

CHURCH IN THE WILD: PREACHING IN AN AGE OF AMERICANIZED SECULARIZATION

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Abstract

Many pastors see firsthand the pervasiveness of biblical illiteracy in the church. In this paper, I argue that biblical illiteracy is symptomatic of a bigger issue: *secularization*. I unfold my argument by describing the phenomenon of secularization, discussing its effects in congregations, recommending four strategies for engaging secularization in our preaching, and asking “What resources are available to us in Scripture?”

Introduction

Human beings in a mob. What’s a mob to a king? What’s a king to a god? What’s a god to a non-believer? Who don’t believe in anything? We make it out alive. All right, all right. No church in the wild! These lyrics are the chorus to Jay-Z and Kanye West’s hit-song, “No Church in the Wild.” While this is probably the first paper in EHS history to frame its argument by quoting from rap moguls, the lyrics should at least give us pause. What Jay-Z and Kanye say about the church is serious. These lyrics confront us with what Mary McClintock Fulkerson calls a “wound in need of redress.”¹

Wilderness is a provocative image, one that arrests and even troubles the imagination. According to Jay-Z and Kanye, the “wild” is the place where the “nonbeliever who don’t believe in anything” goes. It is the *locus absconditis*, a site of contestation outside the purview of right belief and holy living, a place where one lives out a life wholly different from the one we preach about in churches. The rules are different because the place is different – it is *locus absconditis* because the church is *absconditis*. To Kanye and Jay-Z, this is neither good nor bad. It just is. As they see things, a world of pain and promiscuity, death and hopelessness resides *outside* the church’s reach, beyond the church’s control.

So, why frame an academic paper on secularization with a reflection on the wilderness? The reason: our conception (or misconception) of the so-called “world out there” – whether we call it society, culture, the “secular,” or the wild – determines whether we’ll engage with that world or escape from it. Our commitment to understanding and engaging the world in which we live rises and falls with an interrogation of the church’s *function* in it. “Is there a church in the wild?” is at its core a question about the church’s relation *to* the world. And, for the purposes of this paper, it is a question that challenges us to consider whether our preaching engages with that world, whether it is or isn’t a voice in the wilderness. We will return to the desert and wilderness metaphor later.

In this paper, I argue that listening congregations in the United States are impacted significantly by secularization and marked indelibly by its effects. The preachers of today and tomorrow should not only seek to understand this reality and its impact on congregants; they should also develop strategies for engaging secularization in their sermons. I unfold my argument by describing the phenomenon of secularization, discussing its effects on congregations, recommending four homiletical strategies for engaging with and confronting secularization, and asking “What resources are available to us in Scripture?”

What Exactly Is Secularization?

The answer to this question comes in the form of an etymology, a process, and theory. We begin with etymology. The word “secular” comes from the Latin *saeculum* which originally meant “age” or “span of time.” *Saeculum* is the Latin translation of the Greek word *aion*. When Paul writes in Eph 3:21- “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen!,” the phrase “forever and ever” reads *in saecula saeculorum* in Latin. It literally means “age of ages” or “century of centuries.” Sometimes, *in saecula saeculorum* is translated as “world without end” such as in the *Gloria Patri*. But, *saeculum* by itself does not signify eternity but temporality. For instance, Paul writes in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...” The word here translated as “world” is not the Greek *kosmos*. It is *aion* “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this *age*,” Paul writes, which is another way of saying the age that is passing away. When the word occurs in the New Testament (by itself), it conveys the idea of temporality, that is, a this-worldly and particular age.

The word “secular” also gained new connotations over time. In medieval France, “secular” described a person who did not belong to a religious order. Members of a religious order were distinct and differentiated from the *seculer* or Modern French *seculier*, that is, the non-religious or non-clerical public. In some contexts, the word described the difference between church and state. A state official was considered a member of the *seculer*. When the word finally made inroads in English, it took on an additional connotation of being *anti*-religious. This nuance is important in that *anti-religiosity* helps us understand that secularization is not just a static phenomenon, it also as a process.

