

Proper 11C: Colossians 1:15-28  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **An Obsolete God**

Religion is obsolete. That's the conclusion of a new book by Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame. Smith, working from hundreds of in-depth surveys and sociological data, finds that traditional religion, such as Christianity, is not only declining in America, but has become irrelevant, inconsequential. "Obsolete" is the term Smith uses. By this, he means not that religion is useless or extinct, but that it is no longer needed, because it has been superseded. Like how vinyl records are obsolete. They've been replaced first by CDs and then by streaming services. But LPs haven't vanished, and many still swear by the superiority of vinyl recordings. Nevertheless, they have been relegated to the sideline, appreciated solely by aficionados and vintage enthusiasts. In the same way, Smith says, religion in America has been pushed to the margins, an interest of a few devotees but otherwise irrelevant.

Now, I think Smith paints too dark a picture of organized religion, but I do think he has a point. He describes a significant development, namely that many Americans no longer see religion as important or valuable. Religion used to have a central place in American culture, but it no longer fits with the zeitgeist, doesn't "vibe" with the spirit of this age. This misalignment, this disconnect, he says, is in part the result of political, economic, and technological developments in recent decades, changes that have created an environment where traditional religion is now more difficult to believe and hard to practice. But more than that, Smith argues, the problem is that religion has effectively lost its job.

You see, most people in America, surveys indicate, see religion to be chiefly about helping people to "be good." Religion is valuable, they believe, because it helps people to be moral, nice and to make good choices in life. When they send their children to church or synagogue, it's to teach them the basics of ethics and decency—the Ten Commandments, the Gold Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, that sort of thing.

And many churches, for their part, have acquiesced to that expectation, setting aside their doctrines and peculiar practices and focusing instead on instilling morality. If you look back at churches, particularly mainline churches like ours, at what they taught in the 50s, 60s and 70s, it was aimed at forming good, productive, conscientious American citizens, as much as it was teaching about Jesus or the sacraments. And as mainline churches have fallen in recent years, leaders have felt even more strongly the need to justify their existence, by "doing good" in society.

The problem, as Smith notes, is that fewer and fewer people today see religion as being necessary for that. They don't see religion any longer as indispensable for inculcating morality in the young or society at large. Many other people and institutions—parents, teachers, coaches, clubs—teach and promote ethical living. Religion is seen as just one source of moral teaching among many, a supplement to other methods. Some may need it, others don't.

This all puts religion in a pickle. Because religion no longer holds a “patent” on its most important product, no monopoly on the leading service it offers. This problem is made even worse by the number of public sexual and financial scandals by church leaders. Now, these are only a small minority of clergy, but they “pollute” the name of religion in the eyes of millions, calling into question religion’s own moral legitimacy. The result is we have a situation where religion is no longer important, no longer relevant, no longer needed for the chief service it once provided. It’s “obsolete.”

Now, for many life-long Christians, religion’s demise is a cause of much grief and angst, just as it is a cause for celebration by religion’s critics—proof that humanity is finally “evolving” out of “primitive superstition.” But that assumes of course that what has become obsolete is in fact religion, that people are right in thinking the point of Christianity is to teach morals and instill goodness.

But what if that is not the case at all? What if religion isn’t about “being good”? What if morality isn’t the point at all, or is beside the point, or is even pointless? What if the purpose of religion isn’t about being a better person but rather being part of something larger, grander, more transcendent? What if the problem with American religion isn’t that it’s obsolete, but that it has diminish itself, retreated too far, painted itself into a corner and now can’t get out? What if the issue isn’t that God is irrelevant, but that we’ve made “God” too small to care about?

That seems to be Paul’s concern in his letter to the Colossians, our first lesson this morning. What originally prompted Paul to write to the Colossians, we don’t know. But he is eager to lay out for them the great significance of the God they worship. Paul means to spread out for them as far as possible the full dimensions of God’s work in Christ, its heights and breadth and depths, pushing back the boundaries to their fullest extent. Maybe this is the first time they’ve heard it, or maybe he just wants to remind them what they already know, because they’re tempted, as the America church has, to retreat from Christianity’s expansive claims. Like how, after you stretch pizza dough, it likes to contract again, or how when you roll out a spool of fencing or paper, it likes to coil up again. What Paul means to do in his letter is to unfurl the full picture of God’s actions and stake the corners so that it remains open and the whole scope can be taken in.

Paul begins by pointing to the fact that their faith, their life, indeed the whole universe revolves around Jesus Christ. Christ, Paul insists, was no mere man. He is in fact nothing less than the very image, the *ikon*, of the invisible God. We should pause here for a moment to recognize the boldness, the craziness of this statement. He’s saying that Jesus, the wandering rabbi from Nazareth, is really the revelation of the Most High, the manifestation of the presence of the transcendent God! It’d be like claiming today that some guy named Ralph Wortham from Worland, Wyoming, is the most important man alive. If you said that, people would say, “Ralph *who*? From where? Never heard of him.” Likely most people said the same thing when believers talked about Jesus. “Jesus *who*?” Jesus was a nobody from no place important, someone who lived briefly, was condemned unjustly, and died violently as a criminal.

