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BEAUTIFUL, BEAUTIFUL: PREACHING IN A POST-CHRISTIAN "AESTHETIC SOCIETY"

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Introduction

Preaching is changing. Little needs to be said about these confusing cultural times. Political, religious, socio-economic, moral, and societal revolutions seem to be happening by the minute, and technology willingly lends its hand to grease the wheels. On an emotional level alone, these swift changes have shown immense capability to wreak havoc on the human sense of identity and security. For the Christian, in particular, it *feels* as though the western Church has entered a new, hostile world unlike anything it has seen before. Cultural critic, pastor, and missiologist, Mark Sayers, puts words to the emotions many Christians feel:

> Something has changed. Can you feel it? The air temperature has suddenly dropped and a strong breeze has descended. The long-watched, leaden clouds of secularism are now forebodingly overhead. Heavy drops splatter around us, promising a downpour of disbelief. Anxiously we look for shelter, for cover, for higher ground.[1]

Of course, the drives toward secularism and, by extension, pluralism do have their positives. Above all, they cement into place the societal parameters disallowing any *one* religion to be forced upon another. Still, the downside remains that they create emotional insecurity for Christians whose religious tradition once set the framework for public discourse. These unstable emotions are, no doubt, the result of the church's having entered

1. Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 7.

a post-Christian, pluralistic, era. To be sure, feelings like these are anything but isolated to the average layperson; they also can take a draining toll on the emotional and spiritual life of the preacher.

With the litany of societal shifts intensifying, the task of preaching has grown more and more complex. Anecdotally, I have discovered in nearly every one of my homiletics courses at Fuller Seminary (Pasadena, CA) and George Fox Evangelical Seminary (Portland, OR) that the questions both students and preachers bring to class evolve with such speed from year-to-year (even semester-to-semester) that my lectures have a general shelf-life of about three months. Changing questions are demanding changing ways of responding. In this "liquid culture" (to borrow from Zygmunt Bauman) of an increasingly post-Christian society, preachers are struggling to keep up with the pace of the tsunami of swelling cultural questions presented to them week in and week out in their local congregations.

In the end, how does one preach faithfully in a post-Christian age? That is the seminal question this article seeks to explore. While the cultural changes facing the church are myriad, this article considers one aspect of how a post-theistic, pluralistic, relativistic, post-Christian world is beckoning the church to revisit the ways in which it preaches and teaches the gospel. To that end, this article takes a brief look at what I call the "aesthetic society" as an essential mark of the post-Christian West and how the church should reconsider its preaching within that framework.

Updating Homiletics

The anxiety the preacher faces in the post-Christian context is the result of living in what Charles Taylor calls "a cross-pressured world"—that world where one faces a seemingly endless array of challenges from within, without, and all

around.[2] Preachers, no doubt, feel this pressure from just about every angle—the church, culture, leaders, and, hopefully, the inklings and leadings of the Holy Spirit. Still, the post-Christian era has only just begun to take shape. Increasingly, the Western church will find itself in an exclusively post-Christian society that no longer sees its religious upbringing as virtuous and as a basis for cultural leadership; in fact, we may already fully be there. While geographical pockets of North America remain "culturally Christian," these isolated geographical regions are shrinking rapidly. In short, post-Christianity is coming to a neighborhood near you.

This, of course, is not the first time the church has needed to rediscover its preaching voice in a new age. History has shown time and again the church's homiletical malleability during the course of seismic cultural shifts. A cursory reading of homiletic history demonstrates a predictable pattern: the method the church employs in preaching is largely based on the cultural world around it.

Stuart Murray, for example, lucidly demonstrates the variant homiletical transitions between pre-Christendom Christianity and Christendom Christianity of the fourth century—transitions that reflected changing culture.[3] Particularly in the wake of Christendom in the Constantinian world, extant sermons from the period reflect a loss of distinction between church and world. The church and the Roman world were essentially becoming one. As a result, various New Testament themes such as the kingdom of God and the non-violent ethics of Jesus that played such a crucial role for the marginalized early church no longer

2. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 63. I am indebted to Smith's critical and engaging analysis of Taylor's prolific work and the direct effect it is playing on the church in the post-Christian world.