“To secularize” means to *move away from* God, religious expression, rituals of worship, and theology in order to *move toward* being either irreligious or anti-religious. When people self-report that they are “secularized,” they usually mean that they live without any point of reference to the church or to religious ritual. They are literally churchless and a-theological. A number of scholars interpret secularization-as-process positively, a sign that humankind has pushed past its tribal roots and primitive past. In *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans*, David Niose writes: “If humans entered the theological stage because they were able to ponder big questions, the post-theological stage is the result of our acquiring enough knowledge to finally answer many of them.”² Notice the polemical connotation. To be secularized can also mean to be set free from divinity toward humanism, from a theological to a post-theological frame of reference. Sometimes, anti-religious secularism is overt such as among New Atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.³ Other times, it is more covert. Parents might advocate on behalf of their children for schools to be “secularized.” A professor in a university might make it an ambition to secularize students by the end of the semester.

The final layer of connotation is theoretical. Secularization theory arose in the 1950s and 1960s in mainstream sociology. It pertained to the *study* of secularizing influences in society, usually modern Western society. Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* and Peter L. Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* are two examples of books on the effects of secularization. In *The Secular City*, published in 1965, Cox writes: “The rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements.”⁴ Cox goes on to define secularization as “man turning his attention away from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time.” (1965:2).⁵ In *Sacred Canopy*, published in 1967, Berger defines secularization theory as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”⁶ Both of these classic secularization theorists argued for an integral connection between the process of secularization and the advances of modernization. Cox rooted this process in urbanization whereas Berger rooted it in a shifting worldview, namely, an irreversible movement from fate to choice and from one dominant meta-worldview to a proliferation of worldviews. For both Cox and Berger, the logic was as follows: as people became more modernized, they also became more secularized. Whether this is true is another question entirely, one outside the scope of this paper. It is worth noting, however, that both Berger and Cox backed away from some of these claims later in their careers. When one reads later Berger and later Cox, one discovers different and sometimes contradictory conclusions to the ones in 1960s-era Berger and Cox.⁷

One of the more fascinating theories of secularization comes from Brad S. Gregory, a historian at Notre Dame, who links the Protestant Reformation with the secular revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, he writes: “incompatible, deeply held, concretely expressed religious convictions paved a path to a secular society.”⁸ In other words, the unexpected and *unintended* consequence of the Protestant Reformation was a proliferation of competing and contradictory accounts of reality. These diverse and divergent accounts of reality created the conditions in which secularization could grow and thrive. Actions and reactions produced an ecology in which new actions and reactions could take place. No one could have imagined at the time, Gregory argues, that the actions and reactions of the Reformation would create a climate in which secular and modern actions and reactions would proliferate.

Although scholars continue to debate the extent to which the United States has been or is being secularized and how to go about tracing its causes, at least one thing is clear. The United States *is* impacted in significant ways. To quote again from Niose, “The impact of secular emergence goes well beyond politics, into the personal and social realms that define America as a society.”⁹ Although a variety of definitions and descriptions exist in the literature, at least for the purposes of this paper and for the sake of delimitation, let me define secularization as *the recession of Christian faith from its civic role in society through privatization of religious practice and marginalization of religious conviction.*

What are the Effects of Secularization?

A growing body of literature devotes itself to studying secularization’s *effects*, that is to say, examining secularizing forces and how they touch down in the concrete realities of daily life. To be sure, totalizing statements or absolute generalizations about secularization’s effects would prove unhelpful. One cannot say that everyone everywhere is impacted by secularization in exactly the same way.¹⁰ For instance, in 2015, when the Barna Group surveyed American cities that met its criteria for “post-Christian,” San Francisco was ranked first at 66% whereas Birmingham, Alabama stood at 18% and was ranked 115th on the list of cities.¹¹ That stated, much of the recent research on secularization’s effects is not only insightful but also instructive, moreover, it offers us a window into how attitudes and even worldviews are shifting. For the sake of brevity, I will only propose five effects of secularization.

