“LIVING AS LIGHTS IN A DARK WORLD”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Christ put His Church in the world to “shine as lights,” but all too frequently the world has eaten its way into the Church and dimmed the light. As the sons of God we are heaven’s royal representatives “in the midst of crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15). The world is twisted morally and spiritually, following its own pattern while it refuses to recognize or accept God’s values and plan. Men evade the truth to follow their own darkened reasoning. It is into this kind of world that God calls His children to “reflect the light of the world” – Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are to live and share the Word of God with those in darkness – in this regard, we either refrain from doing so, or work at doing so; our resources are to be combined in an all-out effort to live and proclaim the gospel. It is indeed a poor testimony to put into God’s service the “leftovers” of our time, energy, and resources, after being preoccupied with making sure that all of our own selfish desires have been met. Jesus declared, “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (Jn 15:8).

Jesus went on to say, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14) — we are to shine in the world like stars in the midst of a black sky. Jesus described this light as our “good works” — “Let men see your good works that they may glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16); notice that it is the light that they will praise, not the lamp which bears it; thus it is our Father in heaven whom they will glorify, not the children whom He has begotten. Just what are these good works? They include every outward, visible manifestation of the believer’s faith — evangelism, believing, confessing and teaching the truth are all good works that give evidence of our regeneration by the Holy Spirit (Jn 6:28-29; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 5:1). In addition, there are the visible works of love and compassion as well as the works of faith; they express not only our loyalty to God, but our care for our fellow man as well (Mt 5:44; Jn 13:34-35; Gal 5:6, 14; Eph 5:2; Pet 1:22; 1 Jn 3:18; 4:7). Without these works our gospel loses its credibility and our God His honor. Jesus said we are to be like a lighted lamp in a prominent position in the house (rather than in an in obscure position where it does no good), so that we give light to all those around us (Mt 5:15; Jn 5:35). As disciples of Jesus we are not to conceal the truth we know, or the truth of what we are (Mt 10:32-33, 38; Mk 8:38)… nor are we to pretend to be other than what we are.

Probably the greatest tragedy of the Christian Church throughout its long and chequered history has been its constant tendency to conform to the prevailing culture instead of developing a Christian counter-culture. We each have the responsibility before God to “let our light shine” in this world — that is our calling. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book “The Cost of Discipleship” put it this way: “Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call.” We must not fail the world that we have been called to serve — Jesus is the light this dark, perverse world needs; we must let our light shine and not conceal it in any way, whether by sin or by compromise, by laziness or by fear. Remember, light illumines the darkness — how shall people see without the light? The truth of the gospel is the light, contained in fragile earthenware lamps (2 Cor 4:7), and we are to let it shine throughout our very earthenness (1 Cor 1:23–2:5). It should be carefully noted, our influence and effectiveness largely depend upon our character.

The apostle Paul did not live to “please himself;” rather he lived and labored for Christ (Phil 1:21). He did not waste his time living for things that really had no eternal or lasting value — as
such, he chose not to live for himself or labor in vain (1 Cor 15:58; 2 Cor 12:15; Phil 2:16-17; 1 Th 3:5; 2 Tim 4:6). It has been rightly said, “He who would shine as a light must burn” — no candle can give light without the wax being consumed; no lamp can give light if its oil is not being consumed. John the Baptist was “a burning and a shining light” (Jn 5:35). The apostle Paul’s life was one of continuous self-sacrifice — he suffered much in order that he might take God’s Word to those in darkness (2 Cor 11:23-29). He had caught the spirit of the Lord Jesus, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (Heb 12:2). Paul uses the words “joy,” “rejoice” and “rejoicing” eighteen times in his letter to the Philippians — this is the keynote of his entire epistle. The “joy way” is the path of sacrificial service. This is the path our Lord walked… that Paul walked… and you and I are to walk.

