

Christian Doubts No. 15
“The Faith Hasn’t Kept Up”
September 25, 2016
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Some time ago one of you, reflecting on this series of sermons on the doubts that rise in Christian minds, mentioned to me that he thought a great source of doubt was the fact that, in many modern minds, the church maintains positions that have been discredited in the culture. He was thinking of the profound transformation in modern viewpoints – now deeply fixed in the culture – caused by the feminist and sexual revolutions – and, more deeply still the moral relativism which has powerfully changed the culture’s outlook on the judgment of human life.

I hadn’t planned to address this subject as, so it had seemed to me, such questions really concern another matter altogether, viz. the authority of the Word of God and the reality of gospel. Obviously everyone does not agree with the teaching of the Christian faith found in the Bible. From the beginning most people have not been persuaded by the Christian understanding of life. Many of the Jews and most citizens of the Greco-Roman world thought that features of the Christian worldview were more than faintly ridiculous. One either accepts that the Bible is the Word of God, with all the implications of that acceptance, or he or she does not. It is, so I thought, not so much a matter of sturdy faith versus a faith weakened by doubt, as it is a matter of basic Christian commitment in the first place. But the more I thought about it, the more obvious it became to me that real Christians struggle here as well. We all feel the pull of the world and such pressure from the culture, at certain points, can weaken any Christian’s assurance that the Bible is a trustworthy guide to life. And, as we have seen alas far too often, *these* particular pressures from our modern culture can finally collapse a Christian’s faith altogether. The number of evangelicals who started out as feminists but ended up abandoning the faith altogether, becoming advocates of modern concepts of sexual freedom is not small. One of the most prominent, Virginia Mollenkott, a graduate of Bob Jones University, was once a member of the Bible Presbyterian Church!

The siren call of the world is, of course, a danger often recognized in the Word of God. Israel’s spiritual problem, throughout her history was the lure of the world around her, its thinking and its way of life. She never encountered a culture she wasn’t tempted to imitate! Israel never invented her heresies, she imported them from the societies round about her. She gave them her own unique slant, to be sure, she sometimes incorporated them into her Yahwistic faith and practice, but they were, in essence, simply an accommodation on her part to the worldview of the ancient near east. Why was it so difficult for her to reject idolatry? Ancient near eastern idolatry seems ridiculous to us today. Because the whole world practiced it; because it was the warp and woof of the ancient near eastern mind. Indeed, monotheism made little headway in the ancient world because the entire social fabric had polytheism woven through it. Polytheism was the foundation of their way of life!

In the same way The New Testament is emphatic in its teaching that becoming a Christian means, *in the nature of the case*, a repudiation of the thinking of the world – we might today have said the *culture* – and the practices built upon that thinking. John, in his first letter, writes:

“Do not love *the world* or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is *in the world* – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is *from the world*. And *the world* is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

In saying that he is saying much more than that Christians should not succumb to the love of *things*, as if he was only talking about materialism or the love of money, pleasure, and power. He is talking also about the world’s way of thinking, its philosophy of life, if you will. In other words, he is talking about both the world’s *theology* and the world’s *ethics*. The “world” in John and in the rest of the Bible is man in rebellion against God, man seeking his own way, man setting up his own kingdom without reference to God or his will. This is what Paul is talking about when he writes to the Colossians:

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [or, better, elemental principles] *of the world*, and not according to Christ.” [2:8]

Paul knew how powerful the pull of the world can be. In that same place he warned believers about the danger of being deluded by plausible arguments. [2:4] The world’s way of thinking, so pervasive, so widely accepted, so deftly woven into the fabric of social life, complete with its penalties and its rewards, exercises a powerful influence on what human beings find plausible. How in the world did the German church accommodate itself so readily and easily to National Socialism? It was because of the world, the culture in which those people were living; their times led them to find the arguments plausible. Later generations may scratch their heads that intelligent people thought as they once did, but at the time, everyone took these viewpoints so much for granted that it was hard even to imagine a different world, a fundamentally different way of thinking than the one that prevailed in their time. Everyone assumes that the way of *their* world, the thinking of the world *in their time* will last forever, but of course it doesn’t. It is soon enough replaced by another way of thinking and another way of life quite different in many ways. Such is what Paul calls in 1 Cor. 1:20 the “wisdom of the world,” which he contrasts with the wisdom of God that is eternal and unchangeable. Men may discover many things without faith in God and dependence upon his Word, but they will never discover the meaning of life or the source of true knowledge or the way to heaven in any way but through God’s revelation of himself and his will.

