

The Spirit of the World (May 1988)

The head of a large missionary organization told me it was being sued by two of its members. These people had earlier dedicated their lives to missions. Now they have various ailments. One man has ulcers. A woman who lived in the tropics has skin cancer. A “Christian” lawyer, hearing of their problems, advised them to sue the missionary organization. Their afflictions he said, were “job related.”

The mission director shook his head. “They were willing to give their lives—but I guess that didn’t include stomach and skin.”

The missionaries and their lawyer have been infected with what Paul called “the spirit of the world” (1 Cor. 2:12).

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Despite the classic Pentecostal definition, worldliness (the Greek word is *kosmos*) is far more than cosmetics. It is also more than R-rated movies or X-rated prostitutes.

Worldliness is focusing on the things of time, rather than things of eternity.

The sin of today’s Pentecostal leaders is not sexual impropriety—the real problem is a life stance which focuses on the visible earthly kingdom rather than the invisible kingdom of God. It’s sad because worldliness is far more than smoking and sex. Sad, because many Assemblies of God leaders were emulating the same materialism exhibited by those now trapped in their own webs, paralyzing the denomination’s power to

police except when it came to outward acts.

Americans—most of whom are middle class and caught in their own worldliness—see us taking offerings from the poor in order to feather our beds. They call us Cadillac Christians and wonder why we don't give away more than we keep. They seem to know God has called us to walk by a different standard and are angry when we don't.

Too many of our leaders resemble the worldly sons of Eli—Hophni and Phinehas—who “treated the Lord's offering with contempt.” These forerunners of today's prosperity preachers enjoyed temple living, eating the fat which should have been used as a burnt sacrifice. Because of them, God put the death curse of Ichabod on the entire nation.

The spirit of the world has infected all of us. We see it in the struggling black churches where the poor, unable to rise from their poverty, elevate their pastors to the role of king.

We see it in the liturgical churches which have gold-plated the cross as a status symbol. Their clergymen, who are sometimes imitated by uptown Pentecostals, dress themselves in royal robes, title themselves “reverend” and drive royal chariots for one reason: status.

Tell me, can you picture Jesus dressed in scarlet and wearing a dangling cross?

And what about the rest of us? We spend millions on self while giving pennies to missions. Our American brand of Christianity has become a wealthy counterculture which no longer cares about the image it projects.

For every soul won to Christ by our flashy buildings and multimillion-dollar television ministries, there are millions who drive by, angry at the injustice these money-suckers represent. We brag about being New Testament Christians while living the lifestyle of Nero.

We have become like Demas, who deserted Paul “because he loved this world” (2 Tim. 4:10).

I recall the opening statement made by Francis McNutt at the Holy Spirit Conference in Jerusalem in 1976: “If Jesus were on earth, He wouldn’t be here today. He couldn’t afford the registration.”

We have forgotten who Jesus was—and how He lived.

“The greatest task with which the church is confronted,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer reportedly said from his Nazi prison, “is to teach people how to live in this world.” And I add, without letting the world live in us.

The confused folks of this culture, who judge us by the behavior of a few, are looking for a breed of people who are different, who are not in bondage to the world as they are. The only way we will ever restore our lost credibility is to pick up our wounded, renounce what we have become and recommit to be like Jesus.

Jamie Buckingham wrote 153 columns for Charisma over 13 years, first known as “Dry Bones” but later as it’s most recognized “Last Word.” His writing brought his singular voice that was animated by a heart for Jesus that was baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit in 1967 at a Full Gospel Businessmen’s convention. Buckingham provided a steadying force during the scandals of the 1980s, penning the seminal article on the PTL scandal, “God Is Shaking His Church” in May 1986.