The dark, crooked and perverse generation. Paul refers to in his letter to the Philippians, are the unsaved — Paul used these words to describe the whole unbelieving world (Phil 2:15). He borrowed this phrase from Deuteronomy, where Moses describes unfaithful & rebellious Israel as a people who had become “a perverse and crooked generation” (Deut 32:5). Paul applies that description of ancient Israel to the unsaved, corrupt humanity of his own day. The long and short of it all is, the world then and now is under the control of an evil satanic system (Jn 12:31; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2; 6:12; 1 Jn 5:19).

The word “crooked” (skolios), refers to something that is bent, curved, or twisted. The medical condition “scoliosis” involves an abnormal curvature and misalignment of the spine. The term was used metaphorically of anything that deviates from a standard or norm, and in Scripture, it is often used of things that are morally or spiritually corrupt — Solomon speaks of “those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness; who delight in doing evil and rejoice in the perversity of evil; whose paths are crooked (skolios), and who are devious in their ways” (Prov 2:13-15; 21:8; 28:18).

The word “perverse” (diastrepho) has the same basic idea of skolios but in a more active and dynamic way. Jesus spoke of an “unbelieving and perverted (diestrammene) generation (Mt 17:17). The multitude that stood before Pilate and demanded Jesus’ crucifixion accused Him of “misleading (or perverting – diastrephonta) our nation” (Lk 23:2). On the island of Paphos, Paul excoriated the magician and false prophet Elymas saying, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked (diastrephon) the straight ways of the Lord?” (Acts 13:10). Years later Paul warned the elders from Ephesus that “form among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse (diastrepho) things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

The crookedness and perversity of the modern world is so pervasive and obvious that examples are hardly necessary. Most of modern culture has radically distorted and deviated from God’s standards of truth and righteousness. As with the church of Paul’s time, the church today exists inescapably in the midst of a crooked and perverse world. Because of the development of communications technology, Christians today are continually and vividly barraged with vile language, provocative images, ideas, and practices to a degree that past believers never encountered. It is from this crooked and perverse generation that people need to be saved. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter admonished his hearers, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40). Jesus identified the Scribes and Pharisees who demanded a sign to prove His authenticity as the Messiah as part of “an evil and adulterous generation” (Mt 12:23,39,45).
In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus spoke of the world as hating those who are not part of it, namely, those who believed in Him (Jn 17:14,16). Yet He asked His Father “not to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one” (v.15). He prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:17-18). Living faithfully and purely is an absolute prerequisite for fulfilling the Lord’s mandate to carry His divine message of salvation to a lost world lost. Christians are to be “blameless & innocent, children of God above reproach... as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). Obviously the way believers live as children of God has a dramatic impact on how they influence the “godless world” around them. To effectively carry out the Great Commission of Matthew 28 (vv. 19-20), Christians must “shine as lights” in the world. In the literal sense “lights” (phoster) was most often used of the stars — so metaphorically speaking, Paul declares that Christians are to be moral and spiritual luminaries who radiate God’s truth (the word of truth) into an otherwise sinfully dark universe. Amid this moral blackness, the children of God should standout as stars at midnight (Dan 12:3). As believers we all “shine to some degree;” the challenge is to let our lights shine “unhindered.” As luminaries in a world of spiritual darkness, we are to “hold out the word of life” (Phil 2:16).

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah was to be a “light to the nations” so that God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6; 42:6). The prophet Zacharias spoke of Jesus as the coming “Sunrise from on high,” who would “shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78-79). John declared, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (Jn 1:4-5). In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus referred to believers as “the light of the world,” and charged them to “let their light shine before men in such a way that the world might see their good works, and glorify their Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:14,16). Though all of us as Christians “were formerly in darkness,” we are now “light in the Lord” and as such we should “walk as children of Light” (Eph 5:8). Jesus said, “This is the judgment that the Light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds are evil” (Jn 3:19). In closing, reflect upon the following statement —

The quality of a believer’s life,  
be it faithful & obedient or unfaithful & disobedient,  
that is the platform of his testimony.

The foregoing material was taken in large part from commentaries on Matthew and Philippians that were authored by John Stott, Homer Kent, John MacArthur, and Lehman Strauss.