

## Social Vices

by David E. Moss

Even light reading of the Bible reveals that God makes a distinction between things that are right and wrong, good and evil, holy and unholy, clean and unclean. God also makes it clear in His Word that His people are supposed to demonstrate this difference in their lives.

To the church God said,

*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and **touch not the unclean thing**; and I will receive you (II Corinthians 6:14-17).*

To the Priests of the Old Testament God said,

*And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean; And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses (Leviticus 10:10-11).*

To the Priesthood of believers in the New Testament God said,

*Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation, Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy (I Peter 1:13-16).*

Some suggest, however, that the Bible teaches a moral relativism. They object to the practice by which one Christian makes a list of specific activities for another Christian which he considers to be either right or wrong. A statement in a publication by a prominent evangelical seminary says:

A closer reading and study of God's Word now indicate that "separation" as proclaimed and practiced by Christians committed to that stance is neither biblical nor Christlike. It distorts the message of holy living by grace and resorts to legalism. Like the Judaizers who overran the First Church of Galatia, such separationists have instituted their own taxonomy of extra biblical standards. As if to compensate for the presumably insufficient work of Jesus Christ in achieving man's redemption, believers are urged to add works of their own: circumcision in the form of a checklist of disallowed entertainments and cultural taboos.... Instead of asceticism and deprivation, instead of isolationism and withdrawal from the world, thinking Christians need to reassert their calling to live in "sanctified worldliness," that is, to live fully and freely as children of God in appreciation of the world He has given them to care for.... For to lead the church of Jesus Christ at the end of the 20th century into fuller understanding of its redemptive mission in the world, people need the example of thinking Christians living in sanctified worldliness -- Christians who know and appreciate nature, who know and love the arts, who know and enjoy recreation and entertainment....

According to this statement, we have finally come to understand the Bible after 20 centuries. No one before our generation looked at the Scriptures closely enough to understand

that God really wants us fully and freely to indulge in the pleasurable things this world has to offer, and that anyone who suggests that God wants us to deprive ourselves and to isolate ourselves from the entertaining things of this world is a legalist.

Both church history and the Bible refute this new version of Christian libertarianism. Throughout church history, specific applications of biblical guidelines for moral behavior have been preached and enforced by church leaders. Those guidelines are still a part of the inerrant, infallible, indestructible Word of God. The specific applications may vary according to a man's culture, but the need for those applications will be exactly the same, regardless of time or place.

### **A History of How the Church Has Dealt With Social Vices**

Once the church was established in the first century and specific leadership began to emerge in each local church, those early leaders quickly sensed a need for monitoring the testimony of the church in the community. The world of the Roman Empire was morally depraved. Prostitution was considered a viable career option and young girls could go to school to train to be prostitutes. Abortion and infanticide were common place. Art was dominated by nudity and obscenity and was displayed in the most public of places. The upper classes were saturated with a lifestyle of sensuality, and the Emperors themselves were as guilty of excessive behavior as anyone else. Divorce and remarriage was normal, homosexuality was practiced freely, and public entertainment was full of violent and licentious performances.

In this context, the church Fathers tried desperately to help Christians make specific applications of biblical principles regarding social behavior. They denounced abortion, infanticide, divorce, homosexuality, prostitution, adultery, make-up, dyed hair, and drunkenness. They restricted the use of musical instruments in worship to avoid the sensual overtones with which such sounds were associated in the world. They set rules against Christians attending the theater and the public games in the arenas. They preached against participation by Christians in the festivities of pagan holidays. One example of the specificity with which these early church Fathers instructed the believers regards the "holy kiss" suggested by Scripture (II Corinthians 13:12) and practiced in those early local churches. The historian Will Durant describes these instructions as follows:

In some congregations this was given only by men to men, and by women to women; in others this hard restriction was not enforced. Many participants discovered an untheological delight in the pleasant ceremony; and Tertullian and others denounced it as having led to sexual indulgences. The Church recommended that the lips should not be opened in kissing, and that the kiss should not be repeated if it gave pleasure. (Caesar And Christ, page 598)

The excesses of Roman licentiousness were so difficult for the church to counteract, that some came to believe extreme measures were necessary in order to succeed. Blatant displays of the lusts of the flesh throughout society led some to ascetic practices and extreme behaviors in which they sought to remove from themselves any semblance of worldliness. Out of this grew monasticism, a practice in which men removed themselves completely from society and in isolation sought to live holy, pure, and spiritual lives. There are many critical things one might say about monasticism, but it does illustrate an awareness by early Christians of how dangerous it was to expose oneself to the temptations of a depraved society.

