

## **A Response to Jonathan Cheek, “Toward a Biblical Theology of Worldliness”**

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As the chairman of the committee that recently approved Jon Cheek’s dissertation, which is the source from which he drew the paper he presented tonight, something would be amiss if I now respond with disapproval! Not expediency, though, but sincerity lies behind the commendation that I express tonight for the fine work that Jon has produced. Yes, I will push back a little on a couple of points, but I intend enthusiastic commendation, not objection, to register as the dominant tone of my response.

My plan for this response has two major points: reinforcement and pushback, followed by further appreciation. I find little in the core of Jon's work that needs further attention from me, so my remarks will deal mostly with matters that are peripheral – but not insignificant.

### *Reinforcement*

I appreciate Jon’s pointing out the numerous weighty testimonies from within broader evangelicalism to the reality that the topic of the world – along with its corollary, worldliness – has not received the attention in recent generations that its importance demands. So perhaps even this audience is not sufficiently aware that the world is a constant existential threat to the Christian church and to ourselves as individual believers. Yes, we have Christ’s promises of protection and victory. Toward a foe intent upon murder and annihilation, though, apathetic complacency and even flirtation is no commendable posture. Individuals, churches, and Christian institutions who so respond expose themselves to untold danger and loss.

Only those at the left end of the spectrum of Christian lifestyle can point to none further left than themselves, and even they can point to some among the unregenerate as more sinful than they are. So we all naturally incline to locate worldliness to the left of ourselves and assume blithely that the practices we approve and enjoy are safe and pure enough. This false assurance that worldliness is other people’s problem, not our own, must surely be one of our adversary’s favorite deceptions. The close interrelationship among the world, the flesh, and the devil implies that the world is no less a threat to spiritual welfare than Satan and the flesh are. And the fact that the world provides so much pleasure only intensifies the peril. The only mortal enemy more fearsome than one you hate is one who intoxicates and seduces you into its arms – and I will let your own imagination extend the metaphor from there.

An anecdote illustrates my point that the world is “ever near me, around me and within.”<sup>1</sup> In 2012, a short book of my own, *Love Not the World*, was released by BJU Press. Shortly thereafter, a friend who works there recounted to me that a co-worker gave him the copy of the book that she had received under the Press’s practice of giving employees a free copy of the books that they work on. Her comment to him was, “This topic does not interest me.”

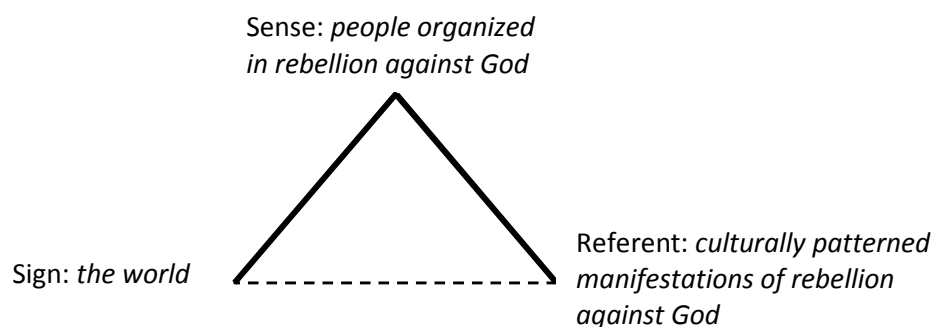
Really? A book written to unfold scriptural truth to help the Lord’s people experience the abundant life that Jesus promised by helping them overcome one of the greatest enemies to that life holds no interest? As puzzling – even horrifying – as that idea sounds, I fear that she simply gave voice to an all-too-common reality: we prefer to suppress thoughts that threaten our temporal pleasures. Jon Cheek has done a great service by his faithful and charitable exposition of a great deal of biblical truth on this crucial topic.

