

# **Sermon: “Christian Living in a Secular World”**

**Text Acts 17:16-34 (ESV)**

Gary L. Wackler

November 24, 2019

**Introduction:** Many people see America as a nation in transition. Daniel Yankelovich calls it a “sweeping, irreversible cultural revolution...transforming the rules that once guided American life.”

Social critic, Theodore Rozak, speaking of Christianity, said, “It is socially irrelevant even if it is privately engaging.”

References to anything religious are rare in textbooks in recent years, and there is a concerted effort to sanitize all conversation in the area of education and culture - of God and Jesus talk. Religious symbols are being taken down in hallways and classrooms across the United States. So as not to appear partial to any group, ALL possible exposure to spiritual or religious expression is removed from sight and earshot - only the profane is allowed especially in public settings.

“Secularism” is the result of many influences, ideas, and events. It did not happen overnight, and it will not be corrected quickly either, *if at all*. It is very similar to the story mentioned by Jesus of the seven demons returning to a life devoid of Christ. Once modern society is exorcised of its spirituality, the demons of secularism waste little time in filling the void. (Keith Ray, p.132)

Langdon Gilkey, in his book *Naming the Whirlwind*, gives us four traits of secularism:

- 1. Contingency:** It teaches that everything that is, was caused by some natural phenomenon that preceded it, i.e. no supernatural explanation - NO GOD.
- 2. Autonomy:** The transcendent and metaphysical are removed leaving man alone. MAN IS ALONE in this form of agnosticism.
- 3. Relativism:** When humanity detaches itself from its theological mooring, the arena of morality is left completely to a state of subjectivity (what I think or feel). Enter Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics.*, i.e. NO RIGHT OR WRONG (*it depends*).
- 4. Temporality:** This is an old notion of the Epicureans revisited: “Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die.” NOTHING IS PERMANENT (i.e., When you’re dead, you’re dead!).

**I believe that Christians can still reverse the tide of secularism rolling over America. But, to do that, we must change our approach to society.**

**Living as a Christian in a secular world is:**

## **I. A Call to Love Jesus.**

**Always coupled with the question: *Do you love Jesus?* is the follow-up question to that: will you obey Jesus by taking on a ministry, sharing, teaching, and caring for others? Will you truly be a follower or just a fan (Kyle Idleman)?**

**To follow Jesus certainly means many things, but one of the primary things it must mean is certainly “a willingness to share with others about our Friend, Brother, Savior, and Lord.”**

**If we have received a call to love Jesus, we ought to be willing:**

**To follow Jesus to the synagogue and be a teacher**

**To follow His disciples into foreign countries and be a missionary**

**To follow Paul into the marketplace full of non-believers and share the Faith**

**To obey and to follow: both mean to give Jesus number one priority in our lives. This seminal question was asked of Peter: [John 21:15a \(ESV\)](#) <sup>15a</sup> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”**

**In [John 21:19](#), after three inquiries and after telling Peter how he would die - Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Follow Me!”**

**Jesus says, (Gary) “Do you love me? THEN FOLLOW ME! This means that we will love Christ MORE than ourselves. The problem with modern man is like the cartoon called *George’s Moon* by Jules Feiffer.**

**Francis A. Shaeffer in a book *How Should We Then Live?* sums it up this way: “When the principles are gone, there remains only expediency at any price.”**

**You see if man is the standard for truth and justice then we do kill babies in the womb, we do correspond with people *like* Dr. Jack Kevorkian (of days past) to take care of dad so he is no longer a burden, and somehow we are duped into believing everyone is right - so nobody is wrong.**

The only thing to keep us from going down that road to destruction is to:  
**II. Think with the Mind of Jesus.**

What are Jesus' social concerns? He said "man should not live by bread alone" and "the poor are with us always." On the other hand we are to give to those who are in need, especially those in community with us. Jesus asks us to walk the extra mile, turn the other cheek, and even go so far as loving our enemies. But loving our enemies is really just doing the best things for them. Even loving our children and family may require difficult decisions, discipline and actions which are not always appreciated.

Whenever Jesus speaks of His purpose, it is to save the lost, and to create a crisis in thinking where people are given an ultimatum and asked to make a choice.

Billy Graham's success in years past was due to his aggressive approach to inviting people to hear the "good news." He WAS NOT a great preacher. He WAS a great evangelist. We need more evangelists who have hearts that are broken for the lost. We need more men and women, boys and girls who will pray for those who do not know Jesus!

