

# Set Apart

Calling a  
Worldly Church  
to a  
Godly Life

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# Acknowledgments

Anyone who writes theology is aware of standing on the shoulders of past saints. And when it is done in the week-in, week-out hustle and bustle of the church “with all the saints” (Ephesians 3:18), those who write know that what they have accomplished comes from the saints’ locking their arms in prayer and advice. Here I must give thanks for the strong arms of College Church elders Roger Sandberg, Harold Smith, Wayne Martindale, and Lee Ryken for their advice and their weekly leading the congregation in discussion of the issues. I must especially thank Dr. Ryken for his masterful editing of the manuscript before it arrived in the capable hands of Crossway Books Managing Editor, Ted Griffin. And, as always during the past fifteen years, my ongoing thanks goes to my Administrative Assistant, Sharon Fritz for preparing the manuscript, and to Herb Carlburg for weekly proofing. Of course, my deepest thanks goes to my wife, Barbara, for her intense interest, advice, and prayers.

## Preface

The chapters of this book were originally a series of sermons that I preached. The series was partly occasioned by a convergence of my preaching on Lot's lamentable accommodations to Sin City (Genesis 19) and my reading of Robert Gundry's book *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian*, which offered a critique of contemporary evangelicalism. I eventually added to Gundry's list of ailments afflicting evangelical churches today. I will note in passing that my church devoted the Sunday evenings during the series to question-and-answer sessions on the topic on which I had preached in the morning.

Part of my venture can be called cultural critique, by which I mean that I begin my chapters with a survey of sociological data that delineates where our culture and the church stand on the announced topic. Not everyone is comfortable with such cultural critique from the pulpit. In one of the evening question-and-answer sessions, someone submitted a note saying that I should stop talking about culture and just preach the Gospel.

I understand the impulse behind that comment. A sermon that gives extensive initial attention to sociological data and cultural analysis has a different feel from a sermon that single-mindedly works its way through a biblical passage. But there is a time and place for cultural critique among Christians. Our own time and place require that we take stock of what is actually happening in our culture and in the

church. The evidence is pretty clear that we do not understand either of these as well as we should. Among evangelicals, there is a great disconnect between (on the one hand) what Christians believe and assimilate from sermons and Christian sources and how (on the other hand) they actually live. It is this very disconnect that is the subject of this book.

The model for cultural critique as part of the religious life exists within the Bible itself. The Old Testament prophets were thoroughgoing cultural critics. They did not simply preach a remedy for cultural ills; they took the time to portray the cultural situation to which they offered solutions. The resulting prophetic discourse as we find it in the Old Testament combines (sometimes shocking) exposés with exhortations about what God requires of his people.

In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostolic writers of the epistles do exactly the same thing. Jesus repeatedly mingles analysis of what was awry in his own social world with his teaching about the godly life. As for the New Testament epistles, there is so much reference to problems in the early church in its cultural setting that a main difficulty we have as modern readers is to work through the mass of cultural references en route to discovering the moral and spiritual application to our own lives.

The contemporary evangelical church is not lacking for moral and spiritual instruction. It *is* lacking in its ability to remain uncontaminated by the unchristian thinking and morality of contemporary culture. It is doubtless true that there has been too much cultural criticism and not enough gospel content in theological liberalism. But in contemporary evangelicalism there has been a deficiency of cultural awareness and a resulting lack of discernment regarding how the world has overwhelmed the thinking and behavior of Christians. This book is my contribution to the attempt to correct the imbalance.

For those who wish to engage in personal thought on each chapter, or who wish to use this book as a springboard to group discussion, here is a basic grid of questions for each chapter. These questions may be used in place of, or to augment, the specific discussion questions listed at the end of each chapter.

- What experiences and observations can you supply to confirm and illustrate the claims made in this chapter regarding cultural trends?
- Have you observed inroads that these cultural trends have made in the church or in your personal life?
- What (if anything) in the survey of cultural trends or the life of the church surprised or shocked you?
- What did you personally find most convicting in this chapter?
- What general themes or specific details in the survey of biblical material stands out to you as being the most important?
- What are the most obvious applications that you can make on the basis of this chapter in your personal life or in the life of your church?

## Set Apart to Save

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

EXODUS 19:5-6

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 PETER 2:4-5

If we had only the story of Lot’s life as it is told in the book of Genesis, we would never have imagined that Lot was a true believer. But Second Peter 2 tells us three times that this conflicted, compromised man was “righteous”—and more, that he was “distressed” and tormented by life in Sodom. Peter’s carefully crafted description of Lot is this: “. . . righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard) . . .” (vv. 7-8). Ironically, though Lot was revolted by Sodom, Sodom was in his soul. It is possible, then, for a believer to be distressed by the world while willfully clinging to the world.

