



Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

(2) The Conforming Power of Society and the Biblical Answer

Romans 12:2

Ephesians 4:17-24

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January 20, 2019

This is sermon #2 in a series of sermons called “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs.” I’m preaching this series because I’ve done quite a bit of reading on how the thinking of the world is influencing the church and how many Christians are leaving the church altogether and it seems to me that this is something that should be addressed.

Furthermore, the Bible gives a lot of emphasis to addressing false teaching and telling Christian teachers that this is one of the things that they need to be doing in order to guard the flock that God has given them to shepherd. For instance in Titus 1:9, Paul writes that an overseer in the church must, “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” One of the other key verses in the Bible concerning the office of elder, says, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” And what Paul goes on to speak about in that passage are “men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28ff.)

David Wells has done a lot of writing in this area and here is a quote from him that expresses why it is so necessary to think about the secular thinking of our time and the biblical responses to it. In his book *God in the Whirlwind* he writes, “The shaping of our life is to come from Scripture and not from culture. We are to be those in whom truth is the

internal driver and worldly horizons and habits are not.... This is a two-sided practice: “Yes” to biblical truth and “No” to cultural norms if they damage our walk with God and rob us of what he has for us in his Word. Being transformed also means being unconformed. Why is this? The answer is that our experience of our culture may have affected how we see things. Given the intense exposure we have to our modernized world, we need to be alert to the way it can shape our perspective and understanding (Location 261).”

Today I want to deal with the secular mindset of our society. I will first spend some time describing what it means to say that we live in a secular society and then I will give a biblical response. The basis of this description is Charles Taylor’s work called *Our Secular Age* as mediated through Tim Keller and a number of other authors. Charles Taylor’s book has been very influential in helping Christians understand our secular age and how we got here, but it is a very thick dense tome which I have not tackled. Instead I am relying on a number of his interpreters who summarize his ideas and make them more accessible for people like me who don’t have the time to get into such a long and difficult book. There are a number of good books out there now which summarize and interact with Taylor’s work and make it more accessible. And I have read and will be using a number of them.

Now Taylor uses the word “secular” in three different but interrelated ways. I’m taking these from a footnote in Tim Keller’s book called *Making Sense of God* which I will be using a lot in this series. So three uses of the term secular: “The first is that a secular society is one in which the government and main social institutions are not tied to one religion..... The second is that a secular society is one in which many or most people do not believe in God or in a nonmaterial, transcendent realm. [Thirdly], a secular society [is] one in which the conditions for belief have changed.” (endnote 3 in the introduction of *Making Sense of God*)

So we live in a society in which church and state are separated and no one religion is in control of the state. That is a big issue in itself, but we are not going there now. What we are interested in now is the fact that we live in a society in which “many or most people do not believe in

God or in a nonmaterial, transcendent realm.” That describes our society with some provisos.

If you look at the polls, you will find that hard core atheists are actually a small percentage of the population and that most people have some kind of belief in a supernatural realm. However, for most of these people their belief in a supernatural realm does not affect their lives and their opinions about things very much if at all. A very high number of people in our society are practical atheists even if they do not tick off the atheist box on a survey. Furthermore, the assumptions that lie behind most of what we are confronted with in the media and in entertainment and documentaries are secular in the sense of assuming that there is nothing beyond this material world or if there is, it is irrelevant to how we think and live in this world. So it is true to say that in our society “most people do not believe in God or in a nonmaterial, transcendent realm.”

Taylor’s third way of using the term secular is also significant. “A secular society is one in which the conditions for belief have changed.” This is one of Taylor’s more significant and relevant observations. The conditions of belief have changed. What he means is this: There was a time in the western world when you did not choose what to believe about whether or not there was a God or what were the basic standards of right and wrong. You just believed what everyone else around you believed because almost everyone believed the same thing. Some took it more seriously than others, but pretty much everyone believed in God and basic Christian morality. The few who did not believe in God were starkly at odds with the rest of their society. Most people did not choose to believe in God. It just happened naturally because it was an assumption that everyone else made.

That is no longer the case and that is what Taylor is getting at when he says that one of the characteristics of our secular society is that the conditions of belief have changed. We live in a world of choices when it comes to religions and worldviews. We live in a world in which there is a whole smorgasbord of ways of looking at the world. And the one way which dominates all others is the secular way where the things that matter are restricted to this life.

The normal way of thinking and living in our society is to live for this life and to be unaffected by any thoughts of God or an eternal realm beyond this life. This is the direction of the shaping influence of our society. The assumption that most people make that underlies their opinions and values is that this physical world is the only world that matters. Even if many believe in God or the supernatural in some sense, those beliefs mostly have no impact on how they think about life or on how they live.

Thus to hold to a biblical understanding of the world and seek to live according to it, is something that we must choose to do in the face of the opposite way of thinking that permeates our society. To quote David Wells again, “Given the intense exposure we have to our modernized world, we need to be alert to the way it can shape our perspective and understanding.” (*God in the Whirlwind*, location 261).