### *Pushback*

I mentioned that I felt some need to push back on a couple of points. Both points are introduced near the top of page 3.<sup>2</sup> In the first full paragraph, Jon expresses dissatisfaction with most theological definitions of the world as being questionably helpful toward “understanding and identifying worldliness.” While I too sense this difficulty, I question whether Jon has correctly located the problem – or whether what he notices is really any defect at all. In short, I think Jon might be expecting a theological definition of the world to do too much.

The well-known Ogden-Richards triangle can help us. Word meaning can be conceived as a triangle that interrelates symbol (or sign), sense, and referent.

### The Ogden-Richards Triangle of Meaning



In this triangle, the connection between sign and referent is indirect (hence the dotted line): sign connects to referent only through the sense.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stanza 2 of the hymn “O Jesus, I Have Promised.”

<sup>2</sup> Further development appears on pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> So, for example, the man named Donald Trump is a valid referent of the symbol *president* only because at the present time he fits that symbol’s sense: something like “an executive

We should not expect a theological definition of the world to serve as a simple guide to identify specific cultural patterns as hostile to God.<sup>4</sup> Rather, understanding the theological sense simply positions us to begin the arduous process of evaluating cultural patterns to differentiate between the legitimate blessings to embrace and participate in and the spiritual dangers to abstain from and guard one's heart against.

One of the key realities for this discussion is the fact that theologians do not determine how the world manifests its alienation from God. In other words, when it comes to what the world is *functionally* rather than *conceptually*,<sup>5</sup> theologians do not define it, nor do Christian leaders or individual believers. The world defines *itself*—if *define* is the correct word—by forming consensus on the cultural patterns by which it will display, encourage, and validate (to itself) its ungodliness. *Defining* the world referentially, then, is not our task at all; we identify the referents of that term rather by *detecting* or *discerning* the ways in which the world expresses itself within our respective cultures.

In concluding this point, I will observe that I found in Jon's paper no clearly superior alternative definition of the world or worldliness. His formulation "behaving and thinking like the serpent and his seed" (p. 25) seems to me to entail the same limitations as the definitions he criticizes.<sup>6</sup> I fail to see that identifying thought and behavior resembling that of the serpent and his seed is much easier than identifying that which expresses alienation from and hostility toward God. Jon, if I have missed your point, perhaps you'll have a chance to clarify during the questioning, and I will let you have your say.

My second objection is much easier to present. At the end of the second full paragraph on page 3, Jon implies that a person can be worldly without participating in culture. This claim makes clear that Jon intends his definition of *the world* to exclude the cultural component that others insist upon. I don't find, though, that he has made his case anywhere in the paper.<sup>7</sup> The reality that he

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appointed to preside over an organized body." There is no direct, inherent connection between the symbol *president* and the man named Donald Trump.

<sup>4</sup> I must note, for clarity, that Jon does not argue that a good definition should actually list specific manifestations of worldliness. He does, though, seem to want the definition to move rather strongly in that direction.

<sup>5</sup> That is, the specific referent(s) of *the world*.

<sup>6</sup> The formulation suffers a further defect if Jon wishes it to stand as a definition of *the world*. A definition's wording should allow it to substitute within a sentence for the word it defines. *Behaving...* will not substitute for *the world* in a sentence like "The world hates you." At best it could stand as a definition of *worldliness*, but the writers Jon faults are defining *the world*, not *worldliness*, so this formulation is not an adequate alternative.

<sup>7</sup> Jon's argument on p. 24 that 1John 2:15-17 does not point out cultural evils is countered easily enough: *the world* is simply flesh expressing itself on a cultural level, thus amplifying its

discusses on page 25, which I might dub “solecistic<sup>8</sup> sinning,” is better accounted for by observing that not all sin need be worldly than by broadening the definition of *worldly* to encompass all sin. The fact that the world, the flesh, and the devil are all in cahoots does not negate the fact that each is distinctive and that the distinctive element of the world is its corporate nature, which, as far as I can see, inherently entails culture. Calling the individualistic sinner *fleshly* or *carnal*, then, would be more accurate than calling him *worldly*. Granted, if a culture comes to prize solecistic sinning, then those who sin solecistically under that cultural pressure would be worldly.<sup>9</sup> In that case, though, the solecism substantially evaporates, and the oddball sinner no longer fits Jon’s description as truly individualistic.