3. Murray, "Christiandom and Post-Christiandom," 9. Murray points out that the catechetical instructions of Ambrose, for example, are based on Old Testament morality (see Ambrose, *De Mysteriis*, 1:1), whereas catechumens used to be taught to apply Jesus' teachings (see Justin, *Apology*, 1:14–16; and *Didache*, chs. 1–6). Fourth-century sermons and writings demonstrate the same reinterpretation of what the Bible taught: the life of Christ was now used devotionally more than ethically.

served the central role they once did. In their minds, it was as though The Great Commission was being fulfilled; Rome was being Christianized. Thus, the blurring of the distinction between church and world resulted in New Testament passages such as Rom 13 being re-interpreted to accommodate an increasingly Christianized empire.

Particularly in the modern era, preaching in a post-Christian society has been discussed at length in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. In the 1960s, Newbigin, a British missionary, returned home, after decades of missionary work in India, only to find his homeland becoming a post-Christian nation.[4] It was as though, Alan J. Roxburgh and Scott M. Boren write, the "Christian England he had left was gone."[5] In Newbigin's eyes, youth were disconnecting from ecclesial life, the gospel was seemingly forgotten, and the culture was darkening at an unparalleled pace. Newbigin realized his Western homeland (England, Europe, and parts of North America by extension) had become a mission field while he had been busy serving as an overseas missionary. The Christian world had almost entirely turned post-Christian, if not entirely *anti*-Christian.

Newbigin soon came to see the European context as entirely post-Christian and *pagan*.[6] It was Newbigin who popularized a theology of *missio Dei* for the purposes of exploring mission in the Western world. He argued that missions had become less Christian than European—that is, the church had been preaching more culture than gospel—a cultural imperialism so to speak.[7] It troubled Newbigin that, while the gospel had lasting effect on European architecture, literature, and culture, it had been lost on the ears and hearts of the people—all of this in a single generation. England had become an unreached mission field, while Newbigin was a missionary in a foreign land.

4. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 4.
5. Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 9.
6. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 20.
7. I borrow the phrase "cultural imperialism" from Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 38.

Newbigin's missional reflections were widely received and eventually gave rise to the Missional Church Network. A number of Newbigin's groundbreaking texts concerned the changing outlook of the modern world toward faith—particularly as it related to the church's preaching ministry. One text, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, identifies various ways modern Western peoples think about God.[8] Modern technology, he suggests—combined with radical self-sufficiency and individualism—has almost entirely eliminated one's perceived need for transcendent, eternal, reality. In short, hope is increasingly understood as temporal, in the "here and now." Through secularization, technological idolatry, and economic over-development, modern people can ground their sense of fulfillment outside a life of faith by locating their sense of identity in their current, historical existence. Today, hope is a hope in the *now*.

This loss of transcendence in the cultural milieu, Newbigin believed, fundamentally changed the role of preaching in the church. He reflects: how can the church preach when everyone seems to get along just fine "without God"? When our needs are met, who needs someone to tell us to carry a cross? Newbigin offers critical insight in a chapter entitled, *The Pastor's Opportunities*. He came to believe that the preacher must be willing to do something drastic. Certainly, there will be the task of evoking belief in the gospel, of preaching the reality of God in the here and now, of breaking through any self-serving form of existence which is not existence at all, and of *evoking* the gospel in order to awaken a city to re-consider God in every avenue of human existence.[9] Newbigin aptly articulates, however, that mission runs deeper than that. The church, the Christians, the preacher, they all, without hesitation, must be willing to *risk hope*. In the modern world and in the modern city, "the commodity in shortest supply is hope."[10]

8. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*.

9. The gospel will always evoke theological renewal. As John Douglas Hall writes, "the gospel *evokes* theology" (italics mine). On this connection, see Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 27.

10. Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 40.

