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In the World

David Phillips

"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." John 17:15-16

The neat slogan declares that Christians should be 'in the world, but not of the world'. Whilst many Christians through the centuries have tried to withdraw from the world the greater danger for most today is being 'of the world'. The pressure is to adopt worldly standards, to conform to the behaviour of those around us. Such a situation constantly confronts not only individual Christians but also churches and other organizations.

In recent years there has been strong criticism in North America of the worldliness of evangelical churches. This is not directed at high profile tele-evangelists but at ordinary Evangelicals. One prominent writer, David F Wells, suggests that confronted by the success of capitalism in America the churches have become entranced with its methods. This leads to an obsession with growth, marketing, management strategies, customer satisfaction and the like. The acid test has become not 'is it true?' but 'does it work?'

It seems strange to even attempt to level the same sort of accusations against our dear old Church of England, and yet, to some extent the cap fits. Faced with spiritual and numerical decline the temptation is to seek to learn from the world, rather than the Word. The Church of England has particularly embarked on a remarkable restructuring programme for its national institutions, headed up by the Board of Directors (The Archbishops' Council) with all its management speak and public relations sensitivities. One 'northern Bishop' apparently also claimed that the Church is now run by men in grey suits. These changes are not necessarily wrong but they are clearly managerial solutions to a spiritual problem. There is likewise a professionalisation of ministry with career paths, contracts and performance reviews. Most recently the press office have produced some new posters seeking to recruit clergy. Aside from the particular problems about the images of ministry portrayed (which bear little resemblance to biblical models) at heart it betrays a shift from a view that sees ministry as a calling to one that sees ministry as a job.

Local churches face the same sorts of pressures to copy the ways of the world. This is the criticism Wells and others make of North American Evangelicals. They may have sound motives behind it all, but that does not legitimise something. In the short term they borrow from the world, in the long term they become worldly, driven not by the Word of God but by market forces.

Christian organizations operating in fields which are dominated by secular bodies are particularly vulnerable. Many major child care organizations began with clear Christian foundations but have slowly lost their heart and now no longer have a discernibly Christian ethos. In particular, the recent decision by the Children's Society to allow fostering and adoption by homosexual couples is not only regrettable it highlights the danger they are in. Despite its strong support from ordinary Christians and big name Bishops connected with it, it has been evident for many years that it had largely lost its Christian ethos as it has sought to be on an equal footing with the other secular organizations.

J B Phillips translates Romans Chapter 12 verse 2 as 'do not let the world squeeze you into its mould'. This vividly captures the threat we are under as individuals, in Churches and in other organizations.

From all the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil. Good Lord, deliver us. The Litany

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Leadership is now substantially in the hands of the managers, and as a consequence the evangelical capital is not being renewed. The only semblance of cohesion that now remains is simply tactical, never theological. This does not mean that there are no theological agreements among Evangelicals around the edges, for there are. What it does mean is that Evangelicals are not driven by a theological vision, and those who have risen to positions of leadership most commonly reflect this diminished outlook.

David F Wells: *No Place for Truth* p133
