

THE CONQUEST

By

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During Christ's last hours with the apostles he warned that they would be hated and persecuted and even killed by those who claimed to be doing God's work (John 15:18-21, 16:2). At the close of his promises and warnings he said, "In the world you have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This claim he made in spite of the fact that even as he spoke his enemies were about to take him by force, subject him to shame and torture and nail him to a cross.

The churches of Asia which faced the hatred of both Jews and Romans during and after the tumultuous days of the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) were given bright promises based upon one condition: "He that overcomes" (Rev. 2 and 3).

The Christians of the first century faced staggering problems. They were surrounded by a pagan culture, which glorified sexual immorality and heaped honors upon the depraved characters who managed to reach places of power and fame. They lived under an oppressive government. Taxation was unjust and property rights were often ignored by officials. One's home and all his possessions could be confiscated on the slightest pretext with no recourse to jurisprudence. Still, they were expected to be of good cheer and overcome the world.

We face the same problems. Sins, which were too ugly to mention fifty years ago, are now accepted as "alternate life-styles" and viewed on TV with some degree of pleasure in millions of homes. Godly standards and the Christian faith are under continuous attack by television, newspapers, magazines and in higher education. Ours is a collapsing culture, and the collapse is not confined to our own nation. We are in the throes of worldwide culture convulsion, and every facet of life is involved.

How, then, are we to overcome the world?

Christians are being blitzed, often by their own church leaders, to launch a multitude of worthy human causes that may give them the feeling that they are really in there like good soldiers of Christ, overcoming the enemy, but which, in reality, disengage them from the real warfare, weakens their commitment, and side-tracks their witness.

Overcoming the world is not accomplished by joining the political foray to put the right people in Washington. It has been demonstrated many times that politicians do not set the moral level of society, but rather seek to conform to it. Sincere brethren often tell us that we must first secure our national freedom in order to be able to continue to serve God and preach the gospel, but they overlook the fact that the church and the gospel flourished and were the strongest in the first three hundred years under a hostile government. It was after

Constantine gave official approval of the church that it sank into a quagmire of myths and false teaching and lost its witness.

There is never a hint in Scripture that the purpose of the gospel or the church was to secure financial prosperity and political freedom for the nations where it was preached, although there is ample evidence that such prosperity and freedom are by-products of the Christian system. The apostolic church was not a tool for altering governments but for altering individual lives. Christ didn't die to save the republic, but to save sinners from sin and death.

Obviously, Christians want to preserve our national freedom and sovereignty. But if these are lost it will not be because someone cast the wrong vote in Washington, but because people are serving the wrong god on main street, U.S.A. It will not be because we failed to overcome the enemy in Iran or China or wherever, but because we failed to overcome the world in our own lives.

Survival programs have become a substitute for overcoming. These include everything from a simple how-to booklet to a kit with a year's supply of dehydrated food, drums for gasoline storage. And parcels of land in hard-to-reach wilderness spots. Every attempt along this line has been a dismal failure. In time of crisis a Christian is not to hide, but to be available to serve God and His people.

Jesus did not advise his followers to find a refuge from the world's problems. We already have a refuge: God. Christians who faced persecution in the first century did not seek protection by retreating from society, laying in a store of supplies and living in fear of the world. Rather, they "loved not their lives unto death..." even as the Apostle Paul, who said, "neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24). Jesus must have known all the tricks of survival, but he led no survival seminars. Instead he said, "He that finds his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:39).

It is the Christian's task to enter into the world with the light of the truth, armed with faith and the Word of God. He is not called to defend the world - not even his own little corner of it - but to bear a witness to the world concerning God's eternal purpose.

Overcoming the world is something expected of every Christian, not to defeat the world's champions in a political or physical way, but rather to overcome evil as he confronts it in his own life. This involves both an inward and an outward confrontation.

The first victory must be inward. It is the crucifixion of self. When one is baptized into Christ he is baptized into Christ's death 'and reckons himself to be dead to sin (Rom.6:3-11). He is no longer his own, but is bought with a price, and owes everything, including his life, to God. He must overcome every thought and desire that does not square with the will of God. Overcoming starts in one's own heart and mind. James writes that temptation comes from our selfish wills. "But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:17).

Christ's great tempting did not begin as he faced his enemies in the crowd, but alone in the wilderness, with no one around but the devil. He had to fight the battle in his own heart and mind and win the victory there before confronting the outward foes.

All the deadly sins that are destroying civilization – immorality, greed, strife, hatred and violence - all begin in the individual. The Christian is first to overcome them in his own life before challenging the world with these issues. How can the church speak to the world about faith and God's purpose when the members are bogged down in credit card covetousness? The purpose of God is as plain as day - that we are to be like Him, in His image, “that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love” (Eph. 1:4).

What is desperately needed is for us to overcome the grip that the world has on any part of our lives until we have no desire for the world but an intense longing to be holy. While we are insufficient to accomplish this on our own power, it still can be done. “And this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” (1 John 5:4).

There are outward confrontations of evil that are well defined, such as pornography, witchcraft, government sponsored efforts to eliminate moral standards and usurp parental rights, and other forms of evil too numerous to name. But while we are to cry out against such evils and sound a clear warning against them, this is a negative approach, and not the means of overcoming them. Besides, it ignores the fact that man is a sinner since the fall of Adam, and to sin is his natural inclination. The approach God made was not to reform society but to redeem man. Our task is centered on this purpose.

Jesus compared his disciples to salt and light. Paul said that we are to “do all things without murmurings and questionings; that (we) may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom (we) are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life” (Phil. 2: 14-16).

No murmurings? No questionings? How can one survive? That's just it. We are not called on to survive, but to be lights in the world – in just such a perverse generation as this. How does this overcome? By holding forth the word of life. This is what matters, that we hold up Christ and his truth. There will be resistance and oppression. We are to expect it, but not to murmur and complain about it, nor ask “Why does this happen to me?” It happens because the world is alienated from God and is under His condemnation. The rebellion aimed at God lands upon the Christian in whom God dwells through His spirit. It's all right, because a Christian's life is already God's. The world cannot hurt him, and he has nothing in the world. He is not called to success, or survival, or self-satisfaction, but to service, and all that counts is that he be faithful.

There is no way to escape the tribulation in the world, until we leave it. Until then, the world is our field of service in pleasing God. The world can oppose us but cannot defeat us, for Christ has already redeemed us and God has “translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

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