

Illusions

Illusions aren't only the tricks that magicians play on us. They're also the lies we believe because we prefer them to reality. It's a strange time we're living in, unlike any period that I can recall. This right now is an era in which people actually want to live out their illusions. Almost everyone I know, know of or have read about seems to have constructed in their minds a world of make-believe, and they want to dwell in it. Reality is no longer real, and truth is no longer truth.

Of course it's not new that people prefer a fantasy world to the world they have to live in. Certain of these self-deceptions have been around since the beginning of time. For example, "If only I were married to someone else [or even not married, if you know what I mean], I'd be so much happier." This isn't just Hollywood stuff, it's going on right now in lives that I see, and it's horribly destructive. That's a personal illusion, but many are shared, that is, they're communal or societal. Pagan idolatry, i.e., worshipping statues of wood and stone, was all a lie. So is animism, and Islam and Hindu nonsense as well. I can easily fill this page with the many different illusions I've observed. Here's a list of some:

The wild and wacky world of "woke" is certainly high on the list. Sadly, some people I know live this and love it. "Systemic racism" is another recent illusion, held mainly by those who are "woke" (people evidently can entertain more than one fantasy at a time). The public education of our children to impart a common set of values and core knowledge is an illusion. These are dangerous. Illusions aren't harmless, they bite and sting. But I'm just getting started. Heliocentrism (as opposed to geocentricity) is a deception. The very notion that Science discovers truth is an absurd lie. So is the whole Enlightenment project that attempts to subvert Scripture. Malthus-ism is another lie. So is the bizarre cosmology that there exist other universes beside our own. Most of what passes in higher education as psychology is illusory. In fact, the idea of "mental illness" is (probably) an illusion; we're surrounded by demons, after all, and they have the ability to influence not only thinking but actions.

More. We've already discussed in previous Sunday School lessons evolution and billions of years. Most educated people, even leaders in the church, now believe this stuff; it's a totally phony origins narrative. "Climate change" is a pernicious deception. Gay rights, transgenderism, and that one's sex can be whatever one wants it to be, are silly fantasies. The notion that a little bit of inflation is good for society is a dangerous hoax. That government welfare benefits poor people, and that the role of medicine is to keep people from dying, are sheer lies. So is the idea that gasoline engine cars are evil but electric ones are good. That the vaccines being pushed on us will protect us from getting the SARS CoV-2 virus is yet another hoax. So is the idea that in a pluralist society such as ours, government needs to be secular. And that having things, especially "cool" things like technology stuff, will make us happy or esteemed by others. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons all hold to fantasy. The sacerdotalism of the Roman Catholic Church (the belief that people find salvation in the organized Church) isn't biblical, it's made up. (Christ is there in Catholicism, of course, but at the periphery.) The list of lies and deceptions Americans hold is, sadly, quite long.

The notion that Americans have God-given political rights (freedom of speech, etc) is also illusory. Way too many in the church in America cherish this idea. But it's a lie, foisted on us long ago by the RCC with its notion that people have "natural rights" as well as by the humanists that founded our country. To be sure, God has uniquely blessed this nation. And while James Madison's wise dictum is true, "Rights are exceptions to power" (that is, our political rights are a defense against the power-lust of those in government), we have no *God-given* right to "rights." Patriotic ideals aren't biblical either. Nor is it biblical that we should want, or strive, to make America great. However prevalent it may be in churches, this is just another illusion.

Now let's get really personal. A dreadful illusion that's exceedingly popular today is the one that says that modern American Christianity is biblical. Nonsense! Any similarity between the New Testament's presentation of Christianity and what passes today as Christianity is coincidental. It is certainly true that some believers desire to hear the Word preached and enjoy participating in communal singing of praises to God. But way too many have developed and bought into the bogus (but enticing) idea that belief in Christ is an insurance policy that guarantees we won't be in hell when we die, and that whatever obligation that gift imposes on us we satisfy by attending church on Sunday mornings. We don't need to know the Word of God or change our lives in any way because . . . hey, we've already got everything there is to get, the forgiveness of sin and the assurance of being in heaven. So we live as we please, pursuing happiness according to our lights. "My life is mine to live the way I want to," we believe. Do Gospel outreach? "No, not necessary." Read the Bible? "Not necessary." Pray with others? Pray *for* others? "Not necessary." Make sacrifices for the sake of others? Practice humility? Eschew worldly values? "No, no, and no. *Not necessary.*" If Paul or John or the other Apostles heard that this is what Christianity has now become, they'd roar with indignation. Because it's an illusion.

There's also this related fantasy in American churches: After we're saved by believing in Jesus, obedience to God's Word is something we may do or we may not do, as we care to; it's an option. But even if we don't obey Scripture, we're still saved. "Super-spiritual Christians can obey if they want to. But if I don't want to, God still loves me and forgives my sins and will welcome me into heaven when I die." We suppose that for salvation, belief and obedience are disconnected.