Another way of getting at this same idea is the term “plausibility structure.” This is what Taylor is getting at although the term “plausibility structure” is used by many more thinkers who are interested in how the society in which we live shapes how we think and what we believe. When most of the people in a society think and speak on the basis of a secular way of looking at the world, it makes the secular way of looking at the world seem and feel more plausible than the biblical way of looking at the world. Imbedded in the language that people use are all kinds of assumptions about the world and those assumptions have a shaping influence on us so that the secular way of looking at the world just seems to be the most obvious and reasonable.

What is conveyed over and over again in millions of ways is that there is no supernatural realm, this material world is all that there is, and that this earthly life is all that matters. What is conveyed over and over again in millions of ways is the secular mindset, the secular way of looking at the world. When religion is mentioned it is usually in a negative way conveying the attitude that religious believers are naïve and irrational in their belief in the existence of a God who actually cares about what goes on in this world and in a realm of being beyond this earthly existence – an eternal and supernatural realm.

And that produces an atmosphere in which the secular way of looking at the world, just seems more plausible than the biblical way of understanding the world. It feels more sophisticated and intelligent to believe that reality consists only of this physical material world and that there is no transcendent realm that is beyond the reach of our five senses. It feels unsophisticated and childish to believe that the world was created by God and that God is involved in the world and cares about how we live. That is the most natural way of thinking about life in our society.

So in the context in which we live what seems plausible to most people are the speculations of the intellectual community that the world came into existence as a result of some big bang in the remote past and that evolution provides the most reasonable explanation for the emergence of life and the development of the various forms of life including the human race. And the biblical teaching that God created the world in six days simply by speaking and that he created human beings to love and serve him just seems like a fairy tale to most people in our society and particularly to the people who are the opinion-shapers in our society.

Here are a couple of more quotes on this subject. Greg Forster writes, "Like all human beings, we are cultural creatures. We are formed by the assumptions, narratives, and institutions of our society." And in his book called *7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind*, Anthony Salvaggio says, "The church is often like a sponge that absorbs the spirit of the age prevalent in the surrounding culture."

This is the context in which we live. And while none of these ideas are completely new to us and while it has often been the case for Christians that they lived in societies that were not conducive to believing, it is vitally important that we be aware of the ways in which our social context influences us, often in subtle ways that gradually and imperceptibly influence our thinking. This has always been the case, but because of modern communications, we experience the bombardment of the thinking and values of our society in a way that is more intense than has been the case in earlier periods in history.

Now I have taken the time to dwell on this because I think it is vital that we are aware of it. There is a lot written about it by various Christian

scholars and observers of our time and they see how the church is absorbing the spirit of the age like a sponge, to use Anthony Salvaggio's expression. We need to be aware of how subtly and imperceptibly our thinking can be changed and we need to be aware of the fact that this is the environment in which our children are growing up.

I do not want to be alarmist or to convey the idea that caving into the secular way of thinking is inevitable for us and our children. We believe the biblical worldview and the biblical worldview is focused on God and the God of the Bible is up to any challenge that his people face. The people of God have always lived in environments that were hostile to the truth and God has promised to keep his people no matter what. But Jesus himself has told us that many will fall away and that it will be very difficult for his people to remain faithful. And both of those streams of biblical teaching must be taken into account.

So let's now look at the biblical response. I'm taking more time describing the secular side of things than I normally do, because this is the context in which we are living, but that is all preparation for considering a biblical response. And the passage that I would like to focus on in the light of what we have covered so far is Romans 12:2 where Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

What I have covered so far is the danger of being conformed to this world. Clearly that is a biblical concern. But the Bible also gives us instruction for dealing with the danger of being conformed to this world and that is what we have in the rest of this verse.

And that means that things are not hopeless and that there is not an inevitability of being swept away with the thinking of the world. There is an inevitability of being influenced by our cultural environment in some ways, but not every influence of our culture is bad. None of us dress in the same styles that people wore 100 years ago, but conforming to our culture in fashion is not adopting a secular way of thinking about life and the meaning of life. Paul's instruction here makes it clear that there are ways to avoid being conformed to our culture. And the key thing

that Paul mentions in this verse is to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

The contrast is between being conformed and being transformed. To be conformed is allow ourselves to be shaped by the culture in ways that contradict biblical teaching and to be transformed is to be shaped by the renewal of our minds and we need to dwell on what that means.

Paul speaks of this a little more fully in Ephesians 4:17-24. In verses 17-18 he says, “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their heart.” Then Paul goes on to say that Christians have “learned Christ!”, that they were “taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus” and that they have been taught “to be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds.”

One of the things that this passage shows us is the biblical evaluation of the thinking of those who reject God. Paul speaks of the “futility of their minds.” He says that “They are darkened in their understanding.” He speaks of the “ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their heart.”

