

## A Fresh Look at Secularity<sup>1</sup>

My subject today, I believe, is both very important and difficult. It's almost never preached or talked about. Nevertheless, it touches each of our lives. Now, I want to admit right off that my thinking on this subject has not crystallized. This is all a little experimental. And, because of these things, I need to ask that you give me an open-minded hearing this morning. It it's not all wrapped up and strong and tidy for you, that's the way it is for me too.

I'm going to talk about what we call the "secular." Secular means *this present age*. The times we live in.

Here's an illustration of how the secular is encroaching on our lives. Two Sundays ago all the churches in town had terrible attendance. The Baptists next door and Methodists up the street cancelled services. It was Spring break. For those of us older than 35, what do we say? "What's the world coming to when churches cancel services for Spring break? In my day, canceling a worship service was unthinkable." Well, it's the world we live in. That's secularity.

Put more precisely, there no longer exists a single world view or a single value system—even in LaGrange, Georgia. It feels like we're sliding into chaos. Actually, we're not losing values, we're

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on April 13, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, Ga.

gaining values. Everybody has his or her own values, standards, ideas what is important. The secular world has arrived.

What are examples of the advance of secularity? Kids interviewed by Jay Leno can't name a single one of the Ten Commandments, or one of the Bill of Rights. People wear shorts to church. Stores in Southern California are open on Christmas Day. Only a minority of adults in the Western World are married. Kids are shocked when their parents shoplift. I'm talking about a world no longer held together by common values or beliefs. Everybody has the freedom and responsibility to decide for him or herself how to live. And a lot of people don't seem to be making good choices.

What does the Bible say? The word "secular" doesn't appear in the Bible. So we have to look in the Bible for situations where standards and values are lost. The surprising finding is that the Bible is one long tale of the downfall of values and religious institutions. Here comes a controversial assertion: The logical outcome of biblical faith is the secularization of the world.

Let me support that. Take the Old Testament. Almost all of the religiosity of the Hebrew people faces away in the long stretch of time covered by the Old Testament. Our lesson today describes a fine example of the loss of an old time value—the enemy manages to capture the Ark of the Covenant—the very throne of God. How could that happen? Later, the Temple is torn down. Later, the Davidic

succession of kings is halted. Then the people are carried off the land. All of the institutions that made up Judaism were lost.

Someone says, "That's nuts, the heart of Judaism was faith and obedience to God's law. Fair enough. Comes Jesus Christ. Jesus is a nightmare for the religious leaders. He teaches a faith that relativizes what is left of Judaism. He's soft on the Sabbath. He cleanses the Temple. Speaks of God in the most intimate familiar fashion. The Apostle Paul goes on to demonstrate how the centerpiece of Jewish piety, the Law, is really not useful for securing God's love. Jesus Christ and his movement were a horror for conventional religious practice. Jesus was killed after all by religious leaders who saw clearly in his ministry a profound challenge to traditional values.

Someone's thinking—maybe a parent—"So, Doug's saying that when my children are disrespectful and pick up the distorted values of their peers and the media, that that's what Christianity supports. My answer is "no," and don't forget this is going to be hard.

Try this. Islam. The Islamic world view divides the world (I'm being simplistic, but I don't think misleading) into two spheres—the Islamic world of belief and the lost world of everything else. The world outside of the Islamic world is defined by Muslims as simply godless and generally benighted. Theologians might say that there isn't much tolerance for a secular—non-religious, non-Islamic realm.

Christianity has a much more complex view of the secular—one that I am striving to get clear about. Biblical faith begins with God creating a world that is intentionally different from God. In other words, our Creator, who had no need or deficiency in himself, nevertheless lovingly brought the world into being for the sheer joy of creating something other than himself that could have its own existence. Put differently, there is nothing essentially wrong with the world as God made it.

We further learn in the New Testament that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to serve and suffer to bring the world into reconciliation with God.

Here's where I'm going with all of this. The basic Christian outlook towards the world around is one of love and service rather than contempt and conquest.

Put differently, it appears that there isn't much of a divide that separates what is inside the kingdom or church or God's realm and what is outside.

Look at how Jesus navigated through life. Jesus moved around in the world. He wasn't always hanging out in the religious places—the synagogues or whatever. Rather he was all over—with sinners, women, Romans, religious people, poor people, demon-possessed persons, and on and on.

Ernie Campbell, the wonderful preacher and former minister of the Riverside Church in NYC playfully suggested that art museums are misguided enterprises. When we have art, we need to hang it in the subway and on tenement walls. Why? These are the places that really need beautification and generous profundity. Art museums are too much of a good thing.

Transfer this to our thinking about the secular world. Maybe you and I are most like Jesus and most Christian when we move into the far country and live out our faith there, turning the other cheek, befriending sinners, living without anxiety, not having contempt for our neighbor and so on. That's the world God created and loves.

Now, if you're thinking that this is all wet because it totally underestimates evil and sin and fallenness, all I can say is, "I haven't forgotten these."

God's world is significantly damaged by sin. And so we have poverty and disease and crime and hatred and on and on.

But consider this. Much of this is because you and I want to worship what is not God. We want to be our own gods. We want to idolize nation, class, and clan. Or sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Show me misery and enslavement, and I'll show you the worship of some false God.

A quick example. I visited our county jail not long ago with the Save Our Children committee. I heard from one of the young inmates. He told a sad story of growing up with a methamphetamine-addicted mother. Addiction is a crude kind of religion or false god. She spent her time cooking and selling "meth." She freely gave it to her son. Her addiction led to the misery and incarceration of her child. This is indeed a fallen world.

So liberation and restoration in this fallen world begins by dethroning—what? The false gods of this world. And that's a move towards secularity. Only the God who loved, created, and redeemed this world is worthy of our worship. And only our God sets us and doesn't make us his slaves.

Okay, we've been flying around at the 50,000 foot level of abstraction and still haven't figured out how to pump up worship attendance during Spring break. The only thing that comes to mind is that it was during Spring break on a Florida beach that a college student talked with me about Jesus in a way that made a big difference in my life. Maybe out there is just sometimes where the action is.

Let me summarize what I'm trying to say in all of this.

First: God loves this world with a selfless and generous love that needs nothing from us, but desires our healing and our happiness

and eternal friendship. There's no aspect of this world that is beyond the reach of God's care and his ability to restore.

Second, the church isn't a fortress of righteousness barricaded against the onslaught of the world. The church is a community of Jesus' disciples called to love and enjoy one another and to work with one another in advancing Jesus' kingdom of love in the world. There's a lot of joy in being a disciple.

Finally, we live in a post modern, secularizing world. That means that no single world view or style of life is for everyone. What follows from that is that traditions, culture, family, morality, patriotism, class, etiquette, respectability, good taste and on and on will suffer from increasing neglect by our kids and newcomers and the media. As you enjoy your afternoon later today, try to list the number of institutions and traditions in our country that are in decline. It's a challenging time.

Curiously, our God and our faith will seem remarkably comfortable in these circumstances. Secularity has been going on since the Philistines grabbed the Ark. It will likely go on. But God created this world. Jesus came to save it—in part from false values and misguided tradition—and that work goes forward as freshly as ever. Even during Spring Break!