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Image & Reality in Society

Part 2

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“Our life is not to be governed by constructing and projecting our own image, but by living out His likeness.”

Having examined the notion of image in modern society and seen something of its use in various fields, we will look at ways in which images have displaced values or ideals even in the church, where one might have hoped this tendency would have been resisted. We will then turn toward a solution in the Biblical teaching on integrity.

Truth and Values

Values have usually been principles, ideals and norms which were recognized to have worth or be good. Moral values are those things that are right by virtue of some standard of truth, whether it be tradition, reason, or, as the Christian would say, the character of God. They are solid, non-malleable. We are not able to change them at our whim.

The word “value” is maintained: in fact, the word itself may be getting more use than ever, but there is a difference. Now *values* refers to those acts or customs which are considered favourably by a certain group. It is the approval of the group or even the individual, that invests them with value. The value does not exist as a value independently of our approval of it. We are familiar with “value clarification” in our schools. It is surely a good idea to clarify our values. No one would argue for confused values. However, is this all that we can do? Can we only clarify values that we already have? Can we not challenge our values, demanding that they be rooted in something that is true? Can we not discuss the possibility that some people’s values may be wrong?

In the last century Carl Schurz wrote “Ideals are like stars. You will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, will reach your destiny.”¹ His point is that values or ideals are external to us, not man-made. You cannot get your hands on them to monkey with them. If you could move the stars around in the sky, they would no longer be of any value in navigation. The value of values to us is that they are not malleable, but stand independently from our individual or collective whim. They demand to be served, adhered to, they have a claim on us. In a certain sense, whether we believe in the values of love and

justice is irrelevant to the values themselves. They are true whether we believe in them or not, fail to live up to them or not - legitimized on a different basis than our favour. We do not make values, we bow to them.

It would be a fruitful study to chart what *values* has come to mean in our society and why the changes have happened. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper. We will look at the ways that image-thinking has replaced value-thinking. If an educational institution finds itself in a slump and a financial crisis, it is a prodigious task to reaffirm its adherence to high standards of education. Even if the standard of education is raised it would take several years for that to be noticed by anybody. On the other hand, if they should bring in some consultants who could, through some well-done, well-photographed brochures, change the image of the school in the public eye, then perhaps far more of an impression could be established. As with an individual, if you have a change of face there may seem to be no need for a change of heart. Boorstin calls image the “pseudo-events of the ethical world. They have the brilliance to give us a sense of direction, but there is nothing more than a mask.

Images have shown themselves to be so effective in so many different fields that it should not surprise us to see the church get on the bandwagon. This the church has done, but in several different ways, none of which have been a credit to it. Today one hears many outcries from the secular world against the church, charging it with secularism. Many of these are quite justified. Think of the existentialist Ernest Becker, who wrote:

Today religionists wonder why youth has abandoned the churches not wanting to realize that it is precisely because organized religion openly subscribes to a commercial-industrial hero system that is almost openly defunct. It so obviously denies reality, builds war machines against death, and banishes sacredness with bureaucratic dedication. Men are treated as things and the world is pulled down to their own size. The churches subscribe to this world empty heroics of possession, display and manipulation.²

Isn't there some truth to this? The world looks to the church to see something different, but too often the church has outdone the world at its own game. There are two main ways that this has happened, one a tendency in those churches which we would call theologically liberal, and the other in churches which we would call conservative.

To take the liberal church first, I draw on an article in the New York Times concerning the Methodist Church, “Methodists, in Search of a Coherent Identity, Acknowledge Crisis.” One could have picked any one of the main American denominations here; I have no intention of making a special critique of Methodism, but it serves as a good illustration of image-orientation in a church context. It is a report of a General Conference in 1980.

Both the left and the right have responded to the oft-spoken anxiety over the apparent loss of a clear image of the church that can stir the enthusiasm of members who have become complacent, the same kind of middle-class Americans that were called “forgotten” by Richard M. Nixon, the same citizens who worry about the nation's moral stability but have little faith that either the church or government will present answers.

