

Reason to Believe: Is Religion Dying?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Today we will start a new sermon series, one that will last all summer. It's a series on apologetics. Many of you know what that means, some of you aren't sure, so let me explain what our series will be about. Some people hear the word apologetics and they think of the word 'apology', which means to say you're sorry. But while the two words come from the same Greek root word, apologetics is not apologizing. Apologetics is not saying, 'I'm sorry.' The word apologetics comes from the Greek verb *apologeomai*, which means to 'speak in defense.' So, to engage in Christian apologetics is to defend your faith. When people question your faith or make accusations against it, apologetics answers those questions and responds to those accusations.

The governing text for this whole series could be 1 Peter 3:15-16. In those verses, Peter urges the church, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is within you.*" This summer, we will be equipping you for that task. We will equip you with reasons. But before we start that let me say something about the right way to do apologetics, the right way to give our reasons. First, as Peter says, we defend our faith with gentleness and respect. We don't ridicule our questioners. We don't badger them. We don't try to intellectually humiliate them. Even if they are nasty to us, we are gracious to them. In practice, I think that means when you get into a discussion with an atheist who ridicules your faith, you don't swing these arguments like fist, "*You are a fool! You're wrong. Here's why Bam bam Bam. Hah!!*" No, you say, "*I know you feel differently than I do, but let me explain to you why I still love and follow Jesus.*" "Second, let's admit that often the person asking questions and making accusations is us. These hard questions, these doubts rise up in us. Sometimes it's our own self saying, "*What's going on here? How do I make sense of this?*"

That brings us to today's challenge to our faith. Today we look at the claim that religion is dying. According to this claim, Christianity (and all religion) is an ancient superstition and as human beings become more enlightened they will leave belief behind. You've heard people say stuff like this, right? They've been saying it for a while now. In 1966-a week after I was born actually-*Time* magazine put out a magazine with an infamous cover. The cover had a black background, and written on that background in provocative red letters was a question: "*Is God Dead?*" The article speculated that religion was in inevitable decline around the world because things that were previously thought of as supernatural now had scientific explanations. Back then, the pop culture spokesperson for this idea was John Lennon. The same year the *Time* magazine came out he said to the press, "*Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and will, be proved right.*" Lately there are statistics that seem to back up John Lennon's claim: We've all been talking about the Nones, the percentage of Americans who answer surveys about religion by saying 'None,' as in I have no religion. According to data from the General social survey, as of last year, 23.1 percent of Americans said they had no religion. That means there are as many Nones as Catholics, as many Nones as Evangelicals. In the early 70's only 5 percent of Americans called themselves Nones, now it's 23 percent. It's by far the fastest growing category in religious surveys.

Atheists celebrate these trends. Stephen J Gould was one of the early outspoken atheists. He was sure that religion was dying, he was also sure that we didn't need religious explanations

anymore. Here's how he saw the world: "*We are here because one group of fish had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures. We may yearn for a higher answer but none exists.*" And then he follows that up with a kind of ethic. *This explanation, though superficially troubling is ultimately liberating because we can now construct these answers ourselves.*" Gould is saying, if religion is dead so we get to choose our own meaning. Religion is dead, so we're in charge now! We can choose whatever we want under the sun and build our life around it! Which brings us to Ecclesiastes. 3000 years before John Lennon and Steven J Gould, the teacher of Ecclesiastes tried what Gould suggests. He tries to find meaning under the sun. He starts the under-the-sun Meaning project. He tries to find meaning without reference to things outside this world. He tries to construct a meaningful life based on earthly things. Let's see how the under-the-sun meaning project works out for him.

So how did the under-the-sun meaning project work out? Not great. Pleasure, whether the pleasures of the flesh, which the teacher seems to be concentrating on in verses 1-3, or the pleasures of achievement, which seem to be more of his emphasis in verses 4-10, don't give him any sense of meaning. They do not satisfy. Neither do the other earthly treasures pursued by the teacher. Read through the rest of Ecclesiastes and you will see that as part of the under-the-sun meaning project the teacher tries to build a life on wealth and wisdom and hard work and personal success, but they are all meaningless. None of them give him satisfaction.

They are meaningless because they don't lead anywhere. Meaning needs a story. Meaning needs direction. Something feels meaningful when it accomplishes something lasting for a cause. Something is meaningful when it pushes you a little further down the road toward an ultimate purpose. But these pursuits don't make him feel as though he's going forward, instead the teacher feels as though he's going in circles. Under the sun, we are all like hamsters in the hamster wheel, says the teacher. We run and run and run and run and then we die. There is no real story. There is no direction. It all goes round and round and round and round. Read chapter one if you want a strong sense of that hamster wheel. The sun rises, the sun sets. The wind blows north and then it blows south. You get up brush your teeth and eat your fruit loops. You work all day, go to bed at night, and in the morning you get up and do it again. Only now you're one day closer to death. "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless. Everything is wearying, more than one can say." Why does the under-the-sun meaning project fail? Because of death. Everything under the sun is temporary. You pursue these earthly things and you feel like you're getting somewhere, but then death comes and it all evaporates. Under-the-sun things can't bear the weight of your hopes because they can all be taken away from you. Wealth can be stolen, or swept away by a pandemic. Pleasures always fade – our senses dull and our mind. Wisdom is ignored or forgotten. Our achievements are handed over to a fool who destroys our good work. Nothing under the sun lasts. If you want to find meaning, you can't anchor it in something temporary. If you want real meaning, you have to anchor it in a purpose that stays steady yesterday, today and forever. If you want to find meaning in this world, you have to anchor it in a refuge that stays steady though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. If you want to find meaning in this world, you've got to root yourself in a purpose, *in a person*, that neither life nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from. You can't find that under the sun. You find that beyond the sun. You can only find it in the one who created the sun. You can only find it in Jesus Christ our Lord. Religion will not die anytime soon, because we human beings want meaning. We are meaning-making creatures. We want our lives to matter. We don't want our life to go in circles, we want it to count. In the words

of Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has placed eternity in our hearts, so our hearts will always reach beyond material things, beyond the sun. And the proper object of that search is found in Jesus.