When Christianity made its way into the Greco-Roman world in the years following that eventful Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, it encountered a worldview that was uncongenial to Christian teaching in almost every way. It was a deeply religious world, but polytheistic not monotheistic. Indeed, monotheism seemed to the Romans a less authentically religious viewpoint. The fewer gods one had, the less religious he seemed to be. To refuse to do honor to the pantheon of gods, to refuse to offer incense to statues of the Roman emperor was regarded as unpatriotic and subversive. [cf. Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 25-28] It was worse, much worse, than Colin Kaepernick not standing for the national anthem. Abortion and the exposure of infants were commonplace in the Roman world – nobody thought about it, nobody protested or objected to the practice – women were in most cases the property of their fathers or

husbands, marriage was disposable, grinding poverty and disease were commonplace, – very little was done to attempt to alleviate those conditions – especially in the larger cities, sexual licentiousness was routine to a degree even *we* would find shocking in our culture of porn, cruelty was often seen as a mark of strength and humility was taken to be weakness. Vast numbers of people were slaves and most of them captives from one of Rome’s many wars.

The Christian faith would eventually lay the axe to the root of this entire way of life, the Roman economy as well as its social fabric. It really would turn *this world* upside down. To become a Christian required not only a new and radically different way of life, really unprecedented in the world of that time, but as well it required the repudiation of the vaunted tradition of Greek thought, the philosophy of life that had dominated the Mediterranean world for half a millennium. The Greco-Roman world prided itself, as ours does today, on its modernity, on its intellectual sophistication, its learning, and its literary traditions. Did the Christians really think that Jesus, the amateur Jewish rabbi whom no one had ever heard of, a man executed as a criminal by the Roman state, I say did they really think that Romans were going to give up Plato and Aristotle for Jesus? Did the Christians think that the writings of Paul and John and Peter could compare to those of Homer, Vergil, and Cicero? No one could be *that* stupid! The Christians didn’t strike the Romans so much as puritanical; they struck the Romans as bizarre, advocates of a deranged way of life and of a philosophy no intelligent person would credit. Modern people look back on the ethics of the Roman world and are repelled, but *only because the influence of Christianity has fundamentally altered their worldview*. There are parts of our world today – inhabited by vast millions of people – that resemble in some ways the culture of ancient Rome much more than that of the modern West. Women remain chattel, slavery is still practiced, and so on. They aren’t ashamed of their world or their way of life. Quite the contrary. They look at the modern west and find little to admire. *That is the power of a worldview, of a way of life, of what the Bible calls “the world” – what we are likely to call “culture” – in any place at any time*. It can make a person take almost any point of view for granted.

Well, in that very way, there are many in the modern West who think that our world has outgrown the Christian faith. They would say that we have matured as a civilization and cannot go back to the backward philosophy and ethics of previous generations, the philosophy and the ethics based on the Bible. They think this way especially in regard to the relationship of men and women, the place of women in society, in regard to sexual ethics, and in the freedom of all people to discover the meaning of their own existence without reference to an over-arching morality of universal obligation.

Young adult Americans, even many Christians among them, now suppose that we have discovered what people did not know before, namely that homosexuality and lesbianism are simply the way a person *is*, a product of circumstances beyond his or her control, and, therefore, it would be cruel, it would be unfair, it would be unjust to ask such people to deny their natural instincts by refusing to act on their sexual urges. This is all the more the case since for some time now heterosexuals have been freed to act on *their* sexual urges without the constraint of marriage. In an age when sexual intercourse is no longer tied to marriage for heterosexuals, why should the same freedom be denied to homosexuals? And so with the so-called transgendered. Further, we now know that men and women are similar to a degree that previous generations did not appreciate, so why should women they be prevented from seeking their own personal

fulfillment in the same way that men have long been free to do. No one has the authority to pass judgment on another person's quest for the meaning of his or her own life. This is the morally neutral reality that has become the ethical foundation of modern western life. The Bible teaches that we are God's creatures, made in his image; that we are eternal, that our lives are subject to his judgment, and that, therefore, we must live according to his will, and in fact the world has been made in such a way as human life will prosper only when it is lived according to the Maker's will. But there is no part of that philosophy of life that any longer dominates western thinking about human life.