The struggle continued throughout church history. There were times in which some church leaders gave in to the passions of the flesh and others had to pull the church back into moral reality. For example, the Popes and priests of the Dark Ages, who were supposed to live

celibate lives, kept concubines and celebrated the weddings of their own illegitimate children. Part of the Reformation reaction to the excesses of Catholicism was a moral outrage at how corrupt these church leaders had become. Reformation preaching brought about a renewal of moral codes of conduct, restoring the values of marriage, family and social responsibility to the people who called themselves Christians.

By the 19th century, the church in America had influenced society so thoroughly that the conservative moral and social standards preached in the pulpit became the accepted standard for life outside of the church. The Christian lifestyle was the pattern and secular society adapted its social mores to conform. It is no coincidence then that the proponents of liberalism attacked the church first. The credibility of Scripture was undermined by biblical criticism; man's accountability to God was brought into question by Darwin's theories of evolution; and the rules for Christian conduct were contradicted by "thinking" liberal theologians and religious philosophers. As a result, the prestige of the church was diminished in the eyes of the general population who then looked elsewhere for their values. Eventually, the direction of influence was completely reversed and the mores of the church became the product of a hedonistic society.

When I was a teenager in the 1960's, the world was promoting free love, short skirts on girls, long hair on boys, and rock 'n' roll music. In the church, it was very different. Christians did not dance, attend the movie theater, drink alcohol, smoke, or have sex outside of marriage. Girls were not allowed to wear short skirts, boys were not allowed to have long hair and, and rock 'n' roll music was taboo. At least, this was what I was taught, but not everyone in the church agreed. When the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show for the first time, many in the church were outraged at the blatant display of rebellion in their music and physical appearance. But many Christian teenagers stayed home from the Sunday evening service to watch the show. A generation later, the Beatles now appear to be mild compared to the kind of music and dress used for "worship" in many churches across America. Need we wonder why? The Christian teens who chose the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show over Sunday evening service are now the leaders of the local church.

### **A Specific History of How North Hills Bible Church Has Dealt With Social Vices**

Back in the 1930's, the founding Pastor of the North Hills Bible Church faced the same struggle in trying to keep worldliness out of the church. Quoting from a history of this local church,

Rev. Kraybill felt the need to preach the gospel as the Holy Spirit led. But in the process he was tramping on certain persons toes....The local church did not mind the preaching of eternal security, in fact they were in favor of it, but they were not all in favor of the way he preached on a separated Christian life. This seemed to be a continual hardship for many people as they lived in their worldly ways. The issue was finally decided when the daughter of one member of the church wanted to go into show business and the family was in favor of it. Rev. Kraybill protested violently and asked to have this family put out of the church.

This controversy resulted in a protest being registered with the leadership of the denomination to which the church belonged. The denomination withdrew Pastor Kraybill's ordination credentials and removed him from the pulpit. The good news is that a large part of the congregation appreciated Pastor Kraybill's stand on doctrine and morality and joined with him in starting The Bible Church.

Some years later, under the guidance of another Pastor (James McClain) North Hills

Bible Church continued its stand on social issues by adopting a dress code. In minutes from the church board meeting dated March 18, 1973,

The matter of standards for the young people was brought up. Some of the girls wear their skirts entirely too short. Standards need to be set down for church and church-related young peoples' activities.

One of the board members at that time said

That the same needs to be done for Sunday School teachers. The discussion brought out that this is indeed an area we need to give attention to and be concerned about."

Another board member brought forth a similar problem, saying,

Members of the congregation have complained about the skirts of some choir members....They request that the board take definite and immediate action on this matter before it gets completely out of hand. The Board discussed the standards to be set and the business of enforcing the standards. The Pastor suggested that he and the secretary (of the Board) draw up a set of standards....The board noted that Christian liberty stops where one sets a bad example for others.