The first effect of secularization is the *marginalization of the church*. At present, the church is on a steady move away from the center and towards the periphery of American civic life. Each year, the church has less influence and less say over ethics, policy, and institutional structure. It does not have the ear of the State and, in some cases, it is seen as a nuisance to the State. This is not all-together bad development as the church has sometimes overstepped itself and forgotten its role as a conscience of the State. Being a prophetic minority vis-à-vis the State is more valuable and even faithful than being a sycophant of the State. I only mention it because it’s important to see the ways that church is being marginalized and ostracized from its former place.

Marginalization brings with it a greater possibility for misunderstanding, mischaracterization, and even condemnation. In his book *unChristian*, when David Kinnamen asked outsiders to Christianity about their perceptions of Christians, the most common responses were as follows: “anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, too involved with politics, out of touch with reality, and insensitive toward others.” The three highest were the first three: anti-gay, judgmental, and hypocritical. To be sure, the church is doing a lot of things wrong if these are the main phrases outsiders use when they’re asked about Christians. The church should not only be known for what it’s against, but what it’s for. That stated, some of these characterizations make more sense in the context of a church moving toward rather than away from marginalization.

The second effect is the *loss of a salient “plausibility structure.”* My insights here are drawn Peter Berger’s *The Heretical Imperative*. Berger makes this significant observation when he writes:

There is a close connection between secularization and the pluralization of plausibility structures...A religious worldview, just like any other body of interpretations of reality will be firmly established in consciousness. The typical premodern society creates conditions under which religion has, for the individual, the quality of objective certainty; modern society, by contrast, undermines this certainty, deobjectivates it by robbing it of its taken-for-granted status, *ipso facto* [by that very fact] subjectivizes religion.¹²

The emphasis here, at least in this paper, is on the phrase “pluralization.” What happens when you have the proliferation or pluralization of plausibility structures as opposed to a set plausibility structure? That which was previously taken-for-granted – e.g., meaning, morality, objectivity, and truth – all come into question and are subject to interrogation. Even something as taken-for-granted as the existence of God is no longer a given in a society in which a multiplicity of plausibility structures proliferate.

The third effect is *the rise of irreligion*. In their new book *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, David Kinnamen and George Barna discuss two subcategories – the de-churched and the un-churched – within the larger category of “churchless.” They define the de-churched as “those who have been churchd in the past but are currently on hiatus,” and, they describe the un-churched as “people who have never attended a church service.”¹³ Kinnamen and Barna’s study revealed that, in the 1990s, the number of churchless people (de-churched and un-churched) stood at roughly 30 percent. By contrast, in 2014, the percentage of people who were churchless stood at roughly 43 percent. The last twenty years has seen a 13 percent increase among churchless, irreligious people in the United States. Interestingly, the largest growth has been among the de-churched.

The fourth effect is *the rise of anti-religion*. Kinnamen and Barna use the language of “anti-God evangelism.”¹⁴ As was mentioned earlier, thinkers such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens are proponents of what some call the New Atheism. In an article published in *Newsweek* in 2009 with the foreboding title, “The End of Christian America,” John Meacham observes:

...The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent...the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years, to 16 percent...[those] willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million. (That is about double the number of, say, Episcopalians in the United States.)¹⁵

Meacham helps us realize that numbers have risen not just among those who are indifferent *to* Christian faith, but also among those who have animosity *towards* Christian faith. While the number of atheists and agnostics is a relatively small percentage, theirs is a vocal minority that has grown significantly (more than threefold) since the 1990s.

