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Return to Me

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Tom Olbricht

It is difficult to fault the title and intent of **The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal** by Allen, Hughes and Weed. A call for return or renewal is perennially appropriate. The biblical witness depicts humans as so engulfed by their own worldly enterprises that they neglect, avoid, or defy the aims of God. The prophet puts it succinctly, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 3:7). It should be noted that this call to align with God was directed, not to outsiders, but to Israel, God's covenant community. Paul addressed his challenge to the new covenant community, the church of Jesus Christ, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2).

Why the work of these authors should elicit such rancor from certain quarters, is difficult to fathom unless those annoyed are so immersed in self interests, even if religious, that they discount the constant biblical mandate for renewal among the people of God. Rather than writing off the authors as reprehensible grumblers, we should admire their courage. This is not to suggest, by the way, that we should hesitate to question their historical reflections on how we got here, specific characterizations of the contemporary church, or how renewal is to be achieved. In fact, I plan to appraise certain aspects of all the above.

Astute Observations of the Authors

I believe Allen, Hughes and Weed are right on target in charging that contemporary life is increasingly secularized, and that this secularization has left its mark on the church. Furthermore, they appropriately argue that as God has receded on the horizons of

human life, the sense of his presence has also receded in the activities of the church. Strangely, we are increasingly more comfortable in confessing belief in prayer than in the God who answers prayer. We are more attuned to believing in the Bible than in the God of the Bible. We are more at home in the Church of Christ than with the God who lives in the church. We do indeed find a loss of transcendence in numerous areas of private and church life. This loss, in turn, is reflected in programs which are patently designed to cope with felt needs rather than to carry out the mandates of the living God. We have embraced numerous self-help techniques which in the end smack of self justification, or salvation by our own works rather than the work of God in Christ.

The authors, in addition, offer many astute observations regarding certain historical roots of our movement which have predisposed us in the direction of secularization. Our forefather's views of God's action in the world in some cases were not too different from those of deism. In fact, Alexander Campbell differed from deism basically in regard to the manner in which humans know God and his ways. The deists claimed that all we really need to know about God we can learn from nature and history. Campbell contended that knowledge of God from these sources is unreliable and inadequate, and that only God's self disclosure, the Bible, provides sufficient and saving knowledge. But in regard to God acting in the world in this day and age, Campbell was at one with the deists who held that God wound up the world like an eight day clock and left it forthwith to run by its inbuilt laws. These views are attributed to the wave of rationalism which swept western civilization in the eighteenth century, known as the age of the Enlightenment.

I also share the authors' view that any renewal must be biblical, more specifically, must incorporate insights from the theology of the Scriptures. Biblical theology is concerned with the centers of the biblical

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message and the priorities resulting therefrom. We have too long been content to tolerate any extreme as long as it can half way be defended by scripture thereby suggesting that any item in scripture is equal with any other, as if, for example, Paul's request for Timothy to bring his cloak (I Timothy 4:13) is equivalent to Jesus' call to take up his cross and follow (Mark 8:34). Our aim should be to focus on that which is of first importance (I Corinthians 15:3-5) regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have too long majored in minors. It is imperative that we develop a strong theology of the central focus of the scripture in addition to astute theology on specific items such as baptism, the organization of the church, and the priesthood of all believers.

Caveats

Despite accolades for the book, even too numerous to mention here, I wish to register certain cautions.

Historical Reflections on How We Got Here

Our authors lay considerable blame for the drift away from the transcendental at the feet of the eighteenth century Enlightenment (pp. 27ff), and this despite the fact that as late as seventy-five years ago, by their account, we trusted God (pp. 6, 7). It is my conviction that the Enlightenment has received much more bashing in the last decade than it deserves. Everyone demands a piece of this action, just as in the sixteenth century, and among the later British empiricists, everyone attacked Aristotle. I should hasten to add that I have my own problems with the Enlightenment, and I have no real reason to defend it, I think, other than a sense of fairness. The Enlightenment simply was not responsible for all the ills that have befallen humankind since.

First, the Enlightenment was much more variegated than the depictions of these and other authors. The characterizations by the writers of **The Worldly Church** are indeed mild when compared with those of other authors. (I encourage everyone who generalizes about the Enlightenment to read a good encyclopedic article, for example, Crane Brinton's in the **Encyclopedia of Philosophy**). For this reason we must determine more precisely the shortcomings of the Enlightenment our authors advance. They have two charges (1) the Enlightenment presupposed that humans, through reason, are capable of discovering the answers and managing their own affairs, and (2) they are also capable of managing the affairs of revival and the church and therefore the millennium will be a human creation (pp. 27-30). These perspectives enter

the Churches of Christ in the form of self reliance, rationalism and legalism to the neglect of grace and the actions of a transcendent God and his Holy Spirit (pp. 31-35, 56-60).