Newbigin's theological reflections were prophetic and helped create a conversation that would soon lead to a groundswell of writings on Christian mission in the post-Christian West. In the same vein, Charles Taylor has explored what he calls *The Secular Age*. Within the book that bears that title, Taylor speaks about a Western society that is "haunted by the transcendent," where the values and ethics of Christianity remain, but entirely disconnected and disembodied from their source. This "disenchantment," as he calls it, is the result of Enlightenment thinking and has ultimately led to the displacement of God as the ordering narrative of society.[11]

The result of this drastic change means that, as preaching changed in the fourth century, preaching is going to change in the twenty-first century. Culture is fluid, as are its questions. As James Choung has pointed out, the epistemic and cultural questions of each generation will shift: the questions of the Boomers ("what is true?"), Gen X'ers ("what is real?"), and Millennials ("what is good?") will emerge as different from generation to generation.[12] A precedent rises to the surface: preaching methodology has always sought to update itself with the culture around it. As it has always related to the preacher, this demands a constant, Spirit-led openness to the process of inculturation and incarnation—bearing the message of the gospel for a given time and place. This inculturation often takes time and many mistakes to fully cement itself in a given context. So will the cultural questions of a Christian and post-Christian world.

Preaching, as such, is always seeking to re-find itself. A metaphor comes to mind: when a child is born, it is as though, upon birth, they are thrown onto a stage into the middle of a play. The child's task becomes, confusing as it is, to try and simultaneously figure out what has been going on with the story

11. Interestingly, Taylor makes the case that a good deal of this displacement is rooted in the Protestant Reformation. Once the church was freed from institutional Roman Catholicism, the various churches set up a context that implied various truths. Thus, the birth of the post-modern incredulity of metanarrative. Smith, *Secular*, 39.

12. Choung, "Generational Worldviews."

up to this point and what *their* particular part in the play is. Such is the story of preaching in any cultural moment. What world do we find ourselves in? How do we speak our part in that world? Like a child, the Western church finds itself standing in the middle of a surprisingly complex, nuanced, chaotic scene with many players (some shouting) and many sub-themes (with every new hashtag) already at play. In a post-Christian world, the task of the church is twofold—careful attentiveness to the story we find ourselves in, and the Spirit-guided role of discerning our voice in that story.

The "Aesthetic Society"

Increasingly, homiletic practitioners in Western Christianity are going to grapple with a cultural swing in post-Christian society towards what I have called the "aesthetic society." Indeed, this term has been employed by others. For example, philosopher Richard Bellamy describes an "aesthetic society" as that society that displaces labor and physical labor with intellectual, artistic, and spiritual occupations as the organizing economic principle in Western society.[13] Similarly, I wish to employ the term "aesthetic society" as that aspect of a post-Christian society where truth discourse ("true" and "not true") is predominantly displaced by discourse in aesthetics as a natural by-product of widespread relativistic epistemic belief structures. In short, the aesthetic society of a post-Christian world is less likely to be interested in what is true and good as much as in what is beautiful and interesting, particularly in the realms of religious discourse.

Our Western philosophical forbears lucidly described in great detail this kind of society. Alfred North Whitehead, for instance, spoke of a Western society that was increasingly apt to believe what is interesting more than what is truthful. Even centuries previous to the contemporary emergence of the post-Christian Western era, which we find ourselves embedded in, Søren Kierkegaard described the kind of person he called an "aesthete"

13. Discussed at length in Bellamy, *Liberalism and Modern Society*.

in his tome, *Either/Or*. In a perceptive analysis of Kierkegaard's text, philosopher and theologian Diogenes Allen describes Kierkegaard's belief that there existed three unique kinds of people: the aesthete, the ethical, and the religious person. The aesthete in Kierkegaard's writings, Allen demonstrates, is marked by five distinctives. An aesthete lived their life, (1) based on immediacy, (2) forever seeking gratification, (3) founded on the accidental, (4) yearning for the interesting, and (5) based on the external over the internal.[14] Of course, a good deal of this description could be utilized to accurately describe many post-Christian urban environments, such as that of the author: Portland, Oregon.