This is important when we think of the fact that the secular worldview seems so plausible. The Bible has a very different perspective about any way of thinking about the world that does not begin with the God of the Bible and which is not based on the teaching of the Bible. The Bible accounts for the fact that unbelievers are not convinced of the teaching of God’s word. The Bible explains why it is that huge numbers of people can be convinced that their way of understanding the world makes the most sense and is so obviously correct that other views are dismissed as foolishness. The Bible claims that the thinking of the world is futile, that unbelievers are darkened in their understanding and that they are ignorant “due to the hardness of their heart.”

Now I plan to demonstrate this in following sermons. There is a great body of work both from the history of the church and from the current crop of Christian scholars that interacts with the secular worldview and demonstrates that it is built on a foundation of sand and that for all its

seeming sophistication it is demonstratively irrational and contradictory. It will take more time than we have right now to even begin to demonstrate that, but for the time being we are taking note of the fact that the Bible calls the whole secular way of looking at the world an exercise in futility and the product of people whose minds are darkened because of sin.

Part of the biblical response to the secular beliefs of our time is to label them as foolishness and the products of darkened and ignorant minds which are controlled by the hardness of their hearts. And one of the ways that we see the evidence of that is to consider that for all the impressive results of science and technology, secular thinking is becoming more and more ridiculous and absurd and untethered from common sense and reality in the areas of morality and sexuality and gender and family. One of things that is increasingly clear as our society becomes more and more consistently secular is that more and more people live empty and broken lives and that society as a whole disintegrates.

Anyway the claim of the Bible is that its way of describing the world and its relationship to God is the truth and that to reject God is the ultimate foolishness and is result of spiritual blindness. The claim of the Bible is that through believing in Jesus we are renewed so that we begin to see reality as it really is which is as the Bible describes it and that the God of the Bible is the truth and Jesus is the way the truth and the life. And the biblical instruction to believers is that we are to be renewed in the spirit of our minds and to not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

Now the overall message of the Bible is that we are all blind until God take away our blindness. Paul expresses it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:6 when he writes, "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The knowledge of God comes from God shining his light into our hearts. But the Bible also tell us to put in effort in resisting the thinking of the world and being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

As in many things in the Christian life, what God does and what we do work together. And in this connection there is a vital work of God that enlightens our minds to see and receive his truth, but at the same time we are called to resist being conformed to this world and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

So one of the ways that the Bible tells us to respond to our immersion in the soup of the secular worldview of our society is to be deliberate and active about renewing our minds. Romans 12:2 goes on to say, “that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

What this means is that we must be active in learning to discern. In Ephesians 4:14, Paul says that we are not to be like children, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” So when it comes to this whole area of the shaping influence of our culture, one of the biblical responses is that we are to be engaged in evaluating what is being said and what is assumed and what is taken for granted so that instead of being conformed to the world we may be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are to give our attention to the task of renewing our minds.

Now we are not all the same when it comes to the minds that God has given us. Some minds are more at home thinking about practical things. Some minds are better at math and other minds are better at seeing and creating beauty and other minds are good at organizing and getting things done. Part of the blessing of being the church is that we are all different which means that our minds are different as well. That means that we are not all as comfortable reading and thinking about the subtle ways that the world influences us. So clearly we are not all in the same place when it comes to reading and pondering these things. And that is one of the reasons that God sends preachers and teachers to his people.

But while it is OK that we are not all given to reading and study, all of us are capable of learning something and all of us to some extent are capable of being transformed by the renewing of our minds. And the most important way that our minds are renewed is by exposing them to the Word of God. And probably the second most important way that

our minds are renewed is by thinking about and praying over what we read in the Word of God. And an important part of this is Christian teaching, beginning with engaging with the preaching of the Word, but also with the many other forms of Christian teaching that are available to us.

For while the secular thinking is around us like air, we also have unprecedented access to Christian teaching in our day and age. The technology that brings us secular thinking can also bring us Christian thinking including all kinds of ways to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And behind all of this is the fundamental truth that God renews our minds primarily through his Word. A relevant text here is 1 Corinthians 1:18 which says that “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

The world thinks that the word of the cross is foolishness. That sentiment is being expressed in thousands of ways day after day after day. That sentiment is what shapes the thinking of so many people in our world. But we believe in God and we believe that the message of the cross is the power by which our hearts and our lives and our minds are renewed. Paul was so convinced of the vital importance and the truth of the gospel that he preached that he said in Galatians 1:8, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Paul did not say this because he was a contentious crackpot who resented being contradicted. He said it because he knew that the gospel is a matter of life and death. That means that the way that we look at the world is a matter of life and death, heaven and hell. This is not about winning arguments and being right. This is about the most fundamental matter of life and death and that is our relationship to God.

We live in a secular world that teaches that all that matters is our lives in the here and now. The Bible teaches us that the most important thing for human beings is how they relate to the God of the Bible. And what we will see the more that we study the Bible and ourselves and the world around us is that the world of which we are a part reflects perfectly the word of its Creator.