This ethical relativism is now so deeply fixed in the thought structure of the western world that it has long since ceased to be examined by young people growing up into adulthood. To question it is to doubt what everyone simply *knows* to be true. The freedom to be sexually active as single adults has long since ceased to be controversial in our western world. It is accepted as a matter of course and most young people would be hard pressed to explain why it was ever forbidden in days past except for the sake of some kind of superstitious prejudice. Sexual activity is healthy! Indeed, many would not even know that not so long ago, within the lifetime of many Americans, it would have been hard to find *anyone* who admitted in public that he thought that what was then called promiscuity was acceptable, much less that it ought to be encouraged. Such is the power of culture to make uncontroversial all manner of behaviors that were once thought to be highly improper, foolish, or dangerous.

Paul Johnson, the English historian and journalist, wrote some years ago a highly regarded history of the modern world entitled *Modern Times*. The thesis of that book is, in part, that the modern world – your world and mine – has been profoundly shaped by, if not *defined* by - a gigantic misunderstanding. It has confused relativity in physics with relativism in morals, two things that have absolutely nothing to do with one another. But who can doubt that the embrace of relativism has profoundly changed our world and the way modern people think about life. Ours – in many more ways than most people realize – is the world created by Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein, all unbelievers in divine creation, in divine law, in divine judgment, whose own view of the world was profoundly shaped by such unbelief and, in fact, specifically by their positive rejection of the Christian faith. And *that world* has become the social, philosophical, and ethical air that people breathe in the modern West.

To most people in the west these changing mores regarding the new place of women in society and business and the affirmation of homosexuality and are so obviously an improvement that they are regarded as uncontroversial social *advances*, like clean drinking water or air travel. They think we have discovered new possibilities that previous generations were denied, and we have set people free to discover themselves and the meaning of their own lives. We are the apostles of liberation! The fact that biblical Christianity frowns on these developments only proves that Christianity is outdated and has rendered itself obsolete and irrelevant. That in itself, for a great many people, is reason enough to discard it.

But, let's think about this. After all, every generation before us assumed a great many things to be true that were eventually discarded by the generations that followed. Indeed, some of these very features of modern life were once commonplace in human cultures but were then repudiated. How do we know that feminism and the sexual revolution actually represent

progress? No one doubts that such revolutions have profoundly transformed modern western life, and done so at an extraordinarily rapid pace, but will anyone think them positive developments a century from now? Or are we going to be shaking our heads and asking how in the world could they have thought those things to be an improvement? Should Christians doubt the wisdom of God's Word because of these developments in modern life?

I want to say two things in answer to that question. I want to say *first*, that the brave new world created by the feminist and sexual revolutions is already beginning to unravel. The horizon is foreboding, dark; it is not sun-lit. *Second*, the teaching of the Bible, however often misunderstood, remains, far and away, a safer foundation for human life.

So, as to the first point, let's take a step back and consider what has happened. These profound changes in our American way of life are to a very great degree *the result of technology*. What changed American life was not first a revolution in morality – though that was coming and probably would have come to some degree in any case – but the invention of the pill. Or, better, the two developments occurred side by side but the moral transformation of American life was made much more rapid by the technology of birth control. No one in the 1940s and 50s was anticipating the changes that were to come in American society precisely because sex and pregnancy were still largely inseparable. At that time, without an alternative, childbearing was still the intention and expectation of men and women, so was marriage, and childbearing began for women in young adulthood, a fact that profoundly shaped the life of women as it had the life of women from the beginning of the world.

Moreover, technology also furnished women with all manner of labor-saving devices that radically simplified and shortened the work required to maintain a home. Whether shopping for food, washing laundry, or cleaning floors, a woman's work at home took many fewer hours than had once been the case. These developments freed women to spend much more of their time out of the home. It is hard to imagine that American life would be what it is today were it not for those technological developments. These changes may have contributed to a revolution in morality, but they did not result from any explicit intention to transform society. Betty Friedan's seminal feminist manifesto, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, introduced what she called "the problem with no name," that is, the problem of the bored, unfulfilled housewife. A good deal of research has since undermined her thesis that American housewives were bored or unhappy – it doesn't actually appear that she was herself bored or unhappy, though she was very busy outside the home – but there can be no doubt that technological changes made it much easier for women to have a life outside their home.

But then came the sixties and the moral revolution that engulfed the country and the Western world. There are a few people who still look back on the sixties as a time of altruism, the anticipation of the Age of Aquarius, a new period of human history marked by peace, light, and love. But any movement whose mottos were "Do your own thing" and "Don't trust anyone over thirty" is unlikely to produce either a true interest in others or the wisdom necessary to improve the world! Richard Nixon discovered that by largely putting an end to the anti-war movement simply by ending the draft! Peace, light, and love have been in increasingly short supply in American life in the years since.

