the Gentiles might not remove the slur of his attachment to the Lord. It should, though, demand—eventually—some measure of recognition for the good works carried out on behalf of those Gentiles who might still despise him. So David is able to testify this way in Psalm 35:11–16:

Fierce witnesses rise up;  
They ask me things that I do not know.  
They reward me evil for good,  
To the sorrow of my soul.  
But as for me, when they were sick,  
My clothing was sackcloth;  
I humbled myself with fasting;  
And my prayer would return to my own heart.  
I paced about as though he were my friend or brother;  
I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns for his mother.

But in my adversity they rejoiced  
And gathered together;  
Attackers gathered against me,  
And I did not know it;  
They tore at me and did not cease;  
With ungodly mockers at feasts  
They gnashed at me with their teeth.

That is not the testimony of a man who is ignoring the world even while being assaulted by it.

The third flawed outlook might be described as *emulation*. This is the church or believer who ends up seeking to be (or, in some cases, deliberately sets out to be) like the world. Often this begins with the desire, legitimate in itself, of doing genuine good to those around her. However, it can result in a church immersed in the world's culture, adopting its patterns, mimicking its behavior, imbibing its priorities, and mirroring its movements. These Christians ape what they see around them and simply meld into the environment, perfectly camouflaged. In some cases, the mantra "in it to win it" might

be used to justify such a principle. Others will twist Paul's statement that "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). In itself, it is an individual's simple testimony to his readiness to accommodate himself to substantially neutral norms around him. Warped, it becomes a mandate for corporate contextualization—all too often and too quickly nothing less than compromise—in which the church adapts its nature, forms, and functions to suit the spirit of the age, floating adrift on the current of present carnality. Sadly, this often happens thoughtlessly where it has not been undertaken deliberately.

Under such circumstances, the church ceases to be a thermostat that regulates the moral temperature of society and becomes a thermometer that merely registers and reflects that temperature. There is no doubt that the church must have points of contact—must *make* points of contact—with those around her if she is to have an impact upon the souls of men and women. However, the Scriptures are perfectly clear that "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). Paul exhorts the saints in Rome—the very center of the mighty empire, where the temptation to ape the world might be particularly potent—"do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Again, all of these approaches might be undertaken instinctively, ignorantly, thoughtlessly, or deliberately. But all are flawed in that they fail to root our activity in our identity, taking into account the various nuances of relationship demanded by the shades of meaning that lie behind the idea of "the world."

Each one, as we have seen, abuses or neglects some element of biblical revelation considered as a whole. None of them answers the distinctive demands of the relationship that the church must sustain to the world considered in all its various manifestations and guises. None of them is an option for the church seeking to be faithful to God and fruitful among men. Indeed, to live like this—individually or corporately—would be to fail in our responsibilities, privileges, and duties. They have the virtue of relative simplicity, providing a sort of catch-all approach by means of which it is then possible to relieve one's conscience, avoid combat, suspend thoughtfulness,

make less effort, give in to temptation, or take some other apparently easy way out.

Our flesh—considered either in the absolute sense of our humanity, so weak and easily wearied, or in the more particular sense of our remaining sinfulness, so quick to salivate over passing pleasures—might demand an easy way out. We are not at liberty to seek such a way or to take one.

Rather, our thoughts, words, and deeds must be governed by the Word of God. We cannot fall back on the mere rationalism that would raise man's thoughts and opinions to the highest authority, leaving the church to be directed by the judgment of the one (the guru), the few (the council or committee), or the many (the coalition or the mob). Traditionalism will not answer, whether it be the unthinking adoption of some old rule without consideration of the application of principle to the here and now or the embrace of some new model churned out by the great and the good for this brave new world. Pragmatism will not do, with its obsession with apparent but often temporary effectiveness. This too often leads to a desperation for an impact, resulting in a faddishness, a church that skips from program to program, abandoning each one successively as it wears out and becomes old, thoughtlessly adopting whatever happens to be popular in the time and place in which God has situated us. We do not need to jump on bandwagons. We need not put ourselves in hock to personalities on a local, national, or global scale, slavishly following those with fame, charisma, wealth, eloquence, aggression, or whatever else it may be that gives them a platform and an authority to be heard in the eyes of many. Neither do we need to default to a kind of confused fatalism in which we are not even sure if an answer exists or whether it really matters, an attitude in which the best we can do is keep our heads down, remaining faithless, fruitless, and frozen. We need not hope merely for survival and trust that things might brighten up somewhere down the road while we drift along on the current of circumstances about which we feel we can do nothing.

