



WHAT? ME WORLDLY?

by Ron Benson

My little brother and I stood at the intersection, struggling with two directions. One way led to destruction, but clearly made the most sense.

The heart of the town where I grew up was a five-way intersection with a stop sign on every corner. On one corner was Welty's grocery store. Another corner was a prestigious prehistoric hotel. Another was occupied by a Bank of America. The remaining corners held a pharmacy with a luncheonette with real orange phosphates,

and a liquor store that had no phosphates, but sold every kind of alcohol you could imagine, except for the rubbing kind.

My house, the parsonage of the church, was just three blocks from "The Five-Way" on the street between the hotel and the liquor store. Downtown was completely accessible to my younger brother and me, since it was the 60's and

life wasn't so full of potential horror; we could walk the streets from dawn to dusk without ever checking in.

We did check in, however, when we were hungry or thirsty or wanted money for penny candy. Mom would always be willing to satisfy the first two requests, but it was rare to get a positive answer begging for penny candy.

Penny candy consisted of a box, usually a cigar box, filled with smaller portions of candy: Butterscotch Drops, Tootsie Rolls, Gumballs, Mary Janes, Chicken Bones, Three-

IMAGES BY MONTE WOLVERTON—FTM

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Layer Coconut Neapolitans. Pay your penny and the person behind the counter would let you choose a set number of candies out of the box. There were two places to get penny candy in town. The pharmacy and the liquor store.

Under the stress of persistent and obnoxious begging, Mom would eventually cave in and give us a penny. But it came with a warning: “Don’t use your money at the liquor store.”

This was no particular problem until we started comparing notes with our friends whose parents were liberal and licentious and allowed their children to shop at the liquor store. Our friends told us that the liquor store gave you five candies for a penny. The drug store gave you two. This created the dilemma—a problem with worldliness.

The “No” List

Worldliness was what our church avoided at all cost. Worldliness was the “no” list, the things we were forbidden to do. This list included smoking, drinking, playing cards, cussing, watching Ed Sullivan, going to movies, dancing and wearing provocative jewelry or clothing. Worldliness was going to a store to shop on Sunday, going to a restaurant that served wine, going within a hundred miles of Las Vegas for any particular reason. If you were caught doing any of these things you were worldly—you had contracted a deadly virus that made you spiritually diseased. Worldly was not good, so you were no longer much good. Worldliness was highly contagious, so you lost a few friends.

The opposite of worldliness was holiness. Avoiding worldliness did not make you holy, but it gave a person a running start. Holiness involved a “yes” list that was long and detailed and a good subject for a *Plain Truth* article, but not this one.

Avoiding worldliness made me hide my Euchre deck in the glove compartment of my 1960 Ford Station Wagon

when I was a teenager. Worldliness was what motivated my dad, the pastor, to suggest in a sermon that we all avoid the appearance of evil by not drinking pop out of a can—someone might mistake it for something else. Worldliness kept me out of square dancing classes in the fourth grade. Worldliness was conformity and compromise to sin and would lead to hell.

You can understand the temptation two young boys faced that day. It’s not as if our penny could buy liquor. It’s not like those pretty bottles with the fancy labels and corks—or the glasses you could buy that you would break against the fireplace after you stylishly sipped a beautiful and elegant wine following some wise and witty words in a toast—were going to open themselves up and pour their contents down our gullets without our permission.

We were just two kids looking for value for our penny. It was a stewardship issue. So we went in, got our candy, and got out.

And on the way home we knew, in our heart of hearts, that we had taken the first steps on a slippery slope to hell. The disease was now taking hold in our souls. Soon, we

would be casualties of the plague of worldliness.

Religious Boundary Markers

Worldliness is alive and well. It is the list of “no’s” that a religion sets up to keep us in line. It is that group of rules, not biblical or even spiritual, but pragmatic, serving as boundaries to keep adherents of the religion away from things that are deemed to be sinful. Of course, the Bible warns us against sin. It associates sin with the world, and makes it clear that Christians are to steer clear of the world of sin. But that’s not what we’re talking about. That’s not “worldliness.”