For Kierkegaard, the aesthete had an orientation toward the world fundamentally opposed to that of the religious person; the former was primarily oriented toward the immanent, the latter, toward the transcendent. Undoubtedly, as it relates to our contemporary situation, Kierkegaard's aesthete fits almost perfectly as a descriptor for a pluralistic, relativistic, post-Christian person in a society that lacks a governing religious narrative based on transcendent truth. The connection between the aesthete and relativism is an important one. This connection between pluralism and relativism, and a multiplicity of religious traditions living alongside one another, can have the effect of muting one's unique sense of religious metanarrative. Donald E. Miller, summing up Peter Berger's work on the topic, points out:

> We are becoming increasingly aware of different belief systems . . . To the observer it appears that there is little agreement . . . in the realm of values . . . Peter Berger has argued that pluralism breeds a philosophical relativism in which the average person stands confused as to whether any single voice among the contending opinions lays claim to the truth.[15]

Pluralism breeds philosophical relativism. For the post-Christian person in a pluralist world, the ongoing experience of encountering "the other" has the effect of forcing one's own dearly-held

14. Allen, *Three Outsiders*, 57–61.
15. Miller, "The Future of Liberal Christianity," 267.

religious convictions to have to learn to swim in the raging and chaotic sea of religious and cultural difference. The end result is often the abandonment of one's concrete, particular religious beliefs for the shallower waters of uncertainty. Pluralism, thus, becomes the father of relativism. If there are so many religions, it suggests, how can *one* of them be true?

Simon Critchley offers a brilliant exposition of the philosophy of Jacob Bronowski—host of BBC's famous "The Ascent of Man"—demonstrating the epistemological underpinnings of such an aesthetics worldview. In a post-modern, post-Christian world, Critchley writes, "There is no God's eye view, and the people who claim that there is and that they possess it are not just wrong, they are morally pernicious."[16] As it relates to the realm of religious truth, everything is opinion; facts are conjecture. The result of this becomes an implicit turn towards the pursuit of religious *beauty* over religious *truth* as an exclusive path to religious experience. Critchley continues: "postmodernist philosophy invites me to view a thing scientifically, and artistically, and in terms of the cultural, gender, political, economic forces that define it as a beautiful or useful or worthy amount of money to certain people and so on."[17] This post-Christian world begins the death of religious certainty and resurrects the "tolerance of uncertainty."[18]

With no "God's eye view," one is left uncertain of religious claims but still hungry for religious truth. Enter the narrative of beauty. In sum, religious *beauty* plays better than religious truth in a post-Christian society. Beauty, for one, does not offend a religiously pluralistic mind because beauty simply *is*; it does not claim superiority. Beauty can be perceived as universally beautiful to the Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and atheist. The turn toward aesthetic truth, sadly, offers a minimized version of a truth claim lacking offense and devoid of the truth. One does not need to reflect long to immediately draw connections between the aesthetic society and post-Christian homiletic practice.

16. Critchley, "The Dangers of Certainty," para. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

Largely, those who come to church have spent their entire week engaging never-ending flows of engaging content on social media, overloaded with news stories from NPR, having watched spectacular videos on YouTube, and enjoying ground-breaking content on various TED Talks. But how can a preacher compete with a TED Talk? Post-Christian society has been allured by beauty[19]—that which appears interesting and alluring over what is truthful and good.

So, an aesthetic society—where pluralism and relativism raise their voices as the prevailing metanarratives—is our societal context that increasingly side-steps ancient religious debates regarding truth or falsehood, goodness or badness. Is it spectacular or not? Is it interesting? Is it "Instagram-able"? These are the questions of the aesthetic society. This move, of course, makes sense in a post-Christian society where no religious tradition—as it did in Christendom—holds sway over the cultural narrative. In such pluralistic contexts, where a multiplicity of religious traditions lives side-by-side, one is left to assume that multiplicity necessarily means that no transcendent truth reigns supreme.

