

A Living Faith in a Secular Age

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Colossians 1:9-23

⁹ And so, from the day we heard (of your faith and love), we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled (by God) with the recognition of his intentions in a comprehensive wisdom and understanding empowered by his Spirit, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner that fits the worth of your Lord leading into a comprehensive beauty, by bearing fruit in every sort of good work and growing in your understanding of God; ¹¹ since you are being empowered with a comprehensive power that belongs to the strength of his glory, leading to a comprehensive perseverance and patience, as with joy ¹² you give thanks to the Father, who has given you the qualification for a share of the inheritance of his holy ones in the realm of light. ¹³ He delivered us from the authority of the darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son who embodies his love, ¹⁴ in whom we have freedom from enslavement, the release from our sins.

¹⁵ He is the visible image of the God who is invisible,
firstborn in relation to all creation.

¹⁶ For in him were created all things,
in the heavens and on the earth, the things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or lordships or rules or authorities –
all things have been created through him and for him.

¹⁷ And he himself is before all things,
and all things are united together in him.

¹⁸ And he himself is the head of the body, the church.
He is “Beginning,” firstborn from among the dead,
in order that he himself may come to be first in all things,

¹⁹ because in him all “the Fullness” delighted to dwell,
²⁰ and through him to reconcile all things into him,
since he had created peace through the blood of his cross,
through him – whether things on the earth or things in the heavens.

²¹ And you, although at one time you were alienated and hostile in mind shown in evil deeds,
²² now he reconciled you in his body of flesh by that death, in order to present you holy, faultless and blameless in his presence, ²³ if indeed you continue firmly founded and and steadfast, not shifting from the hope brought by the Good News that you heard, which has been proclaimed for all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, became its servant.

John 17:15-17 Jesus prays for his disciples

¹⁵ I am not asking that you take them from the world (*kosmos*), but that you keep them from the evil. ¹⁶ They are not from the world, just as I am not from the world. ¹⁷ Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth.

¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

Colossians 2:6-10

⁶ Therefore, as you received the Messiah Jesus as the Lord, keep walking in him, ⁷ putting down your roots and building the structure of your life in him solid in the faith, just as you were taught, overflowing in gratitude. ⁸ Don't anyone to take you captive through “the philosophy” and hollow deceit, the trends among people, the path walked by the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ Because in him all “the Fullness” of God's being dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been brought to your fullness in him.

1 Corinthians 1:20-21

²⁰ Where is someone wise? ... Where's a debater of this age? Has not God turned the world's wisdom into sheer foolishness? ²¹ For since, in terms of God's wisdom, the world through its wisdom did not know God, God decided through the foolishness of the proclamation (*kerygma*) to deliver those who trust it.

Romans 12:2

² Don't let yourselves be shaped by this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, in order that you may discern what God's intention is – which is for what is good and pleasing and mature.

From Christendom to a Secular Age

We're part of a society and world that is "Secular" – "God" may be important personally, but God in himself is not part of public discourse in government, culture, science, economics, technology, academics, education, social sciences, psychology, etc. It's a radical change from 500 yrs ago – the demise of "Christendom" in Europe. [Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.]

Many Christians feel a loss— defeat, a desire to regain cultural and political power. But few want to undo the development of today's world— Modernity. Renaissance, Enlightenment, end of feudal/clerical dominance, science, medicine(!), technological rationalism, political rights for individuals, human rights, diverse nation-states, innovative economies, freedom, democracy. But each word is complex, with a dark side. Materialism, loss of meaning.

American separation of church and state is "modern." Our movement drew on John Locke: The "modern" story is us. But we also inhabit "post-modern" sensibility: We're sophisticated and ironic about our world. No big story is really true. All are attempts to impose power over others. Freedom requires the free play of differences with no claims to truth (except this one). Tolerance is virtue. Any misuse of power differences is sin. Post-modern critique powerfully undermines modernity's claims, but also any morality or meaning, even itself. We have a freedom to do what we want, but never to know who we (all) are ... are about.

We are always in process. "Post-modern" is not the end. We're already post-post-modern. We can't avoid living in our age, nor its influence on us. The challenge is creative interaction.

Jesus – the Challenge to Every Secular Narrative

Jesus did in the Roman empire many things that secularism did to the Middle ages. Jesus was a person, flesh, but also God, a concrete historical event, with place, time, context. But he became a multi-faceted story, told in memory, parable, poetry, and song, each reaching back to grasp some part of the Jesus event that surprised his closest followers.

Jesus communities undermined claims of empire and family, hierarchies of class and ethnicity, even slavery. Every person has real equality. But that equality is as a creature of God and servant of One Lord, who created all the individualities among people and relativizes every societal claim of power and privilege. Modern rationalized bureaucracy treats us as theoretically identical units. That's good in some ways, but it becomes dehumanizing.

Christians remained intentionally outside the structure of power and empire, but claimed a truth that critiqued that world. Their "one-step hierarchy" with God unfolds in a complex narrative reaching back to a true event. The truth claim is serious. The story gives depth that takes human complexity seriously – its brokenness, suffering, nobility, and hope.

Emptiness and fullness: They found not just meaning, but the highest meaning – unity with God's fullness. People in Jesus' day knew the same kinds of emptiness and alienation that moderns feel. Through Jesus they knew their lives were filling up – wisdom, beauty, power, endurance. The reality of Jesus, mediated in story, filled them with new vision and hope.