Several months later, the Pastor read the code of dress standards to the board. The minutes of September 9, 1973 read,

There was considerable discussion, centering about the matters of whether the code should read "should" or "must" on requiring standards; the issues involved; and how to put it into effect. Christians should know what is right without such a step, and children from Christian homes should be instructed on such things. But they are not. People know what the church stands for, but are influenced in worldly directions....It was decided that the forum for presenting this to the congregation was via a series of messages on separation. The Pastor feels the churches are losing their identification as peculiar people; there is a lack of separation. We should put the burden of responsibility on the girls and women to do what the Bible teaches. In the end it was decided to make the code say "must" rather than "should," and the skirt length to be defined as "knee length" rather than a number of inches.

The following is the resulting Dress Code for North Hills Bible Church as included in the minutes of the Board, December 9, 1973:

The Word of God is very clear about the dress and conduct of believers in Christ. We are "a peculiar people" (I Peter 2:9) and as such we are "to abstain from all appearance of evil." (I Thess. 5:22) Since the fashions of men completely ignore, in many instances, all decency and modesty, it is necessary to spell out what the believer in Christ must do to retain his testimony for and obedience to Christ. We feel that the Lord is not pleased when women and girls adopt apparel that exposes their bodies and in anyway makes them be the cause of exciting lust in the opposite sex (I Timothy 2:9).

In view of this, dresses and skirts must not be shorter than knee length and the neck line not be of exaggerated plunging style. Hip-huggers and bare midsections are highly immodest. Men's hair must be neatly trimmed and kept so as not to identify or associate them with the godless revolutionary symbols of the day. Likewise, men's apparel must be modest - not gaudy, wild and spectacular. The believer should not be proud and vain seeking to draw admiration and attention to himself, but rather be inconspicuous so that people's attention will be focused on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many Christians innocently and without any thought of joining Satan's crowd are tricked into wearing the fashions of the day, because everybody is doing it. Let us not join the enemies of our Lord by conforming to the ways of this present evil world.

We desire our young people to recognize the moral issues involved in dress standards, and to develop attitudes of modesty and decency in line with the Word of

God. We encourage them to recognize that prescribed limitations are necessary and not arbitrary or legalistic. Therefore, these standards of dress are affirmed as applicable to them in their various activities.

This specific example from North Hills Bible Church illustrates the attempt by Christian leaders in every period of church history to help God's people understand how to apply the biblical principles of morality in specific social situations. Legalism was the furthest thing from their minds. Sanctification and the pursuit of holiness according to the commandments of Scripture was always their sole objective.

### **Biblical Guidelines for Sanctification**

Nevertheless, we are confronted with the argument that the closer reading and study of God's Word available to us today proves that church leaders from Tertullian to Martin Luther to O.M. Kraybill to James McClain have been legalistic in establishing specific codes of conduct for the members of their churches. There is, however, another way to look at this. There has been a profound consistency among godly men throughout church history in making specific applications of biblical principles in social contexts. And from this consistent example of godly men, it really appears that today's Christian libertarians are grossly missing the point.

The setting of rules which help believers understand specific applications to biblical principles of sanctification is not legalism. Legalism is the philosophy by which one attempts to earn spiritual favor from God, particularly for salvation, by his own works. To institute a set of standards for Christian conduct in the form of a checklist of disallowed entertainments and cultural taboos which provide believers with helpful insights as to the difference between that which is clean and unclean is surely not legalism in the biblical sense. If it were, then God himself is a legalist. The Bible is full of lists which outline the difference between right behaviors and wrong ones. For example, Galatians 5:19-23 lists the difference between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. II Thessalonians 3:6-15 describes the errors and consequences of disorderly conduct among believers. I Timothy 5:11-15 admonishes young widows concerning inappropriate behavior for Christian women. II Timothy 3:1-7 lists the characteristics of those who have a form of powerless godliness and who perpetually pursue knowledge without ever reaching truthful conclusions. I Peter 4:3-5 warns against returning to the activities characteristic of an unsaved lifestyle.

The first century church struggled with this matter of legalism, in which some insisted that Gentiles were required to follow certain Jewish regulations in order to be a Christian. Those godly Apostles and first Elders, while dismissing legalism as false and unscriptural, made a short list of taboo activities. They said:

*Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men...who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. **For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.***

This list is particularly interesting in that it includes the activity of abstaining from meats offered to idols. To these men, this was not an optional activity reserved for mature believers. They simply said that Christians would do well to abstain. This gives a whole different perspective on what Paul was teaching in I Corinthians 8 and 10 concerning this activity. The admonitions in

these chapters to those who were eating meat offered to idols indicate that there were some serious questions about the propriety of their doing so, even if it did not immediately affect their own personal persuasion in the faith.

