

Acts 18:3

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OTHERWORLDLY PREACHING AND THIS WORLDLY GIVING

by Gary North

There is a memorable painting by Norman Rockwell which was the cover of a *Saturday Evening Post* in the early 1960's, if memory serves me correctly. A father is in his pajamas, reading the Sunday newspaper. His wife and several children, all dressed up, are marching out of the house, heads held high. They were obviously headed for church. By implication, he was headed for hell. But this grim implication was not understood by the vast majority of readers who were expected to buy this issue of the *Post*, or else it would never have appeared on the cover. I doubt that Rockwell had this in mind, either. Church is just an activity for women and children. Everyone knows this.

Years ago, I read a passage in one of Clarence Day's delightful books on his father. *Life With Father* is the best known of these books, and was made into a popular television show of the late 1950's, with Leon Ames playing the role of Day's blustering father. I have never forgotten an incident described by Day. The whole family was in church. A visiting pastor was preaching. Day's father never paid much attention to church, was not baptized, and was there only as a formality to please his fluttering wife. But this sermon was different. The visitor had at some point been a businessman. His sermon kept referring to payrolls and work schedules. Day's father grew more and more interested. He was actually listening! Finally, when the collection plate came by, he put in a \$5 bill — a large sum for those days, and the largest sum Day ever saw his father put into a collection plate in his life.

Preaching to Irresponsible People

Day's point was subtle. His father had never taken interest in religious affairs. Why not? Because they were peripheral affairs in the life of a late-nineteenth century American businessman. His father felt perfectly able to deal with the trials and tribulations of middle-class life without any reliance upon God, the church, or other reminders of the world to come. It was not that Day pictured his father as immoral; he pictured him as blithely unconcerned with the realm of the spirit, as defined by bland nineteenth-century Protestantism. But when one sermon seemed to be related to the world he knew and respected, the business world, he responded in the one way he knew carried weight in his world: with money. His father recognized the nature of American religion in his day. It spoke to the needs and concerns of women, not men. Liberal and pietistic sermons have confirmed men in their ethical irresponsibility, for they do not call men to reconstruct every area of their lives in terms of the gospel.

Women in Western nations have taken the lead in twentieth-century religious training at the local level. Men prefer to stay in the background, while the spiritual leadership of the household is transferred to the wives. Women thereby become the driving force in the churches — setting up committees, hold-

ing bake sales, going to Bible studies, teaching the Sunday schools (grade school and under). The wives of the elders frequently have a veto on church activities. The closer you get to mainline liberal denominations, which do not preach to the needs and fears of husbands, the more powerful the influence of women is. The same seems to be true of the older Pentecostal movement, as distinguished from the groups more closely associated with the "faith-success" Pentecostal churches.

This has gutted the churches. Ultimately, men control the purse-strings of the family. A woman may be able to devote time and effort in raising secondary funding for the church, but the husband will present the tithe, if there is a tithe. Few husbands are going to donate ten percent of their income to "women's matters," which they perceive the church to be. They will toss in a few dollars each week, to keep from being seen as skinflints, but they will not dutifully, systematically transfer a tenth of their income.

As preaching has become increasingly otherworldly, or more concerned with good manners than civilization, men have grown disinterested. Institutionally, the church has continued to provide social contacts for both men and women, and large, mainline churches have provided business contacts. A "First Church" mentality develops in a community. First Baptist, First Presbyterian, First Methodist, or most implausibly of all, First Church of Christ, Scientist. In the South, the designation "First" has even more importance than in other regions, for "First" identifies the church as a surviving part of a tradition, in a culture which until quite recently has respected traditions above all. (We see a similar appeal in the South of the "ancient" tradition of Scottish Rite masonry.) A relative by marriage of our family once described herself to my mother as a First Presbyterian. "We always attend the First Presbyterian Church, wherever we live." Apparently, she actually believes that there is a denomination called "First Presbyterian," which indicates fairly well just how involved she and her family are with the church.

The church as a social club is not what the Reformation was all about. Men do not die to defend the purity of a social club. Men do not sacrifice their names, lives, and sacred honor to preserve the sovereignty of a social club. And as the church has become an institution not worth sacrificing for, fewer and fewer people sacrifice anything for it.

Irresponsible women are attracted to "otherworldly" preaching, meaning preaching which makes no attempt to relate biblical ethics to personal and institutional responsibilities. Such preaching encourages these women to flee from their areas of concrete responsibility. It encourages them to abandon biblical ethics. It is easier for them to abandon their responsibilities than it is for their husbands, because they are sheltered by their husbands from the relentless profit-and-loss world which their husbands contend with. Their areas of

responsibility generally do not have profit-and-loss statements attached to them. The criteria of success for wives and mothers are more diffuse and far less public than criteria of success in business, and therefore it is easier for women to cover up failure for a longer period of time. "Otherworldliness" is therefore a less expensive form of rebellion for women to indulge in than for men.

Pie on the Earth

Otherworldly preaching severs the link between biblical ethics and earthly success. It therefore also severs the link between covenant-breaking and earthly failure. Thus, otherworldly preaching contributes to day-to-day worldliness — covenant-breaking behavior which is not governed by fear of the cause-and-effect ethics of the Bible.