“We commissioned a Harris poll recently to test our image,” said Dr. Norman Dewire, general secretary of the church's board of ministry, “and we found overwhelmingly that Methodism has no image in the general population any more. Then we asked just Methodists, and we got the full gambit of responses. There is no image left. That worries me because we started out clearly evangelical in the best

sense, as circuit riders went from town to town, out front on all the issues.”

For the moment, the church appears to prefer a middle course between the liberals and the conservatives. The general conference, the supreme ruling body of 1,000 delegates that meets every four years, resisted the extremes, heard accounts of the problems and seemed satisfied that the two-week session had passed without further splitting members into factions.

For example, the conference appeased neither the left nor the right on the issue of homosexuality. The delegates reaffirmed a church stance that homosexuality is “incompatible” with Christian teaching but refused explicitly to bar avowed, practicing homosexuals from the ministry. The Good News caucus had campaigned for the outright prohibition while liberals opposed the church’s general rejection of homosexuality.

The conference also continued the church’s strong support for racial justice, the elimination of sexism and the development of churches and services for ethnic minorities. In a departure, the conference took an unusual step in the direction of evangelism by voting to raise \$25 million to buy a commercial television station.³

I hope that by now a number of aspects of this article will appear familiar to you. Note that there is no more concern with truth than Ron Zeigler had when he said that his earlier statement had become “inoperative.” The only question is that of how the image, or lack of it, functions. They are concerned that their image never grips anyone, not that they might not be doing the truth. Can you imagine the apostles of the first century sitting down and anxiously polling the residents of Jerusalem and Antioch to see what their image was of the church? They had far too much to do in preaching the gospel, and the source of their gospel was not in public opinion, but was in the spoken word of God.

Also, the nature of the image presented was that of advertising and politics. Just as the political convention tried to “mingle the many meanings of good” in order to appeal to that “non-ideological muddle in our subconscious,” so this ecclesiastical conference tried to conjure up notions of fearlessly standing for the truth as the old circuit riders had, but also of being liberal, undogmatic, contemporary and ever open to change. It is a play to the world of our expectations where we can still eat and stay thin, have compact cars that are spacious and be constantly on the move and ever more neighbourly. It is in our world of expectations that a church can be everything to everybody. As long as this is maintained one must avoid ever dealing with issues such as homosexuality and stick to contradictory politically dictated statements about it. The whole focus is on the mask, not the face behind it; perhaps Boorstin would call it an ecclesiastical “pseudo-event,” pointing to a great hollowness behind the mask. The hope is that some of that hollowness might be filled by a new TV station.

Lest those who are theologically more conservative would look judgmentally on this kind of procedure, we see image-orientation in a different form in their ranks. Here the problem is not so much the issue of image to take the place of lost substance or content, but is in the uncritical adoption of many of the methodologies of the commercial world. Image advertising seems to have made a solid foothold in the style of communication used by parts of the church.

For example, Bob Bloom, a Texas ad man whose agency is used by one of the major denominations of this country said, “We are trying to sell a product, and that product is Jesus Christ.” Market researchers discovered that the number one problem for Texans was hopelessness. Therefore, they made up a series of 30 second spots with celebrities from

sports and entertainment saying how Jesus Christ had changed their lives and given them hope. Featured were Eldridge Cleaver, Ephram Zimbalist Jr. and others. Or, on another occasion, a church held a “double miracle day” to double church attendance. There were revivals led by an assistant coach of the Dallas Cowboys, a millionaire interior designer, Miss Teenage America, and the yo-yo champion of the world. These examples appeared in a book written by a non-Christian who is impressed by the depth and cultural value of Christian teaching (though not believing it to be true), but despairing of the superficiality in which Christians live and communicate.