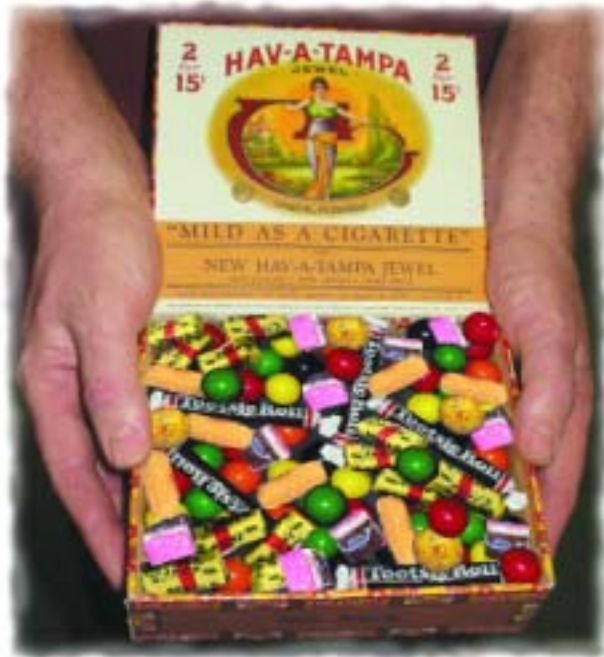
Avoiding worldliness in some churches means not working on Sunday, or wives not working at all. In some circles, worldliness means going to bars, entering a casino, buying a lottery ticket, listening to an off-color joke.

But worldliness can enter into our faith-life in more subtle ways. I had a friend once who watched a religious broadcast on TV about food, specifically the evils of processed sugars. After watching the show, my friend was convinced that candy bars were sinful, and when she subsequently ate one, she was consumed by guilt.

Sounds silly, but it’s not hard to fall into the legalistic trap of the “worldliness” police. Need to wear a certain style of clothes on Sunday? Feel guilty when you tune in to NPR? Ever hide the book you were reading from Christian friends? Ever been “shunned” because of some external behavior? The worldly police have your number.

Being *In*, But Not *Of*, The World

Jesus talked about the world a lot. He called his followers



It's complicated being "in" the world but not "of" the world. So religion—any man-made system of behavior—jumps up to help us.

"the light of the world." He claimed that God loved the world so much that he sent his only son to save it. Jesus predicted that the Good News of his kingdom would be proclaimed to the whole world. He sent his followers out to tell the world about him. He himself was called "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

One particular passage features a high concentration of the use of the Greek term, *cosmos*, or "world." It is John 17, one of the few actual prayers of Jesus passed down to us in the Bible. In the prayer, Jesus makes simple, clear statements concerning his followers and the world. As you read, remember that "I" is Jesus and "they" are his followers:

—I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world.

—They are not of the world any more than I am of the world.

—My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

—They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

—As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

The words are clear. The implications are complicated. We are "in" the world, but not "of" the world, in the same way that Jesus himself was "in" the world, but not "of" the world. What does that mean? How can I be IN, but not OF?

Being in the world is a matter of location. I am in my office at my computer right now. In a few minutes I will be in my car picking up my son from school. Then I will be in the kitchen cooking dinner. I am "in" a place, at a certain time, for a specific reason. But I don't take on a different identity whenever I change location.

Jesus was in the world. He ate, drank, spat and bled just like the rest of us. He was here, in the flesh,

fully participating in all that it means to be human.

But Jesus was not of the world. He didn't belong here. His nature, although human, was other-worldly. He came from a different place, thought different thoughts, held distinctive values and attitudes. Looking at Jesus from the outside, you wouldn't have seen much difference. Get to know him on the inside, and you discover he's not marching to the same drumbeat.

Jesus prayed to his father, asking that he not take us out of the world because we have important things to do here. This location is where God wants us. We are here, in this place, at a certain time, for a specific reason.

However, we are not "of" the world. We are different. By God's grace, we are made of different stuff. Because we have affiliated with Jesus, put our confidence in him instead of the world around us, we have been re-created as new persons, born again into a different family. Our natures have been changed, and we no longer share the same values, attitudes, principles and philosophies which formerly associated us with this world. We are "of" the Kingdom of God. We are "in" the kingdom of man.