I quarrel, not so much with what the authors conclude, but with their account of origins. The Enlightenment did applaud human achievement, but not always to the detriment of belief in a transcendent God. Isaac Newton is a case in point. Rather than denigrating God, Newton believed that his insights and discoveries, in the words of hymn writer Joseph Addison, "Their great Original proclaim." Furthermore, the Enlightenment used reasoning or rationalism in a very broad sense to encompass both formal logic (deduction) and generalization (induction), and in some cases, sensation generally, even including emotion. Our own heritage of Campbell, Stone, Scott and others drew almost singularly on the inductive aspect of the Enlightenment, being overtly critical of the formal logic of Descartes, Spinoza and, Leibniz who were obviously some of the authorities from whom the Enlightenment drew its inspiration. Furthermore, Jonathan Edwards was a child of the enlightenment.

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His preaching utilized precisely the sensations highlighted by Locke and the Scottish realists to achieve his emotive effects. I question there-

fore the accuracy of locating Edwards prior to and outside of the Enlightenment (pp. 27, 28).

I concur with the authors that previous epochs have left an indelible impression on the Churches of Christ. I think some of this may be attributed to the Enlightenment, but when we do so, we need to take care in nuancing our claims. Many other forces prior to and later than the Enlightenment have led to the secularization of contemporary life both outside and inside the church. The better approach, I think, is to identify the sources of secularism without assigning them to any particular age or movement since the sources overflow all the categories. Prior to the last twenty years, though obviously detractors of the Enlightenment could be found, most scholars found fault with specific persons of that age, or with specific approaches, for example, faculty or atomistic psychology.

It does not set well with me that we buy into the currently popular wholesale dismissal of the Enlightenment. Our movement obviously has roots in the Enlightenment and as the result we are in danger of rejecting our whole heritage, preferring, for example, the age of the Reformation. Each age has its own ills and strengths. For example, the Reformation was more sectarian than the Enlightenment. Most Enlightenment authors, at minimum, extolled the unity of believers as an ideal.

In some respects, the presuppositions of En-

lightenment front-runners were more biblical than those of the various current critics. Almost all of the variegated contemporary Enlightenment detractors pontificate from relativistic ontologies, the authors of **The Worldly Church** being an exception. Most Enlightenment thinkers, in contrast, affirmed the Good and the True. While one may reflect on the biblical witness from different perspectives, certain biblical traditions, for example, the wisdom materials, located in certain prophets as well as in Proverbs, presuppose that a universal Good is inherent in reality. Furthermore, the epistemology of Enlightenment leaders, that is, generalization on experience, is nearer to that of the Scriptures than many other epistemologies, especially of philosophical idealism. The mind (reason), if rightly used, is as much a **charismata**, a gift from God, as any other. I may be wrong, but I find the Enlightenment, in some quarters, at least, much nearer the biblical vision of reality than new age religions which in theory, at least, throw reason and caution to the winds. Oh for the heroes of old — Gideon and Thomas — who were both cautious and rational! But reason did not stand in their way as with certain heirs of the Enlightenment. When once convinced, Gideon and Thomas moved — in faith.

I am chiefly troubled, however, because I believe that in focusing upon the intellectual roots of secularization these authors have ignored the major source of secularization from the standpoint of the scripture. (See, however, p. 7). In scripture the cause lies not so much in the mind, but in the heart. It is the total being of a human (and that is what heart means in scripture) who worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). I think this statement of Paul provides us with a very cogent definition of secularization from the standpoint of the scripture. For Paul, secularization derives more from the fact that we will the wrong than that we think wrong.

Jim and Tammy Bakker became increasingly secularized, not because they bought into a rationalistic (Enlightenment) version of reality, but apparently because they willed creaturely goods and pleasures (see also observations p. 55). It is the love of the world and its things (I John 2:15) which constitutes ultimate secularization, not simply misdirected rationalism.

Specific Characterizations of the Contemporary Church

Allen, Hughes and Weed have characterized the Churches of Christ in our time as often secular, emphasizing human activity, technology, facilities, and programs which cater to human needs (pp. 38-40). I agree that there are many soft spots in regard to commitment to the living God and his crucified Son, and in trusting him to empower his church.