There is every evidence that righteous Lot was of no benefit whatsoever to the inhabitants of Sodom. Though he lived in Sodom for years and was prominent in its gates, and therefore would have

had many opportunities to influence his friends, Lot utterly disappointed. When judgment fell on Sodom, not one righteous person could be found outside his family. No acquaintances, no neighbors, not one of his servants had come to know the Lord. His plea with the Sodomites in front of his door was dismissed by them out of hand. Lot lacked *gravitas*; his words carried no weight.

Even more tragically, Lot's life did nothing to point his family and relatives to heaven. None of his family or friends feared God. When he urged his then future sons-in-law to flee the cities' destruction, they thought he was "jesting." Lot's words had no substance because *he* was so insubstantial. Additionally Lot's lifestyle had done nothing to loosen the culture's grip on his wife. She left her heart in Sodom and therefore couldn't resist turning around—to her destruction. The very woman who bore his children, who was on most intimate terms with him, who knew the contours of his soul, saw nothing in him or in his faith to point her from earth to heaven.

It is also evident that Lot's life choices had promoted his daughters' absorbing of the spirit of Sodom into their souls. Deception, of course, was a way of life in Sodom. And Lot was part of it. But his deception was spiritually charged and therefore domestically lethal. Inwardly he was "greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked" and "was tormenting his righteous soul," says Peter; but outwardly he said little or nothing because he had become a prominent man in town. Forthrightness, anything approaching a witness, would have jeopardized his standing. Lot had mastered the craft of turning a blind eye and deaf ear to the social and sexual abuses of Sodom. He didn't *practice* them. He didn't *approve* of them. He *loathed* them. But he didn't speak out against them. Blasphemies and filthy speech were met by Lot's easy politic smile and careful deflection.

His daughters saw his accommodating character that so deftly masked what he really thought. Lot the survivor was a master. His girls could not forget that he had offered them to appease the inflamed men of Sodom in his infamous betrayal of fatherly duty. So when the successive father-daughter seductions took place, his girls used the craft he had bequeathed to them. It was *his* wine, *his* deceit,

*his* betrayal mixed together and served in a dark cup in the depths of the cave. His daughters' dishonor of him was brilliant, because with cruel irony he himself carried out the shameful act he had first suggested to the men of Sodom. Lot had effectively sown Sodom into his daughters' souls.

Lot's folly was this: Though the worldliness of Sodom vexed his righteous soul, he lived as close to the world as he could, hanging on to it for dear life until the bitter end. And the result was that though God judged all of Sodom except Lot and his daughters, *Sodom was reborn* in their very lives. We see, then, that it is possible for believing people like us who are truly distressed by the course of this world to live lives that are so profoundly influenced by culture that Sodom is reborn in the lives of those we love the most.

*Fair warnings.* The enticements to yield to this syndrome and become indistinct from culture have never been more powerful than they are right now because of our prosperity, cyber-options, and the powers of the media. I sense that these are crucial days culturally and spiritually. And I am not alone. Those who poll religious interests—including George Gallup, Barna Research, the Princeton Religion Research Center, and ChristianityToday.com—indicate that evangelical Christianity is becoming increasingly worldly, and that it is ever more becoming a mere mirror of secular culture.

The September 2001 issue of *Emerging Trends*, published by the Princeton Religion Research Center, bears the headline "Religion Is Gaining Ground, But Morality Is Losing Ground." Positively it notes that adult weekly church attendance has increased from 38 percent in 1996 to 44 percent in 2000—up 6 percent in four years. The same is true of teenaged students, only higher, from 42 percent to 53 percent, an increase of 11 percent in four years. There is also an uptrend in adult Bible reading (weekly or two or three times weekly), from 18 percent in 1982 to 26 percent in 2000. Yet at the same time one Gallup Poll indicates that 78 percent say that our moral values are "somewhat weak" or "very weak" and that morals are in decline.<sup>1</sup>

This is corroborated by a study by the Evangelical Alliance (the British counterpart to the National Association of Evangelicals),

which found that one third of evangelicals between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five say they have no problem with unmarried men and women living together.<sup>2</sup> One Christian college president here in the U.S. confided to a *Christianity Today* editor that the most perplexing puzzle he and his staff were facing regarding their present student body was that student leaders were outspoken in their Christian commitment and yet living with a girlfriend or boyfriend—and not seeing a disconnect.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Barna Research listed the following as one of the most discouraging findings of 2000: “Born again adults are more likely to experience a divorce than are non-born again adults (27% vs. 24%).”<sup>4</sup>