And yet Paul says, in *this Jesus*, we see a picture of the Creator of the Universe. More than that, he *is* the Creator of the Universe. Jesus was there at the beginning of time, Paul says, when

everything was made, and every blessed thing that exists, “all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,” exists because of him, was created by him and through him. Jesus was the one who, when the Big Bang flared, blew out the match that lit the fire. He's the One who, as that cosmic soup bubbled, cooled, and slowly gelled into stars and planets, was at work in the middle of it, shaping and molding it according to his Father's design, inscribing into reality the laws of nature and the hidden code of the universe. It was all created by him and for him, and in him all of reality hangs together! What an incredible claim! It'd be easier to believe that that guy, Ralph, is the Chosen One, prophesized a thousand years ago to restore peace to a far-off galaxy!

But this Christ is not just “out there,” a distant, remote deity disconnected from the world. He remains active, involved. He has a mission, which is nothing less than the renewal and reconciliation of all of creation in him. Since Christ first brought it into being, you see, creation has gotten off track, got tied up in itself, bent in the wrong direction, humanity especially. “Alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,” is how Paul describes our state before Jesus. But in Christ, through his blood, that is, through his willing self-sacrifice on the cross, all of creation is brought together, all that was far off has drawn close again, all that is estranged has been reconciled in him, and sinful humanity has been forgiven and made holy, shining like we'd never been sullied by sin.

This “mystery,” Paul explains, the Creator becoming a creature to save his creation, has been hidden, kept secret for ages, but now it's out in the open. God wanted everyone, not just Jews, but everyone, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out: the mystery that Christ is in us and so humanity can look forward to sharing in God's glory.

It should be obvious that the religion described here in Colossians cannot be reduced to a program for making people “good.” The faith it speaks of cannot be relegated to being a custodian of morality or a support for civic society. The God described in these verses is not so small a god, but is a transcendent, expansive God, who dwells in the highest realms, but who nevertheless involves himself in this world, in our lives, going back to the beginning of creation and stretching forward to bring all things together, all things in heaven and on earth, into unity, into harmony in him.

A religion that merely teaches us how to be “good little boys and girls” is laughable, trifling in the face of this God. God, you see, doesn't just want to make us good; He wants to make us new, to prepare us for the new world He is bringing about. And we shouldn't be surprised that, as we are made fit for the world to come, we in fact become *less fit* for this one. CS Lewis put it this way:

God became man...not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. Of course, once it has got its wings, it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped and thus beat the natural horse at its own game. But there may be a period, while the wings are just beginning to grow, when it cannot do so: and at that stage the lumps on the shoulders — no one could tell by looking at them that they are going

to be wings — may even give it an awkward appearance [and make it strange to other horses.]

As Lewis insists, God's aim is not mere improvement but redemption. Sure, redemption over time "improves" people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree we cannot yet imagine. Yet "improving" people is not enough, because it still leaves them earth-bound. Which is why Lewis says elsewhere: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in.' But aim at earth and you will get neither."

That is the lesson of Smith's book: American religion "aimed at earth," and missed. It sought to be useful on the world's terms but inevitably became insignificant and irrelevant. The watered-down faith it offers turned out to be a pallid, tasteless, boring thing, something people could do without.

The obsolescence of religion that Smith spells out in his book is thus a wake-up call for churches. Our choice today is, we can either resign ourselves to growing irrelevance or we can strike out at the very assumptions that hold the American church hostage. The way I see it, the sorry state of religion in America presents us with an opportunity, an opportunity to break out of the box our culture has made for religion and work to reestablish true Christianity, to reclaim the expansive vision of God's work, and take up again the traditional, *transcendent* concerns of religion that have been overlooked—concerns like enabling an experience of God, seeking answers to the deeper questions of life, finding fellowship among believers, freedom from our sins, and strength amidst our fears. These concerns may have been sidelined, but they haven't gone away. They still matter. And religion alone can address them.

We are faced then with a question: How big is our God? How big will we *allow* Him to be? Will we keep God small, confined to just those places where we figure He can be safely used, or will we allow Him his full stature, filling all creation, having full rein to remake the world and us in it? The God of the Bible, the God Paul proclaimed to the Colossians, refuses to be constrained by our expectations of what God should do. He won't restrict himself to just those categories and spheres we delineate for Him. God looks at the world and claims it all, "mine!", so that He might redeem it all. But will we let him?