The hope of success in "the world beyond the grave" has not impressed men in this century. In earlier days, men understood that there is a relationship between ethics and earthly success, and that this, in turn, points to eternal reconciliation with God. To put this perspective in theological language, men believed that Christ's definitive sanctification — His ethical perfection — which men receive by grace at the time of their regeneration, points to regenerate man's final sanctification at the day of Judgment. But these two events are linked by history. As men move from definitive sanctification (imputed by God as a judicial act) to final sanctification (also a judicial act of God in declaring us ethically acceptable in His sight), there is supposed to be ethical progress. This process is what theologians call progressive sanctification. In time and on earth, regenerate men move in the direction of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ (though not His divinity). We do not achieve perfection, but this is the standard set before us.

Men used to believe that what they do in life has effects in the afterlife — that our eternal rewards will be commensurate with our ethical achievements on earth (1 Cor. 3:10-15). But they have steadily abandoned faith in any earthly "down payment" — an earnest — on those future rewards. In other words, they believe that progressive ethical conformity to God's law, in time and on earth, does not lead to external, visible blessings of God, in time and on earth. Thus, whatever rewards we receive in time are not visible on earth; they are experienced psychologically, in an "almost other" world of the human spirit. In other words, "true spirituality" involves progress toward "another world" metaphysically, by means of spiritual exercises that produce an experience of being transported out of the material realm.

This "heaven on earth" experience supposedly points to "pie in the sky" later on, and calorie-free pie at that. Problem: heaven is a temporary place of residence, a kind of "embarkation point" prior to the resurrection. Heaven is not a permanent location for regenerate people who have died. Men have no bodies in heaven. They cry out, "How long, O Lord?" (Rev. 6:10). A disembodied spiritual existence in heaven is not to serve as an earthly standard of existence for regenerate men.

The Bible teaches that we will receive a down payment on eternal life through an extension of temporal life. Men who honor parents will receive long life (Ex. 20:12). But even more impressive are Isaiah's words concerning the New Heaven and New Earth (Isa. 65:17), a token of which he indicates we will experience before the resurrection, when sinners are still alive: "There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed" (Isa. 65:20).

In other words, progressive ethical sanctification is paralleled by progressive temporal rewards — not in each and every case, but in a culturally significant number of cases. This means that what we do on earth will have implications here on earth, as well as in heaven, and these rewards or curses

are seen here on earth, that we might be aware of the nature of what awaits us in the worlds beyond the grave: heaven or hell, and after them, the New Heaven and New Earth or the lake of fire.

This is an important aspect of what is known as the "Puritan ethic." It is a myth that the Puritans believed that their material wealth testified to their necessary regenerate status. They were warned time after time by their preachers that wealth can become a snare to the ungodly. But what they were told was that godly efforts in business affairs — honest dealing, hard work, etc. — will eventually produce wealth. Evil acts can produce wealth under some circumstances, but godly activities do, too. Without a relationship between righteousness and economic productivity, the Puritans believed, they could not hope to build "a city on a hill" which would demonstrate the visible efficacy of true spirituality for degenerate Europe to behold.

This Puritan ethic was watered down in the early eighteenth century, first by Cotton Mather and later by Jonathan Edwards. Mather emphasized "doing good," meaning personal ethical acts, without holding out hope for the whole society. As a premillennialist, Mather did not believe in long-term ethical and cultural sanctification. Edwards dropped the earlier Puritan emphasis on biblical law in his postmillennial scheme, arguing that the mere working of the Holy Spirit in regenerating men would be sufficient to bring forth an earthly kingdom. Thus, the concept of progressive cultural sanctification faded in American intellectual life, to be replaced in the nineteenth century by secular visions, such as "manifest destiny" and the social gospel movement.

Conclusion

Orthodox preaching must link today's worldly behavior with post-resurrection existence. Post-resurrection existence is worldly, meaning tied to the physical realm. It will not be a world populated by the disembodied spirits of men. The warfare which the Bible describes is not warfare between "this world" and "the spiritual world"; it is between the ethically separate worlds, each with a material and spiritual realm. It is not a metaphysical confrontation between matter and spirit; it is an ethical confrontation between two warring kingdoms.

Christians must be taught that this ethical confrontation involves every aspect of their lives. There is an ethical code whose origin is indeed otherworldly, but man's arena of application for this code is inescapably worldly. It was designed by the Creator for use by His ethically subordinate creatures, mankind. What men need is guidance. Everything that men do, every word that they speak, has eternal implications. But this eternal frame of reference is not reached by some sort of metaphysical "leap of being." Men do not "transcend their material natures" and in some way "plug into the ultimate reality" metaphysically. They are required to subordinate themselves ethically to a God who establishes a covenant with them. Preaching which attempts to be "otherworldly" in a metaphysical sense inescapably leads men to become this-worldly in an ethical sense. Such preaching produces listeners who do not view themselves as bound to the terms of an ethical covenant which is binding, in time and on earth (as well as beyond the grave), and which produces specific kinds of results, in time and on earth (as well as beyond the grave).

Dedicated giving should not be expected from undedicated members. Men sign the checks. Pastors who adopt metaphysically "otherworldly" topics for their sermons will eventually drive most men out of the church — if not physically, then emotionally and financially. Like Clarence Day's father, they will commit themselves financially to a ministry which they believe is relevant to life's affairs. Preaching should be relevant to this world, for God calls men to make ethical decisions in this world, in preparation for the next.