It was not so long ago that Americans almost uniformly believed that the first and foremost responsibility of women was to their children and that a career, while certainly appropriate in many circumstances, should not be pursued at the expense of the welfare of their children. It was not long ago that Americans generally agreed that sex outside of marriage was immoral in large part because it represented a thoughtless and selfish unconcern for young women. When I was in high school a teenager – male or female – was confronted with a solid wall of opposition to promiscuity. Parents, teachers, pastors and priests, even television discouraged sexual activity before marriage. Were those people dumber than we are? Are we today a better people than they were? How so? Many of the wisest people who have ever lived, who thought deeply about human life and what is required to make it good, held views that Americans once held but do no longer. For our times the exemplar of the virtuous life was Mother Theresa. For the previous generation it was Albert Schweitzer, the scholar, organist, and medical doctor who left comfort and celebrity behind to devote himself to a medical clinic in the jungles of Africa. Neither of these people, whom the whole world admired, shared the modern west's view of sexuality! Were they dumb? Were they really not good people? Who are the wise and good men who have led us into this better world? Alfred Kinsey? Hugh Hefner? Norman Mailer? Bill Clinton? Really? There are our examples of the good life? *This* culture, *this* civilization of ours is morally superior to what went before it?

The hard fact is that these revolutions have done terrible damage to untold numbers of human beings. As feminism and the sexual revolution became established in the culture, so did a variety of other phenomena. Abortion became commonplace in a culture that had always considered it a sin, if not a crime, not because we learned that abortion wasn't a sin after all, but because accustomed to a new way of life – a life of self-affirmation and self-expression – we did not want pregnancy to interfere with it. Abortion, which is the sacrament of modern feminism, is the act of dispensing with another human being who poses a threat to your peace or happiness or plans for your life. That is what abortion is. The mainstreaming of abortion, with its corresponding diminishment of the sanctity of human life, has led inevitably to the practice of euthanasia, as many predicted it would. The two go together in human history; always have, always will. It's so much easier to do away with the people on the margins of life than in the middle! As one commentator has observed, in modern America today the problem is not that black lives don't matter; the problem is that no lives matter, certainly not the way they once did in society as a whole!

Divorce became very rapidly much more commonplace in our culture, no matter that we soon learned how harmful divorce was to children. We have an unprecedented epidemic of unwed motherhood. Some 40% of American children and 70% of African American children are born out of wedlock, no matter that no culture in history knows as much as we do about how destructive it is to the welfare of children to be born without a mother and father in a stable home. The feminist and sexual revolutions are so firmly established in American life that very few ever point out the connection between them and their vicious and sinister effects, but the connection is so obvious that he who runs may read. And lest anyone forget, the mainstreaming of homosexuality was part and parcel of these same developments. We would not have the one without the others. But these problems place the future of the republic in real peril, as an increasing number of observers on both sides of the political divide are beginning to admit. And,

as is now admitted on almost all sides, very few people are happier because of these profound changes in our social structure.

I continue. We are now facing a crisis in American masculinity, men in ever increasing numbers neither interested in nor capable of managing healthy long-term relationships with women, of meeting the demands of fatherhood, or, in many cases, of holding a job. Several of you drew my attention to a recent article in *The Atlantic*, an article that describes what has already been described in other ways in both research and commentary. [Derek Thompson, “The Free-Time Paradox in America,” *The Atlantic* (Sept. 13, 2016)

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/the-free-time-paradox-in-america/499826/>

Young American men, in unprecedented numbers are not working, are living at home, are spending huge amounts of time playing video games, and, so far as they report their state of mind to researchers, these young men are happy enough with their lot. They are living *virtual* lives. Their relationships with women are virtual – through pornography – and their entertainment is virtual – video games – and their livelihood is virtual – that is, provided by someone else – but what of their future, and what of the country’s future with millions of men unprepared to live productive and satisfying lives. Happy now, will they remain happy? Safe at home now, what happens when their parents die and they must make a living? No one anticipated this as the fruit of the social revolutions of the past generation!

Nor did they anticipate the drop in birthrates across the modern West and now in America as well, a rate dropping quite steeply in fact, after having collapsed in many countries in Europe. Clearly this development also is the result of these profound changes in American life, the changing interests and priorities of the American people, the career interests of American women, the increasingly cynical view of marriage, and so on. Fewer are marrying, they are marrying later, they are having no children or fewer children, and so on. Demographers tell us to worry about the effects of this. Modern states will struggle to survive or to maintain peace and order as populations collapse. Previous great civilizations – Greece and Rome among them – were destroyed by falling populations, why should ours be any different? Everyone hopes that technology will somehow make the difference, will overcome the obstacles looming in the culture. Why in the world would they think so?