I want to finish today with three specific arguments that might be humbly offered to those who say religion is dying. First, when you look at things worldwide, it is not true that religious faith is fading. It may have been reduced in Europe and it may have some struggles in north America, but when you look at China, when you look at Africa, when you look at the southern hemisphere, Christianity is growing. In *Making Sense of God*, Tim Keller gives some stats: By 2020 the number of Christians in China, Korea and Japan will have grown from 11.4 million to 171 million. In 1910 there were roughly 9 million Christians in Africa-9 percent of the population. But in 2020 there are roughly 630 million Christians in Africa. About 50 percent of the population. Yes, the growth of Nones in our country is discouraging, but when you measure that little trend against the great growth in the rest of the world, Christianity is far from dying. In the 50s and 60s people were predicting the demise of religion, but those people were wrong. Eric Kaufmann is a secular Canadian academic who teaches at the University of London. He studies religious trends. He wrote a book called "*Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth.*" In that book he reviewed the latest data on religion and he concludes that religion is growing and not shrinking in this world. He was interviewed in a magazine called the new humanist, also secular...obviously. He told the magazine that religion is growing "*because religion provides enchantment, meaning and emotion, and in our current moment we secularists lack that.*" We are religious Creatures. We need meaning, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

The second fact that tells us that religion isn't dying is the increase in expressions of religious hunger. In this country, people may not go to church as much as they used to, and religious participation may be down, but you know what's up? The cry of hungry souls desperate for spiritual food. When you deprive yourself of eternal food, your soul gets hungry. And when your soul gets hungry it starts to cry out. And when it cries it makes a terrible sound. That terrible sound of hungry souls is everywhere: The dissonance of a lot of modern music. The darkness of so much of modern fiction and modern cinema. The popularity of dystopian fiction and dystopian movies. The screams of punk rock. The anger and despair of heavy metal. The gloom of Emo. The furious sadness of a lot of rap music. You may not like any of this stuff, and some of the things they express may sound vile to your ears, but it's the sound of hungry souls trying to find food. It's the sound of lonely people crying out for their true family and their true home.

In *Making Sense of God*, Tim Keller has a really interesting quote from Apple founder Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs wasn't particularly religious, but he couldn't escape the weight of eternity in his heart. "*It's strange to think that you accumulate all this experience...and it just goes away. So I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your consciousness endures.*" He had this overwhelming sense that this should not be! My life feels something like eternal! How can it end! That feeling was a sign of the eternity God had placed in his heart. It was a sign that he was made for fellowship with God. All humans, unbelievers included, feel a pit in their stomach when facing the death of the people they love. Death doesn't just hurt them, it haunts them. It's a sign that God has put eternity in our hearts. Our souls know that we are made for more than this! Expressions of religious hunger tell us that we are religious creatures, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

Final point: the existence of joy shows that we are fundamentally religious creatures. We all have these moments in our life when we experience joy. Not happiness. Not contentment. Joy. In those moments our hearts lift, and we feel and ecstasy out of proportion to the moment itself.

You're with some friends, one of you says something, and suddenly you are all laughing so hard that your stomach hurts. The joke wasn't even that funny but joy lifts you up. Before he was a believer, C.S. Lewis had an experience of joy when he was reading Norse poetry. Most of us would not experience joy through Norse poetry, but Lewis did. As he was reading the poem there was a line that read "*Balder the beautiful is dead, is dead.*" Lewis said, "*The words seemed to have come from infinity itself,*" "*I was instantly uplifted into huge regions of the Northern sky!*" Lewis called his experience joy, and it became really important in his journey to Christianity. He understood that these feelings of joy that we have in nature, in music, in literature, in the company of friends, were all signs of eternity in our hearts. In these moments of joy, God whispers in our ear, "*You are not just a walking pork chop! You are made to live eternally with me!*" Joy makes it hard to be an unbeliever. What do atheists do when God whispers joyfully in their ear? Often they suppress it. Kenneth Clark, the British Historian, who was not a believer, once wrote about an experience of joy that he had as a young man. He was in the church of San Lorenzo in France, which is a beautiful building, but while he was there he had an experience that, in his own words went way beyond the beauty of the building. "*I can only say that for a few minutes, my whole being radiated with a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had ever experienced before.*" But as wonderful as the experience was, Clark goes on to say that it was awkward for him. If he gave into the joy and opened himself up to eternal things, he would have to change and he didn't want to submit to a power beyond himself. "*I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course.*" He deliberately smothered joy and pushed it away. What a shame. The joys of the world that flare up in every human heart is yet more evidence that religion cannot die because we are fundamentally religious creatures and God has put eternity in our hearts. Of course, we Christians believe that true home is not just 'the eternal,' It's not just the 'realm of the spirit.' We find our home in Christ, because in Jesus, the Lord of eternity, the Lord who is our hearts true home came from eternity to live with us under the sun. In Jesus, the eternal one is laid in a manger, dies for us, and he rises from the grave, and he ascends into heaven for us so that our longing hearts can find the way home. Eternity isn't just a feeling in our hearts. In Jesus, eternity has a face. In Jesus eternity knows our name. In Jesus our longing hearts find their true home.

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