Yet obedience to God's Word is absolutely essential because that's what differentiates the Christian from the unbeliever. It's what reverses what happened in the Garden and it's what defeats Satan. And it's what it is (or should be) about Christ that we desire most to imitate. And not just obedience to certain selected imperatives, but obedience that affects how we daily live, obedience that may involve significant risk, obedience that transforms our lives.

The discipleship texts in the four Gospels indicate that obedience to Christ is a necessary component of belief! The texts in 1 John and Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation likewise point that way. The text in James Chapter 2 teaches that obedience is a necessary aspect of belief. James explains there that belief in God results in or is expressed by obedience – or it's not belief. John the Baptist demanded fruit of repentance, meaning a changed life had to be in evidence for repentance to be valid. The grace that makes salvation blessing available to us expects obedience to God's Word, and obedience to God is not a "works" salvation. We exercise faith in God by obeying His Word.

What makes us want to obey God? Our "heart" does. Our will then enforces the decision, and our minds find reasons for our choice. Our "heart" is our inner-most being, where our passions and desires reside. What does the text say was Solomon's core problem? His heart wasn't right (1 Kings 11:4b). His horses, his accumulated gold and his many wives were consequent to his heart problem. We do evil because we first have a heart problem. We love God, or not. Similarly, we will to obey, or not. (Let's notice, by the way, that Solomon never took any risks for God. No personal sacrifice for God. His life was passive, lived entirely in luxury and peace. He wallowed in God's grace. Solomon's life perfectly exemplifies the text, "**To whom much is given, much is required.**")

What the Serpent in the Garden essentially said was, "Never mind what God said. You just do as you please." The implication of his temptation was perfectly clear: they should ignore God, ignore His will, ignore His word and be autonomous, free to do whatever they wanted. So, do we do as that first couple did, or are we different? Let's look at it another way. Obedience to the Word of God is really a matter of authority. If we obey God, we are in submission to His authority. If we don't care about obedience to God's Word, we're submitting to some other authority – either our own, or some other person's or, more ultimately, some demonic authority. Everyone is under *someone's* authority.

We can only recognize what's illusory by knowing what's true. True Christianity understands first of all that the Bible is the Word of God, which means the text is God Himself speaking to us. So to ignore the text is to ignore God. And that is a terribly dangerous thing to do. The New Testament (about 95% of it) has to do with what kind of people we're to be and how we're to live. God really intends for us to know and to live out His Word. That's why He gave it to us. We're expected to be transformed into the image of Christ, in this life, by obedience to the Word. We – *all of us* – are to have a totally new mode of being, with new values, new beliefs, new interests, new loves, new thoughts, new passions, *everything new*. This is what it means to be "born again." The Holy Spirit dwells in us to empower this transformation. But we have to be actively engaged in this sanctification process. If not, sanctification doesn't occur. There's more. . .

The path to sanctification is to be a disciple of Christ. It's by the process of learning ("discipleship") that we become what God intends for us, and we do what He expects us to do. It's a fantasy to suppose that we can be saved and on our way to glory without being a disciple, or that sitting passively in church for 2 hours a week is discipleship. Learning is hard. It involves work on our part. Jesus issued the hard sayings in the Gospels, e.g., Mttw 16:24ff and Luke 14:25-33 (which we all thoroughly ignore), precisely because He wants us to be committed to learning from Him without distraction and in a spirit of humility. One of the reasons that the four Gospels were written is to reveal what discipleship is all about. That's why Jesus had His followers proclaiming the advent of the King and the kingdom. They were to observe Him and then imitate Him, be like Him and do what He did. It's no different for us today.

Illusions are hoaxes. Frauds. We deceive ourselves by holding them. These lies all stem, of course, from the father of lies, the Serpent who, at the outset of history, got us to listen to his voice instead of to the voice of our Creator. ("To listen" of course means, to obey.) So Satan has organized a massive world system that puts on offer a huge menu of lies and deceptions for us to believe. So that we don't listen to the voice of God, that is, the Word of God.

This issue of illusions is really a matter of truth, isn't it? Do we care about truth? Do we live out truth? God, after all is truth. His Word is truth, and our creational responsibility is to reflect the truths of His Word. I suspect that our really great problem is, we *want* to be self-deceived. The lies and fantasies we harbor provide the excuse we need to not do what we are expected to do. We're indifferent, self-absorbed and complacent, and we like it that way. It's easier to presume upon God's grace than to get serious about something as abstract as "truth." But God is not deceived, and He is One to fear. He's revealed all that we need to know to please Him. So let's be responsible. Let's be *biblical* Christians.