So, before anyone assumes that we must discard Christianity because it hasn’t kept pace with new thinking about the role of women and the benefit of recreational sex, let’s first ask whether our society will even survive these changes. These developments are the canary in the mine, warning us of lurking danger. Does any of this hold promise of a healthier, happier, more peaceful, more productive society? Hardly any serious thinker thinks so. People, for obvious reasons, want to compartmentalize these developments, to isolate them from overarching changes in philosophy of life and moral conviction. But the fact is feminism and the sexual revolution have led to all of this, inevitably, inexorably, as certainly as day follows night. And moral relativism leaves us helpless in the face of these developments. Society can no longer condemn them and no longer has the wherewithal to resist their influence even if it wished to. For all you patriots out there, your beloved country is in profound trouble.

It is no longer controversial to speak of the decline of the West. To thoughtful observers, the handwriting is on the wall. (Where did that metaphor come from?) Its future is threatened by

many things, but by nothing so much as the unraveling of the social fabric. The end may not come for a long time, but it is a brave person who argues that our culture is healthy, that it has a noble future. Europe is some years ahead of us and virtually no one doubts – except the bureaucrats in Brussels – that Europe is teetering on the edge of an abyss. There are too many indications of terminal illness to ignore. Social institutions are weak and growing weaker, our politics are correspondingly feckless, and there seems no longer to be any higher purpose to unify and ennoble our national life. How could there be when the principle of our cultural life is to let everyone seek his or her own meaning in life. “Do your own thing” is hardly a principle upon which to build cultural and national unity! And when we have surrendered the universal moral foundation it has become impossible to tell anyone what he or she *ought* to be or do. No civilization has or will survive that rests on a foundation of morally neutral reality. But where can universal moral principles be found? God must reveal them. We’ve at least learned that in 3,000 years of philosophy. It is divine revelation or nothing. Take your pick.

But there is a second point to be made in considering the doubts that can arise when the Bible conflicts with the assured convictions of a culture. As I have said before in this series of sermons, *be sure you are understanding the Bible correctly*. Its enemies, and, alas, sometimes its friends, can often turn the Bible’s teaching into a caricature of itself, a misrepresentation that not only seriously distorts what the Bible says and does not say, but, in that way, hides the true wisdom and goodness of biblical teaching.

The Bible doesn’t require all women to stay home and do nothing but raise their children. Lydia in Philippi was an entrepreneur. Priscilla was an able woman who traveled widely and was active in Christian ministry. So was Phoebe. Certain women were graced with the gift of prophecy and had the authority to speak the Word of God himself. To be sure, the Bible does require women to be faithful mothers and to put their children first, and this may mean for many women – as it does even for a great many non-Christian women in our culture today – that their primary calling, especially when their children are young and in need of constant attention, is that of a mother at home. But the Bible, in a way utterly unprecedented in the ancient world, makes much of the gifts and callings of women. Indeed, it has been argued that the reason why the Hebrews succeeded when every other ancient near eastern civilization didn’t, is because it was the one society that made full use of 100% of its population, women as well as men.

In the same way, while the Bible requires everyone to be chaste, to order their lives according to the intentions of the creator – God making human beings male and female, creating them for marriage, making the family the fundamental institution of human life, making marriage permanent – it provides for many exceptions. Everyone will not marry, the unmarried, both men and women, can live fruitful and important lives – some of the greatest heroes of the Bible were unmarried (e.g. Jeremiah and the Apostle Paul) – and the Bible gives us examples of men and women living unusual lives for the glory of God and the good of human beings. There is no single template for human life in the Bible even if there is most definitely only one morality for all human beings, as there must be if God is God and we are his creatures.

True enough, the Bible does not tolerate homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle or abortion or careerism (for men or women). It puts spiritual conviction and purpose in life far above things, the accumulation of power or influence, or reputation. In a sexually licentious and careerist

culture, that must be controversial. But sexual licentiousness has been around for a very long time and has never proved itself the way of happy, satisfying, fruitful human life.

What I am saying to those who may have doubts about sticking with the Bible when it seems so out-of-sync with the times, is what C.S. Lewis said about Athanasius. Speaking as an Englishman, Lewis wrote:

“We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same. He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those time, as all times do, have moved away.” [*Introduction to St. Athanasius*, 9]

As John already reminded us:

“the world is passing away...but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

And Isaiah long before him, who likewise had to face a culture that took for granted that it had improved on the Bible:

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord will stand forever.”