I think, however, that several bright areas appear, other than just that sectarianism is fading. I visit more and more congregations in which a theology of the cross and the resultant servanthood is being pro-

claimed. I have found an increase in the number of churches, as compared with the 1930s, in which the preaching, as well as class study, is a genuine effort to understand whole books of the Bible. I am aware of more and more situations in which believers respond in loving concern for persons with health failures, financial disasters, and family problems and break-ups. It is true that the focus of our life is to be the transcendent God, but we see him, not by looking past our fellows, but precisely through them. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (I John 3:17).

I miss in this book a strong call for servanthood in this world. That is what the preaching of the cross is all about. (Notice, for example, in the excellent section on the cross that nothing is said about servanthood, pp.72-74, but note a sentence or two, pp. 81-83). Little space in the scripture is devoted to the cross except in regard to life under the cross. "If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). We need to be careful lest we forget that it was not just in death that Christ placarded the cross. His life itself was the way of the cross. "For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Worldliness is living in the

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world for one's own purposes. The Christian side steps worldliness by living in the world for God's purposes. He takes the place of his risen Lord, serving in this world in his stead. The earthly ministry of Christ never ended. It survives in the church of the living God through its service in and to the world. The church's proclamation of the cross is a call to the rest of humanity to take up God's servanthood in the world.

I am impressed by the number of persons who travel to distant points to visit and help with the spread of the good news. Our people are well traveled, not simply for vacations, as with so many "worldly" persons, but in order to encourage the spread of love of God in other lands. I am also impressed with the number of persons with considerable wealth who use it, not so much for their own pleasure, but to genuinely share with others what God has given them. I also find that many of our people now affirm the power of the Holy Spirit in the congregation, as contrasted with former years.

How Renewal is to be Achieved

According to Allen, Hughes and Weed, renewal is to be achieved through a resurgence (1) of biblical theology, (2) authentic Christian ministry, (3) communities of the cross, (4) openness to the power of God's Spirit in our churches, (5) clarity about Christian worship, and (6) passion to live out the biblical vision of the holy life. These items are little developed, but then the book is not so much a description of renewal, but a critique of the contemporary situation, and thereby preparing the seedbed for renewal.

I think all these aims are admirable. I have vested interests in the call for biblical theology since I have taught courses in both Old and New Testament

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theology for the past quarter of a century. I will therefore limit my remarks to this item. I myself am more concerned about our failure to struggle for a genuine biblical theology than whatever passe' baggage we may have inherited from the Enlightenment. I think our dereliction in searching for the heart and core of the Biblical message may be a major contributor to our divisiveness and drifting secularism.

I must be clear at this point. I do not believe that we will find the living God and live our life in him, simply because we construct the right biblical theology, the right hermeneutic, an admirable anti-enlightenment, pro-reformation posture, or a church which constantly acclaims the Holy Spirit. But I do believe that a theology which genuinely grows out of the scripture points us in the right direction. It helps us cut to the heart of the matter. It directs us to the God who is good, whose steadfast love endures forever, as shown in his concrete actions in creation and history (Psalm 136). This action has reached its apex in the life and death of Jesus, Son of God (Acts 10:34-48). "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn

had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:3, 4).

It is not clear from reading **The Worldly Church** that the authors' critique grows out of a well worked-through biblical theology. Because of a failure to set priorities from a biblical perspective, many observations, though valid, fail to reflect biblical centers. I have already charged that the critique of the roots of secularism has ignored the fountainheads as set out in scripture. I have also contended that the authors have not thought through the biblical perspective on the mission of humankind in this world. They are not clear that through believers, the nations will be blessed (Genesis 12:3), and that the cross is chiefly a way of life in the world which the believer takes up, emulating his Lord. The opposite of worldliness from a biblical perspective is not to avoid the world and its ways, but Godly servanthood in it. I think that the theology set out on pages 64 and 65 does not commence from where the scriptures commence. The scriptures do not begin with the individual as sinner, but with a loving, creating God (Genesis 1). Sin is the result of a person intentionally turning his back on God's love (Genesis 3). The scandal of the cross does not leave one drained and dour. Rather the kingdom of God consists of "righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

This is not to say that these dimensions are missing from the book, but it is not clear that the authors work from these priorities.

Conclusions

Despite these caveats this is a book whose time has come. It has created much discussion and introspection, if not anguish. It has caused many of us to rethink where we and our churches are in the eyes of our Lord. A call for biblical renewal is appropriate in any day and age. We must constantly be reminded of the great centers of the biblical witness. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). "For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts."