

Introduction: Place In This World

Michael W. Smith has been a prominent Christian artist for well over 40 years now. Before the 90s, however, he ministered exclusively to the church world but then, in 1991, he came out with a song called, “Place in this World?” It was a huge hit as it climbed all the way up to #6 in the Billboard rankings. After his mainstream success, Smith became a noted “crossover artist” i.e., one with popularity in both the church world and the secular world. All respect to him because he maintains his Christian values and integrity as he navigates both worlds.

As we continue our “Real Relationships” series today we borrow from his song “Place in this World” to ask, “As Christ followers what is our relationship with the world?”

The Detachers

Generally speaking, the church relates to the world either as “detachers” or “enmeshers.” The detachers are detached from the world because they see it exclusively as evil, fallen, and rebellious against God. Since the world is going to hell in a handbasket, our job is to insulate ourselves from it and to focus on our own personal salvation. If God sends poor sinners our way, great, but if not, we know where we are going and we certainly know where they are going. The detacher’s favorite saying is “In the world, not of it.” Although there isn’t a scripture that actually says this, Jesus, just hours before his crucifixion, did pray something similar (John 17:15-16)

15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

The Enmeshers

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the enmeshers, i.e., those who believe the church’s relationship with the world is primarily one of affirmation and accommodation. Enmeshers don’t try to change the world but accept it in the name of love. Their favorite Scripture is John 3:16, “God so loved the world” and if he does, so should we, and to do so without qualification.

The Three Cosmos

Hear me now and believe me later, but both the detachers and enmeshers are partially right and partially wrong in how they relate to the world. How then should we relate to the world? Let’s go to the best person we can find on church-world relationships, the apostle John. The Greek term for world is *kosmos*, from which we get our words “cosmopolitan” and “cosmonaut.” It is used over 170x in the New Testament but John himself uses it on 80 different occasions and in three different categories.

World I: Creation

World one for John’s is the world of God’s physical creation. Throughout the Bible there are hundreds of scriptures that point to God’s handwork in Creation but Psalm 19:1-2 is my favorite:

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

World II: Humanity in General

John's second use of cosmos regards humanity in general. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son" highlights God's immeasurable, unconditional, and unlimited love for humanity.

World III: Fallen/Broken/Hostile

John's third use of cosmos refers to humanity enslaved by sin and led by the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). This world in opposition to God and is anti-Christ. This is the world we are not to set our love upon as he sternly warns in I John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

It's this third cosmos James had in mind when he said, "To be friends with the world is to be an enemy of God (James 4:4). Christian thinker David Wells describes the worldliness of this world:

It is a humanity divorced from God. It is the refusal to worship God, obey his commandments, and follow his Son. It is the way of life and thinking that encompasses their sinful appetites, the way they order their lives, their priorities, and behaviors.

The world is the sole pre-occupation of those fallen one-dimensional earth dwellers for whom there are no considerations in life more important than eating, drinking, possessing, and being merry.

It is self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion with a corresponding hatred for self-denial.

It's this world that needs saving and from which we are being saved. It's this world that we are "in but not of." It's this world we are not to love, be tempted by, or lose our souls to. It's this world that we are strongly warned not to adopt its vision/values – behaviors/attitudes. It's this world that is under God's judgment now and will be at the end of history. It's this world the detachers, and justifiably so, detach from and unfortunately, the enmeshers love and affirm. John has more things to say about these worlds but let's a look at how we are to positively relate to them.

Our Response

First, we give thanks for the physical world. Honestly, I have a greater sense of the glory and majesty of God when I am cycling down Casey Key then when I am stuck in an office all day. So, let's relate to the physical world by thanking God for the gift it is and the sheer beauty of it. He gave us this world to steward and to enjoy, let's do both well.

Regarding the 2nd world of humanity. Let's generate a tremendous love for humanity regardless of if they are a sinner, a seeker, or a saint. God loves them and as his followers, so do we. You know what fascinates me about Elon Musk? Many things, but mostly that he is a proclaimed philanthropist, i.e., lover of humanity. It's why he wants to get us to Mars before the world short fuses. Love for people is the meaning of the lyrics, "Come Holy Spirit, move in my heart." "Fill me with fire, and love for the world."

Relating Properly

But how do we relate to the third world of brokenness, rebellion, and sin? Let me encourage three ways:

We minister to it. Since the world is broken, it's up to the church to minister to and heal it. Jesus and his disciples not only bore the burdens of human suffering, but they also did something about. They fed it, healed it, and talked about a greater promise of the Kingdom of God. As the Church, our calling is to do likewise.

We save it. Our mission is to spread the message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection so that people do not die in their sins but are forgiven, restored, and reconciled in their relationship with the Father.

We challenge it. The church has always used its prophetic voice against ungodly political forces, repressive economic systems, and cultural wickedness. It has led many movements that challenged such things e.g., the Civil Rights movement, Women Suffrages, and the Abolition of Slavery, etc.. So, let's not stop now!

Conclusion

Regardless, if we are more detacher than enmesher or more enmesher than detacher, let's relate to the world properly by doing all we can to minister, save, and challenge it. For God's glory, their sake, and our continuing joy.