Virginia Owens, in her book *The Total Image*, sees similar problems:

... as Bruce Cook, the former advertising agent for Coca-Cola who engineered the “I found it” campaign, put it, “Back in Jerusalem when the church started, God performed a miracle there on the Day of Pentecost. They didn’t have the benefit of buttons and media, so God had to do a little supernatural work there. But today, with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society.”⁴

Do we really think that the same kind of interest is raised as on the Day of Pentecost? I doubt it. Perhaps a better Biblical event to use as a paradigm would be Palm Sunday. It was an entirely up-beat occasion. Jesus was widely recognized as the foremost celebrity of the season, and rumours about him were spreading like wildfire. It is hard to imagine greater “interest.” Everyone was excited, fascinated - except of course Jesus himself who wept as he looked at Jerusalem. He knew that this acclaim was superficial, skin-deep, and that it would last less than five days. Where were all those people on Good Friday? Perhaps some were even among the multitudes who shouted to Pilate, “Crucify him.” Wherever they were, there was something more interesting going on than defending Jesus against his accusers. What they had responded to on Palm Sunday was their own image of the Messiah. When the Son of God failed to measure up to that image and expectation, they had better things to do with their time.

Virginia Owens continues to evaluate the Christian media blitz:

The point is to make the picture so appealing that the customer wants to see himself within the frame. Health, wealth, youth (or at least youthful age), sharp clothes, exuberant optimism. Is the product Coca-Cola or Christ? It’s hard to tell.

Actually, the product is lifestyle, that loathsome word that has succeeded in trivializing our existence for us. It is a necessary component in the wardrobe of someone with a good self-image. One opens the closet, puts on his life-style, looks in the mirror, and there’s his self-image smiling at him.

The product that Mr. Cook and other Christian advertisers are supposedly selling is Christ. Yet Christ is nowhere to be found in the picture. If he were, it would severely limit the marketing potential of the picture. Christ is motivationally equivalent to, say, Geritol. Any ad man knows there is no point in putting out a picture of a bottle of Geritol. Instead, he shows a picture of a youthful, happily married couple who attribute their health and success to Geritol. The same with Jesus. He himself doesn’t sell well, any more than a bottle of tonic. So the ad shows pictures of people who can testify to the therapeutic results in their lives. The appeal is the same as in any image advertisement: put yourself in this picture.⁵

There are two problems with this kind of communication. First, it too often fails to communicate Christ at all - it miniaturizes and trivializes him. It uses his name to titillate our extraordinary expectations of life, and therefore fascinates us. He is no longer the Lord

and Maker of heaven and earth who will one day have us all at His feet. The second thing is that the way Christ is presented encourages and plays to the very kind of worldliness (success and celebrity) that Christ, in fact, calls us out of and to repent from. Despite certain undeniable results from this kind of communication, at the end of the day, it seems that the preponderant result will be Palm Sunday faith.

Perhaps it is that, in a society which fabricates almost everything else, it should be expected to fabricate God as well. It seems that modern society has done just that. How is God perceived in the media? He is evaluated through polls which report the percentages of people who believe in His existence, pray to Him, go to His churches, read His word, and so forth. There might be graphs in *Time* and *Newsweek* of church attendance over the last decade, with a similar graph charting sales of Plymouths on the next page. Could it be that there is more concern with God's image than His existence? After all, questions of His existence are seldom newsworthy. The discussion becomes too difficult to follow in a media presentation. The newsworthy item still remains God's prestige in a secular society. As Boorstin points out, He is no longer the Alpha and the Omega, the first Fact, the Creator and Sustainer of Heaven and Earth, He is the author of the world's best-selling book, and is therefore, reduced to the status of a celebrity. The relevant question is not whether or not God exists, but whether He is useful for a "God-fearing" society to believe in.

God, therefore, has all the earmarks of being a pseudo-event. His power is in terms of how widely He is reported, His prestige is measured by public opinion, and His relationship to reality is highly ambiguous.

Integrity: Toward the Recovery of Reality

The image-orientation of our culture is not localized in certain ideals or social structures. For many it reaches to their basic tacit assumptions about reality; it is their pair of glasses through which they see the world. As such, it will not do to aim at making adjustments to our style of doing advertising or politics. We must start with God as the final reality.

Remember that one of the main advantages of an image is its malleability in your service. It enables you to maintain extravagant expectations of the world and of your role in it. This attitude is captured by one stanza of the poem "Creed" by Steve Turner.