It is not misguided to infer that anti-religious sentiment will increase rather than decrease in the future. In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Lesslie Newbigin offers a prescient analysis of what lies before us. Western culture is not just a secular society marked by indifference but, according to Newbigin, it is also a pagan society marked by animosity. Speaking of Western culture, he writes: “Its paganism is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.”¹⁶

The fifth and final effect is *the rise of bad religion*. In his popular book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Ross Douthat writes: “America’s problem isn’t too much religion, or too little of it. It’s *bad*

religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of pseudo-Christianities in its place.”¹⁷ Douthat’s claim is substantiated by the research of Christian Smith, the renowned sociologist at Notre Dame. In 2005, Smith and researcher Melissa Lindquist Denton published their research findings from the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR). In their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, they write:

We can say here that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten step cousin...*Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*....It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.¹⁸

Although many of Smith’s research findings revealed positive trends, this one in particular is deeply troubling. As Kenda Creasy Dean observes, “It is hard to read the data from NSYR without the impression that many American congregations (not to mention teenagers themselves) are ‘almost Christian’ – but perhaps not fully, at least not in terms of theology or practice.”¹⁹

To summarize, the effects of secularization are numerous, among them: marginalization, loss of ‘plausibility structures,’ and the simultaneous, precipitous rise of irreligion, anti-religion, and bad religion. With these effects in mind, how might we as homileticians respond and even strategize? In the next section, we turn our attention to proposed *homiletical* strategies for engaging with and confronting secularization.

What Homiletical Strategies Should We Consider in Light of Secularization?

For understandable reasons, some express reticence and even wariness about over-attending to trends and trajectories in modern American society. These reservations are not only warranted but in some cases required. Whenever audience adaptation or analysis *replaces* careful study of and preparation in God’s Word rather than accompanying it, or the timeless truths of Scripture take a back seat to the current needs of listeners, or the preacher de-tethers from Christian tradition in the name of being relevant, we should exercise caution and practice vigilance. To paraphrase a quote from G.K. Chesterton, “If you marry the culture today, you’ll be a widow tomorrow.”

But, ignoring these issues could also prove to be unwise. The gospel is both timeless and timely. As Scottish preacher James S. Stewart reminds us, “The gospel is not for an age, but for all time: yet it is precisely the particular age – this history’s hour and none other – to which we are commissioned by God to speak.”²⁰ Ian Pitt-Watson argues that preachers must learn to be bilingual, conversant with the language of Canaan (the church) as well as the language of Babylon (secular culture). Pitt-Watson’s larger point is this: we’re good at the former, but bad at the latter. Those who hear us preach “live in Babylon not Canaan,” Pitt-Watson writes.²¹ If preachers expect to be understood, they must learn to speak better Babylonian.

In *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson claims that preachers must “not only answer the questions our fathers and mothers asked; we must wrestle with the questions our children ask.”²² For many, secularization poses one those questions. How do we respond? My answer comes by way of four proposals designed to help us “wrestle with” this question better. These proposals are meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Proposal # 1: As preachers, take more responsibility for the church’s reputation “out there,” i.e., do more “Mirror Work.” Romans 1 concludes with Paul’s condemnation of sexual immorality, slander, idolatry, and depravity. Paul describes people who exhibit these vices as having “no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no

mercy.” (v 31) They persist in their rebellion. (v 32) What we’re less familiar with is what Paul says next. Romans 2:1 reads: “*You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things*” – not exactly a ringing endorsement for those *inside* the church either. Paul is doing for the Romans what one might call “mirror work.” Preachers who shine the mirror back on themselves and on the church before they point out the faults, fissures, and fractures in the world “out there” have a greater chance of resonating with the secularized. The phrase to remember: “Shine the mirror before you point the finger.” Paul did this to the church at Rome, and so should we.