Christian libertarians, though, like to use eating meat offered to idols as an example of a gray area in which believers have options and absolute rules for behavior are inappropriate. The term “gray area” is supposed to suggest that an activity so labeled cannot possibly be defined as either right or wrong and that anyone who makes rules against gray area activities is legalistic. The color gray, however, is a mixture of black and white. In fact, it is the presence of black in the color gray which has taken away the purity of what was originally white. How can a sanctified believer justify indulging in an activity that has been compromised by such a mixture? The Bible says we are even to *abstain from all appearances of evil* (I Thessalonians 5:22). If something has enough darkness in it to call it gray, surely the appearance of evil cannot be far away.

God made it very clear in His word that believers, enabled by grace, are to live sanctified lives.

*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour* (I Thessalonians 4:3-4).

The emphasis on the word vessel means that a believer must on the one hand deny himself certain worldly entertainments and cultural activities which foster the flesh and encourage carnality in the believer’s life; and on the other hand, he must pursue godliness by carefully selecting behaviors that show in the exterior of his life the sanctification of the inner man being wrought by the Spirit of God. Titus 2:11-12 tells us that the very same grace of God that brings salvation to men also teaches us, “*that denying ungodliness, and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.*” Repeatedly, God’s Word tells us that believers are to adopt a lifestyle of non-conformity to the world in order to live a sanctified life (Romans 12:1-2, Romans 8:13, Romans 13:13-14, II Corinthians 7:1, Galatians 5:16, II Timothy 2:22, I Peter 2:11, I Peter 4:3-5, I John 2:15-17).

II Corinthians 6:14-18 explains how believers are to separate from the world and “***touch not the unclean thing***” so that our fellowship with God will not be broken. What is the unclean thing that believers are not to touch? This is the monumental question Christian leaders have been trying to help believers grapple with for two thousand years. First, it is important to note that there is such a thing as an unclean thing from which believers are to keep themselves. And, in order to do this, we must identify what that unclean thing is. Secondly, the Greek text does not include the definite article with the phrase unclean thing. The Bible is thus not referring to one specific thing that is unclean, but to ***any-thing that is unclean***. Whatever is characterized by being unclean, that is what the believer should not touch. So the believer is left with the important exercise of evaluating everything that is available to him in this world and determining whether or not it is clean and therefore compatible with the sanctified life he is to be living in Christ.

The lists provided by separationists serve as sources of advice in determining what is clean and what is unclean. Mature believers who provide such lists in no way suggest that a person can get to heaven by meticulously following their so-called “man-made” rules. Rather, they are providing insight based on their knowledge and experience to growing Christians as to the kind of activities which have the potential of preventing them from possessing their vessel in sanctification and honor. This is precisely what the Apostles and Elders were doing when they told the Gentile believers to abstain from meats offered to idols. This was what the church fathers were doing when they instructed Christians not to attend the theater. And, this was what

the Board was doing when it provided a dress code to the congregation of the North Hills Bible Church.

The burden of proof is not on the separationists to confirm that their lists are not legalistic. The burden of proof is on the libertarians to confirm that their lack of restraint is not an occasion to the flesh. In Galatians 5:13, Paul called for perspective in reacting to legalism by saying, *For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.* The liberty to which we have been called in Christ is not one of indulgence but one of service. Being liberated from sin and all of its consequences, we should not turn again to the self-pleasuring activities associated with the problem, but we should turn instead to the respectable activities that help others find the solution.

Laying this burden of proof on the libertarian's shoulders, let them answer the following questions.