We believe that each man must find the truth
that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust. History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.⁶

By contrast with this attitude, the final ultimate reality, God himself, is in no way mouldable by us. Boorstin rightly remarks how different the modern view is from the mind-set of the American past.:

... the God of the American Founding Fathers, whatever other qualities he might have had, was a constitutional monarch. He ruled by laws which he was not free to change at his whim ... For neither God nor man was the world wholly plastic.⁷

If the world was not wholly plastic to God, how much more is it unplastic to us, and how much further beyond our reach is God himself? In fact, this is one of the clear distinctions

between the God of the Bible and idols as the Bible defines them. The Psalmist points out that:

Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes but do not see. (Psalm 115:3-5, RSV)

The extraordinary thing is that God should pay any attention to man at all. The ultimate question is surely not the prestige of God in the eyes of man, God's public image in a secular society. That question is dwarfed by a far larger one - namely, what does God think of us? One day He will judge us. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. This will be the great culmination of history on this planet, but there will not even be any TV coverage. There will be no reporters or observers, there will be only participants.

The real issue is the one raised by Micah, "What does the Lord require of you?" The answer, of course, is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8, RSV) But how do we do this as sinners in the midst of a highly sophisticated social and economic system which would scorn the idea that God might make requirements of us at all? How do we confront the image-orientation that is so powerful and effective?

There is no use trying to avoid use of images, whether individual or corporate. Life does have a performance side. This is not to say that all of life is a performance or that performance governs all of our actions. It is rather that we are aware of being observed by others at times and that their observation affects our behaviour in varying degrees. Corporately also, it is impossible not to project images. Our social institutions do communicate impressions, whether we like it or not, and whether these impressions have been intended or not. In most institutions there is at least some conscious awareness of the impression projected out to those who observe. Thus the idea of projecting images and impressions is unavoidable, and a distinction must be made between legitimate and illegitimate use of images.

Perhaps the place to begin is to say that through all our involvement with performance, God himself must be in the audience. God is not only completely free from our control; the Bible says that He is in control of our world and that He sees absolutely all. God, then, is the final audience; nothing on earth happens apart from His observation. It is a tendency of sinful man to forget or ignore this fact in his pretended autonomy from God. This is a primary characteristic of the fool:

"Understand, O dullest of people! Fools, when will you be wise?
He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does
he not see? (Psalm 94:8, 9, RSV)

Woe to those who hide deep from the Lord their counsel whose deeds are
in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"
You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay;
that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the
thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?
(Isaiah 39:15, 16, RSV)

On page after page of the Bible we are assured that “a man’s ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths.” (Proverbs 5:21, RSV) This turns out to be either comforting or horrifying depending on which side of God we are on.

If God is part of our audience in any meaningful way, it eliminates hypocrisy. This is simply because He sees through anything and everything - even our thoughts before we think them. If He then is the primary one before whom we act, there is no reason to try to create an artificial image; impression management is utterly useless since reality is right before Him. Before Him we are like clear glass. He knows us far better than we know ourselves.

Have you ever wondered why so many people who are honest in all their other dealings, cheat on their income tax? Part of it is the common notion that stealing is not really stealing when you steal from someone who is big enough. But more than that, the thing that distinguishes income tax evasion is that no one can see you doing it. Who is to know that you did not report that part of your income? Because no one can see, the chances of getting caught are minimal. But, you see, if God is part of the theatre of our awareness, He sees it quite clearly. He sees it as clearly as He sees us if we rob a bank in broad daylight. We are in His theatre whether we know it or not or whether we like it or not. We are never off stage.

Let us look at some examples of how this works out in the lives of some of the characters of the Bible. The contrast between Saul and David is very stark on this point. Saul was very concerned for his image before the people. He saw it as the basis for his legitimacy as king, but it was his downfall. In both incidents that caused God to turn away from him (1 Samuel 13:15) he cared primarily what the people thought. First, it was that he was afraid of losing his following, so he made a sacrifice when it was not lawful for him to do it, and second, he disobeyed God’s instructions because he “feared the people and obeyed their voice.” (1 Samuel 15:24, RSV) He was living mainly in the theatre of the opinions of men and was aware of God in his audience only when he was confronted with his own sin and its punishment. Then we can see the contrast that David offered as he had the chance to kill Saul, who by that time had become his enemy. He saw Saul not as just his enemy who was out to murder him, but as God’s anointed one whom he dare not touch simply because he was God’s anointed one. (1 Samuel 24:6) God, at this point, was very much within David’s theatre. He had the courage to go against the advice of his men, risking losing his following because he knew that what was right before God who could see was more important than what seemed to be expedient.