In the same issue it was noted that a minority of born-again adults (44 percent) and an even smaller proportion of born-again teenagers (9 percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.<sup>5</sup> George Barna’s recent book *Boiling Point* categorically states that moral anarchy has arrived and rules our culture, and that we are now in a state of spiritual anarchy.<sup>6</sup> The implication is that some ominous times are ahead for a church that dares to insist that there is absolute truth. This isn’t helped by the biblical ignorance that afflicts so many young Christians in the upcoming generation, 40 percent of whom hold the view that Jesus Christ committed sins!<sup>7</sup>

All of this together—the ignorance, the spiritual anarchy, the growing acceptance of relativism among Christians, divorce rates that exceed those of secular culture, the rise of cohabitation among professing Christians, the increase of worldliness in the church despite growing attendance and Bible reading—suggests that the church is becoming indistinct from the world—*worldly*. And more, the failure of its increasing numbers to make a difference in the world shouts of compromise. Indeed, what we see now may be an Indian summer, the last gasp of the warm, sunny days before a long, dark spiritual winter.

Who can deny Robert Gundry’s assertion that the evangelical enterprise has become worldly, that materialism grips the church, that pleasure-seeking dominates us, that evangelicals watch sensuality and violence like everyone else, that immodesty is *de jure*, that

voyeurism and pornography and sexual laxity and divorce are on the rise, and that we, like Lot, could find that Sodom has been born anew in our own homes. God help us if while decrying sin, we are sprinting headlong after it.

We must lay this to heart: A worldly church cannot and will not reach the world. The church must be distinct from the world to reach the world. We must set ourselves apart to God if we hope to reach the world. In a word, the only hope for us and the lost world is a holy church.

#### GOD'S PLAN: A PEOPLE SET APART (DISTINCT) FROM THE WORLD TO REACH THE WORLD

From the onset God's plan for reaching the world has been to create a people distinct from the world who would then minister to and reach the world.

*God's plan: Israel.* This was God's global plan for his chosen people as first told to Abraham: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3; cf. 18:18).

*A kingdom of priests.* As Israel became a nation during the four centuries that followed their captivity in Egypt, the manner of their becoming a blessing was unclear. But after the Exodus and before Israel's entry into the Promised Land, God made it very clear to Moses as he gave them the Ten Commandments: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6). As a kingdom of priests they would then offer sacrifices and intercede for the whole world. What a stupendous designation—a kingdom of priests—every Israelite a priest to the Gentile nations!

*A holy people.* The key, the secret, behind Israel's worldwide ministry was to be their holiness (or set-apartness) as a holy nation. The

parallel version of their commission at Mount Sinai in Deuteronomy says, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 7:6). Holiness is essential to God’s nature; it is not so much an attribute of God as it is the very foundation of his being. Holiness denotes the separateness or otherness of God from all his creation. God is set apart from all that is unclean or evil.

The holiness of God was to be the example and motivation for God’s people to be set apart as holy, that they might reach the world. This is a great theme in the book of Leviticus, which repeatedly highlights the fact that they must be distinct from and holier than the nations around them:

*“For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”*

—LEVITICUS 11:45

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”*

—LEVITICUS 19:1-2

*“Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you.”*

—LEVITICUS 20:7-8

*“You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”*

—LEVITICUS 20:26

The sum of their call was that they be separated to God and consecrated to serve him in holiness. This is where their power lay. Israel’s distinctiveness was to leverage them for ministry to a sinful world.

*A light to the Gentiles.* Isaiah repeatedly refers to Israel as a light for the Gentiles. The context of those declarations is the servant songs in which the servant is sometimes corporate Israel and sometimes an individual servant, prophesying the Messiah, the ultimate light to the Gentiles (see 42:6; 49:1-6; cf. 60:1). But national Israel, set apart as holy, was in its time to be a beacon to the dark Gentile world.

But Israel never reached its potential. Aaron's golden calf shows how miserably Israel could fail in becoming a nation holy to the Lord (cf. Exodus 32—34). Likewise, the failed attempt to enter Canaan was due to Israel's faithlessness and fears (cf. Numbers 13—14). Israel's repeated lapses into idolatry as recorded in Judges, the sins of the latter prophets, and the many failures of the people all testify to their descent from holiness, despite glowing exceptions. Israel never achieved its potential as a kingdom of priests and a light to the Gentiles.

Someday, as Zechariah says:

*“Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”*

—ZECHARIAH 8:22-23

But that did not happen with national Israel. It yet awaits a future fulfillment in the last days.

*God's plan: Jesus.* When Jesus came, he succeeded where Israel had failed. As the ultimate seed of Abraham, Jesus is true Israel (cf. Galatians 3:16). He was called out of Egypt as was the nation of Israel (cf. Matthew 2:15). As true Israel, he succeeded in resisting Satan's wilderness temptations, whereas corporate Israel had failed (cf. Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Jesus was at once set apart as holy to God the Father, a great high priest and a light to the Gentiles.