In the lucid letter writing of author Flannery O'Connor, the Roman Catholic describes a friend who has abandoned her faith and no longer attends the local parish:

> I'll tell you what's with "A." Why all the exhilaration. She just left the church. Those are the signs of release. She's high as a kite and all pure air . . . She now sees through everything and loves everything and is in a bundle of feelings of empathy for everything. She doesn't believe any longer that Christ is God and so she has found that he is "Beautiful! Beautiful!" The effect of all of this on me is pretty sick making but I managed to keep my mouth shut. I even have restrained myself from telling her that if Christ wasn't God he was really pathetic not beautiful. And such restraint for me is something! She is

19. Of course, the Genesis account offers a strong critique of beauty as a means to truth. God instructed Adam and Eve not to "eat" from the Tree of Knowledge. That is, they could look but not eat. The sin of Adam and Eve was to take the food they did not need—proto-consumerism. Satan, as well, is depicted as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

> now against all intellectualism. She thinks she's at last discovered how to be herself and has at last accepted herself.[20]

This is the response of a post-Christian world. O'Connor's cutting words offer a description of a friend walking away from the life of the church. Notice, however, that the faith remains; the rejection of church has not immediately led to an outright rejection of Christ. Rather, it has led to a re-orientation of truth. Christ is no longer true; Christ has become beautiful. "Beautiful, beautiful," she says in her liberation.

Like "A" in the letter of O'Connor, the post-Christian world has not rejected religious reality. Rather, it locates it elsewhere outside a conversation of a truth claim that could be perceived or received as offensive in a pluralistic context. Relativists still yearn for truth, which is why secular atheism has taken on such religious dogmatism and doctrinal purity. Discussion of beauty is largely the means by which one speaks of truth in a prevailing pluralistic society. By displacing Christianity, secularism has replaced it as the first-order religious choice. In large part, the post-Christian world is one in which religious facts are assailed. No one is right, no one is wrong. What remains in its place is a non-objective reality where religious truth (if it does exist) is largely unknowable. Right and wrong—in a pluralistic age—has been replaced with what is pragmatic or beautiful. Beauty is neither right nor wrong—beauty just is. While relativism can challenge existing truth structures, it cannot undo the human drive to desire what is true. Aesthetics—the search for meaning in beauty and artistic expression—provides such an outlet. Truth becomes synonymous with pursuits of beauty; hence, the post-modern exaltation of art as a means of religious experience.

Preaching in an "Aesthetic Society"

Certainly, this kind of aesthetic society where truthfulness has been replaced by pursuits of truth in the realm of the aesthetic has great import for the methods of our preaching. Eugene

20. O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, 460–61.

Peterson describes how societal realities of this sort have shaped his preaching ministry in his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*:

> Preaching to these people was like talking to my dog—they recognized my voice with gratitude, they nuzzled me, they followed me, they showed me affection. But the content of my words meant little . . . they were as easily distracted, running after rabbits or squirrels that promised diversion or excitement.[21]

This is the result of a distracted world that yearns and goes to great length to *feel* that which is beautiful. And there are great resources available to the church, like Ellsworth Kalas's *Preaching in an Age of Distraction* that can help us navigate those challenges of preaching to those enticed by excitement and those looking for an orgasmic experience.

How will the aesthetic society that emphasizes beauty and the interesting affect the church's preaching? In my experience as a pastor and teacher, I am seeing this aesthetic society bring to bear a number of attitudes and perceptions in the people I preach to in post-Christian Portland. I would like to mention three: the aesthetic society creates within the post-Christian person theological eclecticism, intellectual hedonism, and passive contrarianism.

First, people in an aesthetic society are marked by what I call *theological eclecticism*. By that, I mean they are quick to select for themselves those theological truths that are advantageous for them and reject those that are not. This privileging of aesthetics over truth discourse has been accomplished in near-dogmatic fashion. Malcolm Muggeridge, who converted to Christianity late in life, wrote about the dangers of this kind of society. "Western man," Muggeridge reflects, "has decided to abolish himself, creating boredom out of his own affluence, impotence out of his own erotomania, vulnerability out of his own strength; he himself blows the trumpet that brings the walls of his own city tumbling down." In short, we have "educated ourselves into

21. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 27.

imbecility."[22] Where there is no longer truth, as it were, we can find a scholar for anything we want to say. These words echo eerily Paul's concern: the last days are days in which we will surround ourselves with "teachers who say what we want to hear" (2 Tim 4:3).