The New Testament abounds with examples that illustrate the same point. Take the case of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5) Their downfall was caring too much about their image in the eyes of the church, their Christian friends. They cared so much that they lied to establish this image of generosity and general Christian heroism. Perhaps the seriousness of their sin was in using the things of God for their own image-building. Peter’s rebuke was to the point, “You have not lied to men but to God.” (Verse 4, NIV) God was there in their theatre, but they ignored His presence, living as if the theatre was filled only with men. Perhaps this was the lesson the early church had to learn in this very hard way.

The Sermon on the Mount is another case in point. Take Jesus’ teaching on giving and on prayer:

Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you,

they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2-6, RSV)

Here the contrast is made sharply between those who live in the visible world, for the effect that they can create within it, and those who are aware of and live in the sight of the invisible world. Jesus highlights the question, which world are you living in? How big is your theatre? Some men stand and make exhibition of themselves and get the reward of establishing a public image of piety which results in praise and prestige. Others disregard what people think and pray and give to God because what He thinks matters. The command to “not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” counsels a real freedom from impression management when we are dealing with God and the things of God. Surely the height of hypocrisy is when we say we are speaking or giving to God, but in fact are only talking to or giving in front of other people for the sake of the effect on them.

What a profound one sentence comment Jesus made about Nathaniel when He said to him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.” Nathaniel was a man about whom there was no deception. His public image was not something he spent a lot of time worrying about. There was a continuity between what was within him and what was perceived by those who knew him. He was a man of integrity.

Having emphasized the way God sees all, I do not want to give the impression that He is like a great interrogator or theatre critic, ever frowning and recording our mistakes in his notebook. If we are in Christ, He is a forgiving, accepting, loving Father who sees all our sins but casts them into the depths of the sea, blots them out. The more we are aware of Him in the audience, the higher will be our level of integrity and also the greater our awareness of His love.

We are made in the image of this God. Our task, then, is to realize that image in our thoughts, words and deeds; it is to become more fully what we were intended to be. Our life is not to be governed by constructing and projecting our own image, but by living out His likeness. Our self-image is not God, God is God.

If we live in awareness of these things, then our image will find its own place. Our image will be where it is meant to be, subservient to the reality of who we are. We will certainly do some things because others are observing us - things that we might not have done otherwise. For example, you will act differently when you are reunited with an old friend than you will at a job interview. In a job interview you must convince the person of your competence to do the job, but this can be done without a highly contrived impression. You should convince the person that you are competent because you are competent. If you are not, then you should look for another job. All this can be done with God in our audience, without compromise.

The apostle Paul discussed his own flexibility when he said that he was free to become like one under the law, though he was not under the law himself, or to become like one outside of the law, or like one who is weak. “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22, RSV) Here Paul is possessed with the overarching determination to spread the gospel. With this end in sight, he feels quite free to change his

habits (probably clothes, customs, vocabulary) depending on whom he is with. He is not compromising, he is just trying to make sure that he does not put an unnecessary stumbling block in the way of anyone's seeing the claims of Christ clearly and taking them seriously. In the interest of preaching Christ crucified to them, he had to be sensitive to their hang-ups and traditions that he might let the gospel itself be the thing to cause offence, not some way in which he stepped on their toes. Or, to take a more contemporary example, think of a minister coming into a church. His own effectiveness as a minister depends on his being able to establish an image in the minds of his parishioners of one who is trustworthy, caring, wise and so forth. The question is - how will he do this? By telling stories and dropping names to illustrate what a fine minister he is and thus aim directly at creating an impression, or by being trustworthy, caring, wise and letting his image take care of itself? Perhaps the latter course will take longer, but in it he can function with a genuineness and integrity which is of infinitely greater value.