The resulting separation from the world makes it hard to be "in" it sometimes. Jesus knew this difficulty. He was often accused of being worldly because he did not conform to the religious, legalistic mores of his culture. This was what Jesus meant by being "in" the world. He was a living, breathing, real part of the real world. He didn't live as if the world was a disease to catch. He lived as he did because the world was broken and needed repair. And he carried, in himself, that which was needed for the fix.

Jesus prays for his disciples and for us, that we share this same dis-

tinction. He prayed that we would not be removed from the world, but that, since we were not "of" the world, we would become influencers "in" the world, drawing attention to God. In order to have

influence, we need to be "in" the world. At the same time, in order to have influence, we cannot be "of" the world.

It's not easy. That's why religion steps up and gets involved here. It's complicated being "in" the world but not "of" the world. So religion—any man-made system of behavior—jumps up to help us.

Religion's Sincere Attempts to Define Worldliness

Why do religious systems so easily fall to legalistic external rules and regulations? A careful look at Jesus' prayer in John 17 gives a few powerful answers.

1. Religion needs to find a way to protect its followers. In order to keep them from temptation and sin, rules are established and boundaries created. In order to keep followers from drunkenness, for instance, some created a rule that all drinking is sinful. Attempting to circumvent immoral activity, movies are banned. Religion creates a legalistic fortress that keeps adherents safe, but removes them from the world. Followers are no longer "in" the world.

Jesus prays for protection for his disciples. But the protection is not through external behaviors that will seal the disciples into a fortress of safety, imprisoned there for what religion determines to be their own good. Jesus prays that God himself would protect his disciples from the evil one by the sheer power of his name. This protection is offered while they are "in" the world.

2. Religion wants to insure that followers will be unified. Unity is artificially created with external specifications of legalistic behavior that will set people apart as a group. Amish men wear beards and broad hats. Roman Catholics utilize a rosary and genuflect during the Mass. Baptists immerse followers in

water. Evangelicals have potluck fellowships.

Jesus' prayer makes it clear that our unity is not based on externals which are legislated for us by a hierarchy of ecclesiastical leadership. Our unity exists as a fact of our being welcomed into fellowship with God in Christ. Our unity is realized and experienced fully as we grow in our relationship to Christ.

3. Religion must have a lock on truth. This is the way followers are controlled and kept in line. This is the way individuals can be measured and evaluated for entrance into the group. This is the formula for acceptance. Legalism demands that the truth be held tightly by the authorities, that the hierarchy knows the correct interpretation of the Bible, and they will communicate whatever the followers need to know. This is coupled with the expectation that the followers will submit to that truth and, by submitting, set themselves apart from the world.

Jesus prays that his friends would be "sanctified." The word means "set apart for special purpose." He prays that, just as he has set himself apart for a special purpose "in" the world, so, too, would his disciples. They are set apart from the world, not "of" it. Jesus asks the Father to "sanctify them by the truth." And, as if to respond to the next question: What is truth? Jesus states: "Your word is truth." Jesus acknowledges that no special team of scholars is necessary to access the truth we need; it's in God's communication to man—the Bible—and it is God's tool to do his work to sanctify each of us.

Following Christ Without Becoming Legalistic

In the first church where I was pastor, my wife joined a traveling game of Bunko. Without going into particulars, Bunko is played with dice, everyone chips in money for a "pot" and that money is distributed, along with other gifts, to winners at the end of the evening of play. I know what you're thinking—sounds like gambling.

My wife did it because she wanted to get to know more people in the community who were not church attendees. She joined so she could identify with them on their turf. And, she joined because she loves to play games, and it was fun. Since the game shifted from house to house, it eventually came to the church parsonage. What a night! Decisions had to be made ahead of time: Would there be smoking inside? Would there be beer available? Would any deaconesses show up?

It was a rousing success. Women had fun. They were amazed at being welcomed into a pastor's home. And they realized that you can be a Christian and still have a rollicking good time. We had never heard as much laughter from the parsonage as we did that night. We can say for certain that spiritual fruit resulted from a game of Bunko.