An aesthetic society can find anyone who will say anything they want to hear. This has certainly had a great effect on the church's theological reflection in both the academy and the local church. This leads to a kind of approach toward religious truth, which I call *eclecticism*. New Testament scholar Walter Liefeld describes eclecticism in clear terms:

> Eclecticism is a way of looking at religion and beliefs in which one is not committed to any one religious organization or belief system, but instead chooses aspects of these at will. Any teaching or ethical yardstick that is personally appealing is considered valid. Thus many Catholics today accept traditional Catholic teachings about Mary but dismiss Catholic teachings on birth control. Religious authority and theological absolutism are dismissed.[23]

That is, the aesthete is quick to choose or reject, eclectically, from the religious buffet the truths that fit their prescribed worldview. Why is this dangerous? Because eclecticism—while gathering lots of good quotes and bumper sticker fodder—does not take seriously the actual *intent* of the religious teachers who spoke those truths. Eclecticism has, while sidestepping historic Christian doctrine, made a way for epistemic egalitarianism, where every idea remains equal in the public square. Or, in most cases, it has flipped the entire moral structure upside down. Sleeping with whomever you want whenever you want is morally neutral. Embracing traditional values, however, becomes morally repugnant.

Secondly, the aesthete is *intellectually hedonistic*. By that, I mean they privilege the interesting over the truthful. Again, Kierkegaard believed that the greatest enemy of the aesthete was

22. Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom*, 20.
23. Liefeld, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, 62.

boredom. They will do anything to avoid it. Allen, again, sums this up:

> Boredom is the great enemy of the aesthete, and he keeps trying to push it away. This can be done by traveling for a while, trying a new hairdo, buying new clothes, changing houses, yoga, enrolling for a college course, or changing marriage partners. In a myriad of ways the aesthete keeps putting off boredom by seeking variety, novelty, diversity, diversion.[24]

The aesthete—the aesthetic society—will go to extreme lengths to not have to feel any sense of boredom. I have actually come to think that the word "orgasm" best describes the intellectual hedonistic milieu of affluent, post-Christian West. Feelings, emotions, spectacular, change, and ecstasy are its marks. If it is not interesting, they say, it is not worth our time.

Every Christian preacher in the West knows the feeling: the message of the Bible seems to have lost its sense of being interesting to the world. To borrow from Dorothy Sayers, doctrine and gospel have become "dull" to the world. In her article, "Toward a Christian Aesthetic," Sayers offers a strong warning to the church in its temptation to try and spice it up. Plato, she points out, saw the downfall of Rome as being a result of a kind of aesthetic society that shied away from moral development for the sake of entertainment purposes. He repeatedly bemoaned what he saw as "art for entertainment." The industry of Greek aesthetics as entertainment over moral development became, in the end, the downfall of the Greek world. Plato's world cared about what was "interesting" and "entertaining" over what was "truthful" and "principle"; it doomed their society.[25] She, like Plato, sees this as the downfall of society.

24. Allen, *Three Outsiders*, 63.

25. She speaks of the despair of a relativistic society: "the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die." Quoted in Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 53.