When one comes to public institutions, here, again, there is no way that images can be avoided, whether it be with a school, college, church, corporation, product or nation. In all areas, however, we must lean toward the importance of truth and reality over contrived impressions. This matter is much too complex to subject to general rules. I will only give a few illustrations of a more helpful direction.

On the National Public Radio in our part of the country there is a morning program of music preceded by a news broadcast. The announcer is startlingly different from the average breathless narrator of the news. He speaks slowly and seems relatively unaffected by the need to emphasize the spectacular. One morning I even heard him say: "Well, there's really not very much news this morning, most of the stories are things that might happen or of things that are going to happen but didn't." He was removed from his responsibility as a newsbroadcaster and replaced by someone more conventional, but there was such a storm of protest from the listeners that he was back in three weeks. Why can't the news industry sometimes admit that on certain days there isn't a lot of news? Why is that so unthinkable? Why not deliberately puncture our foolish expectations from time to time?

For Christians in elected political office, re-election cannot be the highest goal. If it is, then one's hands are tied by expediency, and there is little room to influence the path of government in any direction in which it does not already want to go. Also, the attention to image must be held in check by putting emphasis on the issues themselves. The last presidential election in the United States was a good example of how this was not done. The televised debates were a case in point. It seemed that the main point for both candidates was to establish their image and run their opponent's down, with as little attention spent on the issues themselves as possible. Carter tried to project an image of the one who was the incumbent and, therefore, knew far more about the workings of government than anyone could who had not been President. Therefore, he was always talking about "the oval office" - about when he was in it, what he said in it, what it represented, and so on. He tried to paint the picture of Reagan as an irresponsible war-monger. Reagan, on the other hand, tried to have us identify our feelings of nostalgia with him - he represented the "good old days" before the government was on your backs and when everybody did an honest day's work. He countered with the image of Carter as a fumbling incompetent. There was little light shed on anyone's decision as to who to vote for. It is very hard for anyone in politics to resist its image-orientation, certainly impossible to do it completely, but one must lean against the tide.

Advertising is one of the most difficult fields of all, since it is already built around so much image-making. A Christian working in this field who wants to keep God in his theatre of

observers must lean toward persuasion or information advertising instead of sheer image advertising. The approach would be to highlight the real virtues of the product, not to aim so much at getting the consumer to identify with the setting in which the product is being used in the advertisement. Of course, this is not a black and white thing, but there are many gradations between the two poles of information and image. It is impossible to avoid image-making - people make some sort of image out of every ad that they see - but the question is, is that all there is? Also, appeals to greed, snobbery, lust and sheer illusion cannot be justified. They are all very powerful and seductive means of leverage on any human being, simply because they strike such a sympathetic vibration with our tendencies to pride and self-indulgence. If we are in any sense to be salt of the earth in the midst of a corrupt generation, we must be able to resist this kind of direction, not just in our private lives, but in our working life. Some of the best advertisements that I have seen are those that debunk materialism itself. Some of the Volkswagen advertising presented the product effectively and through use of humour pricked pins into the bubble of modern materialism.

A big consideration in all three of the fields that I have mentioned - news, politics and advertising - is that people who would like to change the direction for the better are often found not at the top of the pile but somewhere in the lower ranks. They are, therefore, not free to simply redirect major policies, but if they are to remain in the institution, must be content to lean as much as they can in a helpful direction.

Lastly, we turn to the work of the church and Christian works in general. The church is in a role of primary responsibility here. If the church will not stand for truth, who else can be expected to? Paul referred to the church as the “pillar and bulwark of the truth,” (1 Timothy 3:15, RSV) meaning that it is the church’s task to maintain, guard and live out the truth of the living God. At its most irreducible, the task of the church is to worship God, spread the gospel and love each other and the world. If the church or Christian work is doing this God-given task faithfully, its image will take care of itself. In an image-oriented culture, the Christian church must be attuned to the dangers of importing the world’s methodologies and means of communication uncritically. The church has at its disposal a deep and rich source of guidance in the Bible itself, not just in the form of lists of rules, but in the form of profound insights and obligations about who people are, how they are to be treated, how the message of God is to be communicated and so on. We are living in a culture which, by contrast, has no coherent view of man and has only one guide to action, which is “Does it work?” The methodologies of the world may be seen to work in a limited way, even in the work of the church, but my impression is that it is more in the direction of Palm Sunday faith.