Proposal # 2: Find ways to critique “bad religion.” Tim Keller excels at this. He shows how the gospel critiques irreligion (the secular position), and he also shows how the gospel critiques *religion*.²³ He never uses the phrase “bad religion” to describe what he does, but his critiques are rooted in religion that is *bad*, that is, religion antithetical to the gospel. Phil Ryken, the president of Wheaton College, refers to bad religion as “The New Monroe Doctrine.” The old Monroe Doctrine goes back to President Monroe’s refusal to get entangled in European Wars. The New Monroe Doctrine, according to Ryken, finds its genesis in a quote attributed to Marilyn Monroe. An interviewer asked her, “Do you believe in God?,” and she said, “I believe in everything just a little bit.” “People do not want to be intolerant, so they believe a little bit in everything,” Ryken writes. “A majority of Americans believe in God, the Bible, Jesus, the power of positive thinking, the basic goodness of humanity, luck, alien life forms, and checking horoscopes every day,” he continues. “The only way to believe all these things at the same time is to adhere to the New Monroe Doctrine: believe everything a little bit.”²⁴

Proposal # 3: Attend more to the power of narrative and testimony. Among a significant percentage of Latino/a Christians as well as among many Pentecostals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, *testimonios* or testimonies are a significant “source along with the biblical historical sources.”²⁵ According to Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, they are a form of “doing theology.”²⁶ What would it look like to bear witness to what God has done for us in Christ, how God has spoken through the Scriptures, *and* to bear witness to what God has done *for us* in the present? In a climate such as ours, it is essential that we tell stories about God’s goodness and faithfulness. Perhaps we should ask, “Where are people hearing the most compelling stories – from us or from others? As journalist Terry Mattingly observes, “Most people hear academic lectures at church, then turn to mass media to find inspiring tales of heroes and villains, triumph and tragedy, sin and redemption, heaven and hell.”²⁷ In other words, when people hear only a lecture in a sanctuary, they are more likely to obey a story in the world. The Christian story is the best story ever told. It’s time to work harder at telling it.

Proposal # 4: Better account for the pervasiveness of biblical illiteracy whenever we prepare sermons. How pervasive is biblical illiteracy? Perhaps the word “rampant” is appropriate. In 2014, the American Bible Society reported that nine in 10 Americans households had at least one Bible with the average household owning three. Contrast this finding with a *Lifeway Research* study, also published in 2014, which showed that 40 percent of church attendees read their Bibles about once a month or “rarely/never.”²⁸ In other words, we live in an age of Bible ownership *and* biblical illiteracy. People own Bibles, but don’t read them. Again, as a matter of nuance, the extent of biblical illiteracy in a congregation varies depending on a host of factors. That stated *it is better to assume less biblical knowledge than we used to assume*. As Andy Stanley observes, “Whenever pastors assume people in their congregations know certain things, they miss opportunities to teach. If a pastor makes assumptions year after year, then a whole generation has never heard [that truth] for the first time. If we assume too much, we communicate too little.”²⁹

Perhaps an example would be helpful. In *Distance in Preaching*, homiletician Michael Brothers tells a story about going to church on Easter. A little girl from an un-churched home had been coming to Sunday School and services for several weeks, and she decided to invite her un-churched father to attend. It was obvious that her father didn’t know his right from his left when it came to church – this man was sitting on the same pew as Brothers. When the preacher for that Sunday began to preach, and he got to the part of the Easter Story when the angel tells the women, “He is risen. He is not here,” the father turned to his daughter, whispered in her ear,

and asked, “*What happened to him?*” He didn’t know what happened next. *Assume nothing*, even something as basic as what happened with the Easter story. Especially when we tell obscure biblical stories, we should assume that a lot of people don’t know them. What does this mean for us as preachers? It means we need to think more strategically about preaching-as-catechesis, that is, as basic instruction on the rudimentary features of the Christian faith.

What Resources in Scripture Help Us Think about Secularization Biblically?

Many resources are available to us in the Bible to help us think biblically about this issue. For the sake of brevity, let me suggest returning to the wilderness metaphor as a helpful starting point. When most Christians think about wilderness, they associate it with spiritual deadness, dryness, and thirst. To them, wilderness equals spiritual lethargy, apathy, or temptation. Why go to the same place where a whole generation of Israelites died and where the subsequent generation sent the scapegoat to die? In the desert, Jesus was tempted by the Evil One. Why go there? Interestingly, Scripture offers a broader perspective on the wilderness – it challenges Jay-Z and Kanye’s perception that there are somehow places outside the church’s reach. Two scenes are especially prominent.