For good measure, I will register a third point that serves less to correct the writer than to caution the reader against oversimplification. Footnote 66 (p. 14) mentions the negative NT usage of ἡδονή (“pleasure”). This word is significant because of its bearing upon John Piper’s term *Christian Hedonism*, a topic not treated in the paper but prominent in current Christian thought. Worth mentioning is the fact that the Septuagint uses the word positively, and the NT uses some cognates positively.<sup>10</sup> So while Jon’s discussion is perfectly true as far as it goes (which, indeed, is as far as his topic *needs* it to go), it does not provide, in itself, a sufficient basis for rejecting Piper’s term.<sup>11</sup>

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power. It is not surprising, then, that John delineates “all that is in the world” in terms equally applicable to individual carnality.

<sup>8</sup> Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines *solecism* as “something deviating from the proper, normal, or accepted order.” The usage with which I’m familiar includes a component of uniqueness; notice the root *sole* (in the sense *only*).

<sup>9</sup> Whether *worldly* can ever legitimately be applied to an unbeliever is an unsettled question in my mind. The world as the unbelieving segment of society cannot be worldly; it is simply the world. The church as a corporate body can be worldly in tolerating, approving, or adopting the world’s practices, as can an individual believer. In my view, since individual unbelievers might conform to sinful culture to varying degrees, it could be legitimate to characterize some individual unbelievers as worldly, much as a man might be called a “manly man.” In general, though, the word seems best used largely with restricted reference to those who identify as Christians or perhaps with some other system that values non-conformity to culture.

<sup>10</sup> Most notable is the superlative ἡδίστα (“most gladly”) in 2Cor. 12:9, 15, which Paul attaches to his willingness to endure the deepest hardships in order to reap spiritual benefits.

<sup>11</sup> I register this point not at all as an endorsement of Christian Hedonism, but simply as a caution against seizing the negative NT usage of ἡδονή as a case-closing basis on which to reject the system or its name. This consideration alone can discredit nothing deeper than one word of the name, and it does even that with only partial success.

### *Further Appreciation*

In further appreciation, I'll observe that, across the break between pages 12 and 13, Jon has at least refined and possibly corrected a point in my own work in *Love not the World*. I fear that I might have oversimplified the NT use of τὰ ἔθνη (the Gentiles), leaving the impression that the NT never uses the expression negatively.

I also appreciate Jon's pointing out a significant fact of which I had been unaware: Luke Timothy Johnson sees the topic of the enmity between God and the world as the focal point (the "thematic center") of the epistle of James. While I have not yet brought myself to go that far, I'm glad to know that one respected commentator, at least, sees the subject as so important.<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I will say that I believe Jon Cheek has done the body of Christ a fine service by laying down with clarity the fundamental point on which a biblical theology of the world must rest: the enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.

Jon's work – for tonight at least – is finished. But what about ours? What will we do with the truth that Jon has brought to us? The full answer to that question lies only in the mind and will of God. Undoubtedly God's intentions for us as individuals differ. What I trust *none* of us will do is fail to heed Jon's clarion call to perk up and pay attention to what God has graciously revealed to us in scripture about the world and its dangers. The world is destined for death. If we desire rather to live that abundant life promised us by our Lord and to minister for him in the power that requires not merely saying words but truly and intimately knowing of what and of whom we speak, then we must take the world seriously as an existential threat to be overcome by grace through faith, not as a legitimate source of pleasures by which, given their carnality, we only delude ourselves into thinking that our lives bring glory to God.

Thank you, Jon, for being the Lord's instrument to help us!

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<sup>12</sup> Jon, if you included Johnson's view in your dissertation, I somehow failed to let it register sufficiently, so I thank you for giving me another chance to pick up this point.