If we think with the mind of Jesus, we certainly will have the same qualities that are listed in [Philippians 2](#). But beyond that, we will use some of the same strategies: We will approach others in humility, be a servant, and give up your lives for others.

Another strategy is found in our morning text in [Acts 17](#). This is very much in the same vein as Paul's teaching of "being all things to all people." Here Paul uses logic, secular poetry, and the gospel to reach the lost.

[Acts 17:16-34 \(ESV\)](#) <sup>16</sup> Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."

21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. 22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ 29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

*Jesus said we are to be as innocent as doves and as shrewd as snakes.* I have seen a lot of well-meaning Christians cut a non-Christian off at the knees. Ultimatums of hell-fire and brimstone are sometimes given. In order for us to help introduce faith to the world, we must get a hearing, an audience. Making enemies with those who Jesus came to save is NOT the proper strategy to build the Kingdom here on earth. If a person has to jump through man-made hoops to become a Christian, how is that different from the problems with Gentiles having trouble being admitted into the church.

Living as a Christian in a secular world we need to be in a position to:  
**III. Serve the World.**

As we try our best to serve the world from a Christian perspective, we must decide on an appropriate strategy. Building Sunday School programs through a bus ministry like in the 50s and 60s does not work generally anymore.

Door-to-door solicitation is considered a nuisance - you will be suspected of being in a cult if you try that approach even though I have done that before. The one-on-one street witnessing of the 1960's is generally not a valid approach either. Many things that used to work are now counter-productive.  
**NEW METHODS MUST BE FOUND AND ADAPTED.**

There are many approaches to serving the world.  
Our logo tells us: that this is a place *Where People Care About Other People*. It was chosen in the early 90's to convey one approach that I believe is a valid one because our world is getting less caring and loving. Respect, kindness and grace are desperately needed. Paul tells us that without love all spiritual gifts are useless. And the book of Acts tells us the church attracted the society to itself on the basis of her members' love for each other.

Our society is fraying at the seams because of a lack of integrity, lack of commitment, and lack of love in many circles. A community that cares for itself is one thing, but one that sacrificially cares for others is the true mark of Christianity. The Branch Davidians cared for their own in some ways. Other religious communes and cults also see that the needs of *their* community are met, but what about kindness toward others, even enemies?

Some believe that forcing the Christian agenda on various issues is the way to go (legislate morality). Others take the opposite pole and rarely share their views at all, but actually live in secluded communities. (Amish, or monastic, religious ghettos)

In a time when religion means different things to the culture, TRUST must be established. Positive relationships need to be built. There need to be successful, obviously-Christian business people, teachers, child-care providers, etc.

People come up to me at funerals and tell me how good a person so and so was. We must tell them when we can, and when it's appropriate: just being good and sincere will not get them to heaven. Only a relationship with Jesus will do that. And if we don't tell them, WHO WILL? In a sensitive and loving way we need to take advantage of every opportunity to share the Gospel.

Paul tells the Asian churches in his circular letter to the Ephesians: [Ephesians 5:15-16 \(ESV\)](#) <sup>15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

**Nothing has changed. People still need the Lord. The Church is the vehicle Jesus left here on earth to attract the world to Himself, and we need to be coworkers with Him.**

**There was a time within denominational structures of the last fifty years that people over-emphasized the “Social Gospel” as the way to bridge the gap with the world to get an audience, but that approach and liberal theology have failed. Those who have a low view of the Bible have not learned:**

**“We don’t (*can’t, shouldn’t*) change the Bible, the Bible changes us...the high standards of the Scriptures are not to be traded for the culture of low living.”**

**Conclusion:** I believe with everything that is in me that the pendulum is swinging away from emotionalism and feeling-based responses regarding issues of salvation. And in an age of expanding knowledge, we must be able to defend why we believe what we do, but we also must be able to demonstrate it in our lives.

**James Sire is correct when he says:**

**“I am convinced that for a person to be fully conscious intellectually he should not only be able to detect the world views of others but be aware of his own - why it is his - and why in the light of so many options he thinks it is true.”**

**Would you help me tell others about our SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST this week?**

**Someone at school?**

**Someone at work?**

**Someone you help?**

**Someone in the neighborhood?**

**And for Christ’s sake, let’s please tell someone!**