The first scene is found in Ezekiel 37. “The hand of the Lord was upon me,” Ezekiel says in v. 1. The Spirit carries him out to the middle of a valley filled with bones. We learn in v. 2 he Lord led him “back and forth” among the bones, and that the bones were very dry. Ezekiel is not in a lush valley; he is in a desert valley. The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Son of Man, can these bones live again?” And, Ezekiel answers: “O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.” Then, the Lord says, “*Prophesy* to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’” (4) God says: “Preach to the bones.” Interesting, isn’t it? In a place of deadness, dryness, and desolation, the Lord says, “Preach!” “Prophesy!” Tell the bones, “Hear the word of the Lord.” Often in Scripture, God speaks to His people on mountaintops: Mt. Sinai, Mt. Carmel, the Mount of Transfiguration. But, in Ezekiel 37, God speaks in the desert valley of dry bones. The Lord sends Ezekiel to preach in the wilderness, the place of dryness and desolation, the *locus absconditus*. In the desert, Ezekiel speaks a bold and prophetic message: “Hear the word of the Lord.” In effect, Ezekiel says to the bones: “In this valley, God is not *Deus Absconditus!* God’s rule and reign still apply. God still in the wild!” In Ezekiel 37, the wilderness is not a place of desolation or a place outside of God’s sovereign reach. Rather, it is a place of transformation, the epicenter of God’s plan to redeem a people to Himself. In this scene at least, the wild is the place where God makes a way.

The second biblical scene is found in Luke 3 and Matthew 3, both of which push back against the belief that the wild is a place of spiritual deadness. The first is Luke 3:1-2: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

Notice which clauses are dependent and which are independent. All of the names of those in power provide historical points of reference, but they also set up the main verb and the main phrase. “The word of God came to John...*in the wilderness.*” It is as if the omnipotent autocrats are afterthoughts. The wilderness is the epicenter of God’s redemptive activity, not the halls of power.

Also, in Matthew 3:1-3, we read about John the Baptist launching his public ministry in the “Desert of Judea.” (v. 1) John behaves after the manner of Elijah wearing camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts and wild honey. (Mal. 4, Lk 7:27) John also fulfills the Isaianic prophecy, “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (Isa. 40:3) Interestingly, Isaiah 40:3 has two different renderings in the Hebrew. The rendering Matthew uses reads: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord.’” But, most translations of Isa. 40:3 read: “A voice of one calling, ‘*In the*

desert, prepare the way for the Lord.” Notice that, in the second rendering, the emphasis is greater on the wilderness-as-place-in-which God’s word and God’s ways are revealed. In both renderings, the desert is not a place of divine absence or spiritual apathy; it is the *locus* of kingdom announcement, the site in which God’s redemptive purposes and plans are inaugurated in the Messiah. In a sense, the church as we know it is born in the wild, its relevance to the modern situation revealed by its natal genesis in the wilderness. More often than we realize, the wilderness functions as a place of spiritual transformation and renewal. According to NT commentator R.T. France, in Jewish thought, “to be in the wilderness was to be prepared for a new beginning with God.”³⁰ The OT prophets testified to this reality. (Jer 2:2-3, Hos 2:14-15, Ezek 20:35-38) In Scripture, the wild can be a place where God raises up children for Abraham and makes dry bones live.

Like John, preachers are called into the wilderness to proclaim, “Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him,” even when that same wilderness is profanely secular. Perhaps the reason Kanye and Jay-Z don’t believe in a church in the wild is because none of the Christians they know are willing to go there? The *preacher’s* calling is to announce the advent of the kingdom of God to those who will repent *and* those who will not, to proclaim in Babylon what is true in Canaan. Ours is a calling to a public ministry of life-transforming, world-changing witness in the desert as well as on the mountaintop.