A helpful passage in the writings of the apostle Paul captures much of what I have been trying to say:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to be proud of us, so that you may be able to answer those who pride themselves on a man’s position and not on his heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. (2 Corinthians 5:11-13, RSV)

Paul begins with an over-arching principle of life. It is “knowing the fear of the Lord.” That is the attitude with which we persuade men. Because we fear God, there is no room for hypocrisy or manipulation. God is there, he is watching. He is our ultimate audience. There is an appropriateness to the verb fear as well. It is not as if we crouch in terror of being stricken by lightning, but on the other hand, as C. S. Lewis wrote, “He is not safe.” He is

not mocked. Then Paul is able to tell them that what we are is known to God and to you. This is something extraordinary. If God and the Corinthian church were to compare notes on the sort of person Paul was and the kind of ministry he had, Paul is sure that the two sets of notes would be in agreement. God, of course, sees the whole truly, but because Paul was a man of integrity who carried on his ministry with real openness, the Corinthians knew him truly as well. He was like Nathaniel, an “Israelite in whom is no guile.” He could say that they were not commending themselves to the Corinthians, but giving them cause to be proud of Paul. That is to say, he was not indulging in impression-management for the sake of establishing an image of himself in the church. He, through his life, was giving them real cause for pride. It was a question of real life, not a pseudo-event existing only to be reported. Paul is concerned that they be able to have an answer for those whose view of life is image-oriented in that they pride themselves on a man’s position, status or image, rather than on his heart or where he really stands as a person. And lastly, in verse 13 he seems to be answering some who have charged him with being beside himself. He brushes this aside making it clear that it is not an important point with him what they happen to think.

I mention this passage at some length because it is Paul’s transparency and integrity that end up being a far more effective witness to those inside and outside the church than all the efforts expressly contrived to be witness, despite all their sophistication. In his life there was an affirmation of reality over pseudo-events which has been a beacon to Christians and non-Christians alike down through the ages. It is a witness that is especially powerful because it flows completely naturally out of the things he believed about himself, God and the world.

In each age Christians are called on to fight worldliness in whatever form that worldliness shows itself. Today, images and foster illusion, deception and confusion are a part of the world spirit of this age: This spirit we are called on to resist, even though it has titanic force behind it.

The battle must start in our individual walks with God Himself. He must be the primary audience before whom we live. We are never off-stage in His theatre, out of sight of His scrutiny or out of the range of HIS love. The final reality is God Himself. It is from His character that our values and ideals come. Our priorities must be formed around them and any image-making that we do must be within their boundaries.

A pertinent question is, “What in the world goodwill It do for the individual Christian to try to combat a vast orientation of our culture?” It is one thing to fear God in the way I have described in our individual lives and another to think of influencing our culture. Most people see what needs to be changed, realize that they cannot bring about those changes in their lifetimes and then don’t do anything. But under God, we are not called to be successful (much less to be able to bask in awareness of our success) but to live with integrity before God. No one of us can hope to challenge our society head-on, single-handedly, but we can do something to influence the little piece of society that we touch, and we can do a great deal to influence the course of our own lives and encourage others. By God’s grace we can “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God”; the visible success in this world then is up to God Himself. Christians, even in a minority, have accomplished extraordinary things.

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- ¹ See Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p. 46
- ² Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. 164
- ³ Kenneth Briggs, "Methodist in Search of a Coherent Identity, Acknowledge Crisis," *New York Times*, April 27, 1980
- ⁴ Virginia Owens, *The Total Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 27-28
- ⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 28-29
- ⁶ Steve Turner, "Creed," *Nice and Nasty* (London: Razor Books/Marshall, Morgan and Scott, LTD, 1980), p. 90
- ⁷ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 186