### **Guided by Scripture**

Instead, if we are to be guided and guarded on our way through this life, it is to our Bibles, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, that we must

turn: “The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

How is a child of wrath to be saved? What is it that changes our fundamental relationship to the world? What brings us out of the way of death and puts us onto the way of life, delivering us from the power of darkness and conveying us into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love (Col. 1:13)? It is through the Scriptures, which make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

And how is the child of God to be kept from the evil one? How will you make your way in the world, knowing “how you ought to walk and to please God” (1 Thess. 4:1)? It is the Scriptures that equip us for the road.

What relief there is here for the determined-though-sometimes-bewildered, willing-but-often-exposed disciple of Christ! Here is realism about the persecutions we must endure and about the deceptions that will abound: “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:12–13). But here also is a firm anchor, a source of divine wisdom for salvation in its complete scope, a means for our entering in and our going on in the kingdom of God. Its quality—the breathed-out word of the living God—gives us confidence. Its utility for bringing wisdom for salvation to those who are lost in darkness and who require a Savior (2 Tim. 3:15) and for enabling the “man of God”<sup>4</sup> to be “complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17) assures us that it will answer our needs. Its sufficiency, answering every phase of Christian experience and every sphere of Christian need, makes us entirely fit for purpose. John Murray reminds us that

there is no situation in which we are placed, no demand that arises, for which Scripture as the deposit of the manifold

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4. In the context, “man of God” probably has primary reference to those appointed for the care of the flock of God, but if in principle the Scriptures are sufficient for them to do their work, which involves ministering to all the saints, then in practice that sufficiency provides for every member of the church.

wisdom of God is not adequate and sufficient. It is the Scripture that provides the equipment, the furnishings, the investments, that prepare us for the kingdom of God, "till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" and are "filled unto all the fulness of God."<sup>5</sup>

But we cannot forget that we are utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit to enable us to grasp the truth that saves and embrace the truth that sanctifies: "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit we are blind men in a dark room. Even if that room is filled with the treasures of divine revelation we cannot see them until the lights are turned on and our eyes are opened. He opens the truth to us (John 16:12–15), and us to the truth (Acts 16:14). Without Him, we will miss our way. When He is at work in and with and through the Word of God, then we find answered that great prayer-declaration of our Lord and Savior: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Our Bibles, given through and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, are a safe and sufficient guide for us. The Scriptures expose and condemn certain attitudes and approaches, putting them distinctly and definitely out of bounds for the child of God seeking to live in this present age in fulfillment of his calling and God's will. The same Bible also provides precepts, principles, and practices by means of which we may discern our duty as disciples, pursuing that duty in dependence on the Spirit of the risen Christ. John Calvin described this relationship between Word and Spirit, telling us that

the Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth, which He expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power.... For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn

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5. John Murray, "Holy Scripture," in *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 3:261.



may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word. So indeed it is. God did not bring forth his Word among men for the sake of a momentary display, intending at the coming of his Spirit to abolish it. Rather, he sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word.<sup>6</sup>

With the Word of God as our map and the Spirit of Christ as our compass, we are equipped to navigate this world, to make our way in the world so as to bring honor and glory to God. By means of the Scriptures and with the light of the Spirit we can establish and embrace our identity and direct and pursue our activity to the praise of the glory of our God and Savior.

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6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.9.3.