On that fateful evening my wife took a walk, balancing between "in" and "of," as she bore the influence of Christ and severely dented the reputation of Christians as boring and judgmental.

Bunko may not be your thing. But it's time to come out of the unbiblical fortress of legalistic religion and take on the adventure that Jesus prayed for you. Stop allowing religion to do for you what God has promised he will do.

By the time my brother and I got home from the liquor store with penny candy in our pockets and in our mouths, someone had called and exposed our iniquity to our mother. We were in big trouble. We were punished and vowed never to enter the liquor store again.

We sent our friends in to get the penny candy for us. □

Ron Benson is a freelance writer and serves as interim pastor for Calvary Missionary Church in Livonia, Michigan. He lives in Royal Oak, Michigan, where he sometimes enjoys drinking Diet Pepsi directly from a can, and will—if he's really living on the edge—eat at a restaurant that serves beer on Sunday. If you'd like to read more of Ron's work, catch his website at www.ronbenson.net.

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Family's Boycott Extends to Everything

by Joel Kilpatrick

Joplin, Missouri

Three years ago, the Molina family sat at their kitchen table and decided to take a moral stand: They would no longer patronize any company which had connection to abortions, homosexual rights, pornography or any other objectionable cause.

This month, the Molinas' decision finally reached its zenith, as their boycott now covers every product on the U.S. market.

"Our lives have narrowed down to a few choice pleasures," says mother Carly, peeling homegrown carrots and trying to put a positive spin on their experience. The children play with splintery wooden toys hewn from a nearby tree by

their father, Joe Molina. On the mantle are framed photos of former Christmases, when the children received plush Elmo toys, tricycles and other toddler fare. Those days are no more.

The Molinas used to live like other American families, enjoying television shows, taking yearly vacations and participating in local sports.

Now they can't go to Disneyland or watch ABC News, because ABC supports domestic partnerships. They no longer eat at McDonald's, Burger King or Taco Bell, because those companies have made contributions to candidates which support abortion. Carl's Jr. is out of the question because of their racy television commercials. Even

LegoLand is tainted: Its corporate headquarters in Denmark supports liberal political causes.

They can't drive vehicles made by Toyota, Ford, BMW or most other car companies because they allow health insurance designation of domestic partners. They can't eat Frito-Lay products because the company's health plan splits the cost of abortions with its employees. Even the cooperatives that grow and deliver fresh fruit and vegetables

are dominated by unions, which the Molinas boycott because of their affiliation with liberal causes.

"The pantry and the entertainment closet started getting bare once we looked into these companies," Joe says.

They now drive a Kia, whose parent company earns a "clean" rating from the Molinas. The only commercially-grown food they can eat is potatoes, the only crop they know of with no ties to objectionable activity.

"We're finding creative ways of cooking the spud," says Joe one night, standing over a deep fryer. The electricity is supplied by a generator, because the Molinas are boycotting the local utility company for offering cable television which includes racy movie channels.

Little by little, family members have stopped visiting, and the Molinas have found their social life languishing. Nobody wants to eat homemade vegetable stew, even with the promise of homemade ice cream, says Joe.

He and Carly employ gallows humor, sometimes waking up in the morning and remarking, "So, what can't we do today?" Long-distance vacations are gone, as airplane-maker Boeing supports domestic partnerships.

For entertainment they watch old Lassie movies on a VCR made by an obscure Korean company—the only electronics maker they could find that has no tie to immoral causes. When a reporter points out that Lassie is owned by Warner Studios, a supporter of dozens of liberal causes, Joe sighs, pulls the video from the machine and breaks it in two. The children run to their rooms and cry face-down on their Amish blankets.

"They're used to it. They'll get over it," Joe says.

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Joel Kilpatrick is an award-winning writer and creator of Lark News.com, a Christian satire website.

Joe and Carly Molina with their two children, Rebekah and Jared in front of their Joplin, Missouri, home. Citing moral concerns, the family has boycotted every product on the U.S. market.