1. Does dancing avoid the immoral pitfalls represented in Scripture when Herod derived destructive pleasure from watching his stepdaughter perform before him and his guests? (Matthew 14:1-12)
2. Does dancing avoid the pitfalls which resulted from the questionable public demonstration of David, albeit in the context of worship, who by it breached his relationship with his first and most legitimate wife? (II Samuel 6:20-23)
3. Does attending the public movie theater conform with the Scriptural command to "*come out from among them and be ye separate...and touch not the unclean thing?*" ( II Corinthians 6:17)
4. Does indiscriminate watching of movies, videos, or television programs which contain violence, sexual content, and other elements of ungodliness fulfill the Scriptural principle stated in Psalm 101:3: *I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me?*
5. Does the wearing of mini-skirts, short shorts and other types of clothing that expose more flesh in public comply with God's instruction to dress modestly? (I Timothy 2:9).
6. Does changing our wardrobe and conforming to every fashionable fad fulfill the biblical rule not to conform to this world? (Romans 12:1-2)
7. Do long hair styles on boys which mimic rock 'n' roll singers follow the teachings of nature and of the Word of God showing a man's proper position in the order of creation? (I Corinthians 11:1-15)
8. Does the incorporation of the elements of worldly music into Christian music actually help a believer to walk in the Spirit and not to fulfill the lusts of the flesh? (Galatians 5:16)
9. Does participation in worldly forms of entertainment fulfill the Scriptural admonition to let *the time past of our life ...suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles?* (I Peter 4:3)
10. Is a Christian's acceptance of activities as neutral merely because they are culturally derived compatible with God's warning to *love not the world, neither the things that are in the world?* (I John 2:15)

### Final Note

There is a very disturbing statement in Will Durant's commentary on the infiltration of worldly practices into the early church. He said, "In such matters it was not the priests who corrupted the people, but the people who persuaded the priests" (The Age of Faith, page 75). In other words, the church was turned upside down. Those who should have been leading were following; and those who did not know where they were going were determining the direction the church would take. It has not always been this way in the church, but the pendulum is swinging back in this direction in our day.

Christians have a very significant choice to make: will they let the teachings of the church be the dominant influence on how they live their lives in the world; or will they let the influence of the world be the dominant factor in what they look for from their church? For too many, the latter is the choice they make. They see things they enjoy in the world and they insist that the church provide the same kinds of opportunities for self gratification.

This then forces church leaders to make a choice: will they stand firm and say no, or will they give in and accommodate the worldly desires of people in the pew? Let's face it. A pastor's livelihood is almost entirely dependent upon the salary he receives from the local church he serves. An evangelist's income is derived exclusively from the offerings of the people to whom he preaches. A missionary's ability to stay on the field is based on the money sent to him by people back home. And, the withholding of funds is a powerful tool by which people in the pew can hold leverage over a man in the pulpit. Dare we say it? Could it be that job security is a greater influence on Christian leaders today than the Holy Spirit? Have we seen the decline of standards in the modern church because preachers face a terrible dilemma of either giving in or losing their jobs? Perhaps it is with good reason that Scripture warns men not to be greedy of filthy lucre.

The devastating thing is that there have always been some all too willing to accommodate the whims of people. From Aaron, the first High Priest in Israel, to the Willow Creek movement in our own day, you can see a long line of church leaders who found it easier to be led than to lead. And the more preachers there are who accommodate the worldly interests of people in the pew, the more power the people gain in pressuring the remaining preachers who want to stand firm. The tide has turned so much in the modern church, that those who maintain an insistence on the pursuit of sanctification are actually made to look like the bad guys. Christian libertarians have successfully branded godly, holy men as legalists and their teachings as pharisaical. It is a clear case of calling good evil (Isaiah 5:20). And the general population in the church is so convinced that there appears to be no means of stopping the flood of worldliness that is overwhelming the church.

In spite of this, there is a simple solution. The whole matter could be resolved if each and every child of God made a personal commitment to obey God's commandments. His commandments are still the same as they have always been.

Come out from among them and be ye separate.  
Touch not the unclean thing.  
Adorn yourselves in modest apparel.  
Love not the world, neither the things in the world.  
Be not conformed to this world.  
Possess your vessel in sanctification and in honor.  
Deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and live soberly, righteously and godly in this  
present  
world.

Abstain from all appearance of evil.  
Be ye holy, as I am holy.

After all, *This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments and his commandments are not grievous* (I John 5:3). Keeping God's commandments is not a burden of legalism; it is an act of loving obedience to the one who delivered us from enslavement to the flesh. Of course God wants us to deny ourselves those things from which He delivered us, and those things which bring us dangerously close to them. Why would He deliver us from the consequences of those things if He did not want us to discontinue our participation in them?

Oh, I forgot. Jesus openly associated with publicans and sinners, and somehow this is supposed to justify a Christian's participation in worldly activities. There is an interesting thing to note about this though. Jesus never sinned (I John 3:5; I Peter 2:22), and His message to these worldly people was always the same, *Go, and sin no more*. Not bad advice for today. Would you agree? 📖