> [Plato] sees that the theatre audience is in fact looking to the theatre for nothing but amusement and entertainment, that their energies are, in fact, frittering themselves away in spurious emotions—sob-stuff and sensation, and senseless laughter, phantasy, and day-dreaming, and admiration for the merely smart and slick and clever and amusing. And there is an ominous likeness between his age and ours. We . . . have audiences and critics and newspapers assessing every play and book and novel in terms of its "entertainment value," and a whole generation of young men and women who dream over novels and wallow in day-dreaming at the cinema, and who seem to be in a fair way of doping themselves into complete irresponsibility over the conduct of life until war came, as it did to Greece, to jerk them back to reality.[26]

Sayers was repulsed by "entertainment value." When the church gives into it, borrowing Plato's warning, "you receive the pleasure-seasoned Muse, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law and agreed principles."[27] The danger emerges when our preaching seeks solely to become *relevant*—when we seek to become interesting and entertaining to reach an intellectually hedonistic society that only believes in the interesting. The content of our beliefs, not our ability to make them interesting, is the beauty of the Christian gospel. Again, Sayers challenges the church to teach dogma and truth over what is interesting or cute—what she called the "inevitability of dogma." Is it dull? Dorothy Sayers says that, if it is dull, then words have no more meaning.

> That time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when He submitted to the conditions He had laid down and became a man like the men He had made, and the men He had made broke Him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero.[28]

Third, and finally, the aesthetic society has a particular stance toward the Christian church that I would call *passive contrarianism* that is marked by a critical, distrustful, yet, oddly,

26. Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, 75.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 15.

inactive critique of the church. When moral and absolute truth is removed, the only option is to become a total contrarian. As it has been said, when one does not know where they are going, any way will do. Again, Sayers describes this as the "Bohemian spirit":

> We can sit and watch the Twitter feeds, critiquing the methods, models, and ministries of others; from the comfort of our couches we can speculate on how it could be done better. We can devise all kinds of theories, read all the right books, engage in online debate, blog our opinions, yet the whole time be disconnected from actually having skin in the game.[29]

This passive contrarian attitude is reflected in a culture that says our world will finally make it to a place of goodness and justice, once we can shed the religious oppression that ruined it. These attitudes are the result of a culture that gets most of its impressions about Christianity from social media. Within that context, it is easy to write off an entire people group out of shallow and uninformed perception.

Conclusion

All of this presents a tremendous opportunity for the church. Ronald Rolheiser describes this post-Christian, aesthetic society. It is, he says, like a teenager who has run away from home, rejecting its Christian mother and father. But, while having run away, it has *no idea where it is going*.[30] It has not found its way, but it is certainly not willing to stay at home any longer. The post-Christian world may have run away from Christianity, but it has no idea where it is going. Post-Christian people are, and will become, more and more hungry for the transcendent. And the reason is simple: the immanent cannot fill us with what we most desperately need.

All of this is not to suggest that the church in the post-Christian world should reject the search for beauty. Quite the

29. Sayers, *Facing Leviathan*, 156–57.
30. Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 15.

opposite. Truth, goodness, and beauty are those prime virtues the ancient fathers believed to be the fount of the truth of God. One could argue that modernism was about truth, while post-modernism has been about beauty. The task of the church, of course, is the embodiment of all three, not just one.

In fact, one could argue that the world has turned toward the aesthetic precisely because it did not find beauty in the church. Brian Zahn reflects:

> Christianity has suffered a loss of beauty—a loss that needs to be recovered. With an emphasis on truth, we have tried to make Christianity persuasive (as we should). But we also need a corresponding emphasis on beauty to make Christianity attractive. Christianity should not only persuade with truth, but it should also attract with beauty. Along with Christian apologetics, we need Christian aesthetics. Christianity needs not only to be defended as true—it also needs to be presented as beautiful. Often where truth cannot convince, beauty can entice.[31]

The call of the preacher in a post-Christian world is to be faithful, not to be spectacular and interesting. In fact, the simplicity of Jesus' words is more important now than it has ever been: *feed my sheep*. This implies not to preach that which is interesting *per se* but what feeds the spirit. It is not the task of the post-Christian preacher to keep up with the age that is addicted to pleasure and feeling. Rather, it is our task to preach another way. We give a meal that feeds the deepest spiritual needs of a people, not something that excites and tantalizes the soul. Our methodology becomes prophetic. "Feed my sheep," it turns out, is fundamentally different than blowing their minds.

31. Zahn, *Beauty Will Save the World*, 60.

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