

4.18 - Worldly Churches

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The letters to the [Seven Churches of Asia](#) describe a range of conditions which can be seen within different churches to differing degree throughout history. Much of the criticism which Christ levels at the churches is an indictment of the ever-present tendency to compromise with the culture.

The Bible does not hesitate to condemn worldliness for the serious sin that it is. Worldliness is any preoccupation with or interest in the temporal system of life that places anything perishable before that which is eternal. Since believers are not part of the world system (John 15:19), they must not act as though they were. “Do not be conformed to this world,” wrote the apostle Paul, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).¹

4.18.1 - The Pressure to Compromise

In the case of the historic churches of Asia, pressure to compromise came on at least two fronts: 1) pressure by the state to worship the emperor and, 2) pressure by the trade guilds to participate in pagan activities.

Because of its belief in one God the church found itself engaged in a struggle with the Roman state which permitted no compromise and from which eventually only one of the two parties would emerge victorious. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* sets out quite clearly both the issue at stake—Lord Christ versus Lord Caesar—and the state’s (as well as the general population’s) view of Christians as disloyal atheists who threatened the well-being of the empire.²

The Christian was faced with a cruel dilemma. His safety was assured only by preparedness, in time of need, to identify Himself either with pagan society, by sacrifice to the emperor and the expected participation in the religious aspects of guilds and social life. . . or with Judaism on whatever terms would gain him acceptance in the synagogue, that is, probably, at least an implicit denial of his Lord. The first inducement was naturally strongest in those places where the pressures of authority and pagan society were most direct (Pergamum and Thyatira, and also Ephesus, where it was steadfastly rejected): the ‘synagogues of Satan’ brought the opposite threat against those who scorned the pagan compromise (Smyrna and Philadelphia, and perhaps the commended minority in Sardis). The situation also introduced a new occasion of disunion between Jewish and Gentile Christians, on whom it impinged differently.³

4.18.2 - Christian Liberty or Licentiousness?

When faced with such pressures, it is often easy to rationalize participation in pagan activities and reinterpret them as being compatible with the grace of God and the maturity and freedom of the believer. Christian liberty can stumble weaker brothers and easily cross the line where we find ourselves participating in events which are neither helpful or edifying and even border on licentiousness (Rom. 6:1-2; Jude 1:4).

But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1Cor. 8:9-13)

What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1Cor. 10:19-23)

4.18.3 - The Results of Compromise

The first result of compromising with the culture is the one which offers the greatest temptation: *peace* is achieved between the believer and the world. The church at Sardis and the church at Laodicea had this in common: no mention is made of any burden being born or conflict with foes. These churches appear to be at peace with the culture. The church at Sardis had the appearance of opposing the culture, but a tacit understanding had evidently been reached between the church and the culture (Rev. 3:1-2±). Concerning the Laodicean church, Trench observes:

Of the absence of heathen adversaries there has been occasion to speak already; but more noticeable still is the fact that there neither appear here nor there Nicolaitans, as at Ephesus, or Balaamites, as at Pergamum, or Jezebelites, as at Thyatira, or those who say they are Jews and are not, as at Smyrna and Philadelphia; seeking to seduce Christ's servants, and constraining them earnestly to contend for the truth.⁴

The world could endure the churches at Sardis and Laodicea because they were not only *in* the world, but *of* the world. Consistent peace with the culture is a clear indication that the believer is not separated to God, but is considered one of the world's own: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). This road to peaceful coexistence with the culture is typically paved with a series of incremental compromises.

The Jerusalem conference had in its decree brought into juxtaposition the eating of [ε δωλόθυτα](#) [eidōlothyta] and indulgence in sexual impurity (Acts 15:20, 27), and John had not lived in a Greek city without becoming aware that these two things were in fact closely bound up together. . . . From participation in a pagan guild-feast to licentiousness was but a step.⁵

"To effect a reasonable compromise with the established usages of Graeco-Roman society"; they taught that Christians ought to remain members of the pagan clubs, and that they might do so without disloyalty to their faith. Such a course involved nothing worse than the abandonment of an obsolete decree. The Jerusalem decree had been issued at the first beginning of Gentile Christianity; it had been circulated by St Paul in Pamphylia and Lycaonia (Acts 16:4), and doubtless had reached Ephesus. But St. Paul himself had permitted at Corinth some modification of the ban against [ε δωλόθυτα](#) [eidōlothyta], recognizing the liberty of Christians to partake without question of meat which was sold in the markets or set before them at a friend's table, which he insisted that charity to weaker brethren should preclude them from eating an [ε δωλόθυτον](#) [eidōlothyton] which had been declared to be such or from taking part in a banquet held in a pagan temple (1Cor. 8:10; 10:25 ff.).⁶

As the church becomes comfortable with the culture, its witness is compromised and it begins to forfeit the favor of God.

By enticing God's people into an idolatrous practice, Balak got them out of God's favor, compromised their testimony, and caused internal chaos and grief—this is what compromise with the world does to the Church. II Corinthians 6:17 makes this same point of separation from the world by repeating Isa. 52:11. Clearly, God requires Christians to be different from the world.⁷

But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the LORD'S, and all its fullness." "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another *man's* conscience? (1Cor. 10:28-29)

Compromise has always been a chief tool of Satan.

4.18.4 - Friendship with the World

If the path of accommodation and compromise continues unabated, eventually the church reaches a point of *friendship with the world*. This is an extremely dangerous place for the believer. Like the proverbial frog in the boiling pot, he has lost the ability to sense the heat slowly rising and is likely to slowly cook until almost all distinction from the culture is lost. This was precisely God's point when He dealt with Israel in the Old Testament. God went to great lengths to separate Israel from the surrounding nations because He knew all too well the eventual destination of the path of incremental compromise and accommodation:

Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their *sacred* pillars, and cut down their *wooden* images '(for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and *one of them* invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods. (Ex. 34:12-16)

How often do we read similar passages and wonder at the seeming harshness of God's instructions to Israel? Yet the seriousness of

God's commands to Israel are merely a reflection of the waywardness of man. In many instances, God's laws are not motivated as much by rectifying the immediate situation as they are by His perfect foreknowledge of the consequences which will eventually ensue once men begin down such a path. Christ's [NT](#) condemnation of the worldliness of the Thyatiran and Laodicean churches stands in stark contrast to the modern "seeker-friendly" strategy of church growth: "Today's user-friendly, seeker-oriented, market-driven church doesn't preach much against worldliness. To do so might make unbelievers (not to mention many believers) uncomfortable, and is therefore avoided as poor marketing strategy."⁸In John's day and our own, we need to be constantly reminded of the words of Paul, John, and James:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among [them]. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." (2Cor. 6:14-17)

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

Adulterers and adulteresses! 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. (Jas. 4:4)

Notes

¹John MacArthur, [Revelation 1-11 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 82.

²J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, [The Apostolic Fathers](#), 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 131.

³Colin J. Hemer, [The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 10.

⁴Richard Chenevix Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1861), 206-207.

⁵Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), lxxii.

⁶Ibid., lxxi.

⁷Monty S. Mills, [Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John](#) (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1987), Rev. 2:18.

⁸MacArthur, [Revelation 1-11 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#), 81.

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