- *Holy:* Jesus was the Holy One of God (cf. Mark 1:24; John 6:69). He had set himself apart as holy, praying on the very night of his death, “And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may

be sanctified in truth” (John 17:19). Holiness was the province of Jesus’ soul.

- *Priest*: At his ascension Jesus became a high priest in the order of Melchizedek who eternally and tirelessly intercedes for his people (Hebrews 7).

- *Light*: After Jesus’ birth, when his parents brought him to the temple, aged Simeon swept up Jesus in his arms and sang:

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

—LUKE 2:29-32

Thirty-three years later in the same temple, Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

*God’s plan: the church.* Today the threefold responsibility that was corporate Israel’s—and that of Jesus, the true Israel—falls to the church. The apostle Peter, in chapter 2 of his first letter, refers to Exodus 19:6 (where Israel had been first called to be a kingdom of priests) by telling believers that they themselves are now a holy priesthood: “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5). Again, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). We are all to declare that Christ is the light of the world, both Jews and Gentiles.

As to our holiness, the Scriptures declare that we are both “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [holy]” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

This verse contains the *indicative* of what we are (“sanctified,” i.e., holy) and the *imperative* of what we are to be (“saints [or holy],” i.e., sanctified). Thus we *are* holy and must *become* holy!

We are sanctified (set apart as holy) because Jesus is “our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). Fifty-six times the New Testament designates believers as *saints* (holy ones). The common compliment, “she’s a real saint,” referring to a woman’s goodness, is nice but uninformed. All believers are real saints (cf. Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2).

And here lies our great advantage as believers. The call to be holy is not a call to a bootstrap moralistic improvement. Rather, it is a call to live out the practical implications of our holiness in Christ by pursuing holiness as a lifestyle. Our renewal and change flow from the sanctification that God has already accomplished in our lives. As “holy and beloved” by God, we are to abandon the values and attitudes and practices that belong to the old self and be clothed with the new self (cf. Colossians 3:9-10, 12). We are to live with a confidence in what God has already done for us and to trust in him to continue his transforming work until we see him face to face.

*Finish then Thy new creation,  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heav’n we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

CHARLES WESLEY, 1747

#### HOW TO BE SET APART

Still, while holy living is not a matter of moralistic self-improvement, and while it is allowing what already has taken place to renew

our lives, it remains a daunting task. It requires saying no to our sinful desires. It requires discipline. It requires prayer and vigilance.

The stakes are so high. Righteous Lot loved Sodom. While scandalized by it, he hung on to it for dear life. And he and his family paid dearly. So listen carefully. Setting ourselves apart from the world so that we might reach the world is not so much a series of noes as much as it is an immense yes to Christ and all that he gives. A great yes to the riches of Christ supplies the perspective to say no when and as we ought. When we say yes to Christ, we say yes to eternal salvation. (For a clear explanation of the Gospel from the Old and New Testaments, see Appendix I: “The Gospel—Old and New.”) We say yes to a love that is a shoreless, bottomless sea. We say yes to the endless Niagara Falls of grace so that no matter how much we have received, there always is more grace (John 1:16; James 4:6). We say yes to the indwelling of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We say yes to becoming a temple of him who is the eternal temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). We say yes to light that fills us now and is eternal (Matthew 5:14-16). We say yes to God’s care that is ministered in the full orbs of his omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience (Psalm 139). We say yes to citizenship in heaven, and we are *now* seated in Christ in the heavenly places because Christ is in heaven and we are in him (Ephesians 2:6). We say yes to heaven and the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Revelation 21:1-2). And we say yes to his Lordship over all of life (Romans 12:1-2). His sovereignty commands every area of life. This yes is the sweetest of all—and the key to the noes he calls us to declare.

The stakes are indeed high. Lot’s folly could be ours. We are more than capable of being tormented in our righteous souls by the deeds of lawless men, all the while hanging on to the same world with all we have, so that Sodom is reborn in the lives of our nearest and dearest.

God help us.

NOTES

1. *Emerging Trends*, September 2001, Vol. 23, No. 7, The Princeton Religion Research Center, pp. 1-2.
2. ChristianityToday.com—*LeadershipJournal.net*-6, “Trends Facing Christians,” p. 2.
3. Personal conversation with Harold Smith, editor for CTi.
4. Barna Research Online, “The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings.” From Barna Research Studies, December 12, 2001.
5. Ibid.
6. Barna Research Online, “Researcher Predicts Mounting Challenges to Christian Church,” April 16, 2001.
7. Barna Research Online, “Teenagers’ Beliefs Moving Further from Biblical Perspectives,” October 23, 2000.