Conclusion

An important caveat before concluding: secularization *does not mean* that the church is in a precipitous and irreversible decline. As was stated earlier, sociologists like Berger and Cox backed away from some of their 1960s-era claims that modernization *necessarily* led to secularization. Also, immigration changes the trajectory of the conversation in significant ways. Those who ignore rapid demographic changes in the U.S. among Christians do so at their own peril. According to Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “new immigrant Christians are changing America’s religious landscape” and revitalizing large segments of U.S. Protestantism.³¹

So, what can we conclude? First, we can conclude with confidence that it’s time to think more intentionally about how we preach in a culture marked by the effects of secularization and plagued by biblical illiteracy. If the data are correct that significant percentages of people believe Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife and that the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” is in the Bible, then we have some work to do. If the starting point for some of the non-Christians who hear the Easter Story is, “What happened to him?,” it might be time to re-think our evangelistic starting point.

Second, we can conclude from Scripture that God is at work in the wild. In Isaiah 43:19, the Lord speaks and offers to His people this abiding promise: “I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” The reason the church can be a church in the wild is because God can transform and renew it in the wild. In the wilderness, God is present. God is working. God makes a way.

Endnotes

¹ Fulkerson’s larger point is that theologies that matter arise out of situations that matter. The situations that matter most occur at the site of a wound in need of remedy and transformation. See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–14, 22.

² David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 93.

³ See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); and, Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Books, 2007).

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1969), 107.

⁷ In *The Desecularization of the World*, published in 1999, Berger writes: “The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled “secularization theory” is essentially mistaken. In my early work I contributed to this literature. I was in good company – most sociologists of religion had similar views, and we had good reasons for holding them.” See Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 2. In *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox lists “the unanticipated resurgence of religion” as one among three distinguishing qualities that “mark the world’s spiritual profile” in the new millennium. The other two qualities, according to Cox, are the death of fundamentalism and a change in *how* people express religiosity. See Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 1.

⁸ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2. To a certain extent, Gregory’s thesis is not new. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger claims that “the Western religious tradition may have carried the seeds of secularization within itself.” Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 110.

⁹ Niiose, *Nonbeliever Nation*, 29.

¹⁰ Berger writes: “To be sure, modernization has had secularizing effects, more in some places than in others. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.” Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” 3.

¹¹ The Barna Group, “2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population,” accessed August 25, 2015, <https://cities.barna.org/america-more-post-christian-than-two-years-ago/>.

¹² Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 29.

¹³ George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Austin, TX: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 7–8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ John Meacham, “The End of Christian America,” April 3, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/meacham-end-christian-america-77125>.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 20.

¹⁷ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 3. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 171. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

²⁰ James Stewart, *Heralds of God* (New York: Scribner’s, 1946), 11.

²¹ Ian Pitt-Watson, *Preaching: A Kind of Folly* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 52.

²² Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 48.

²³ For instance, in a sermon on Psalm 39, a lament psalm, Keller demonstrates this two-fold critique: “The Psalms gives us a gospel third way with your feelings. It’s a third way between what religiosity and secularity ordinarily tell you to do with your feelings. Religiosity is very uncomfortable with feelings. Religious people by and large want to deny the power and the depth and the darkness of their feelings. But, on the other hand, secular people tend to see discovery and expression of your feelings almost as a good end in itself. Once

they discover them, they bow to them and they say, ‘Well, that’s my feelings, and I have to go to my feelings.’ To bow to your feelings or to stuff your feelings, to be overawed by your feelings or under-aware of your feelings, that’s dangerous. The Psalms does [*sic*] neither. The Psalms suggests [*sic*] neither. The Psalms does not say deny or vent, but pray your feelings. Pray your deepest feelings. Bring them before God and process them.” See Timothy Keller, “Praying Our Tears,” Sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, February 27, 2000. See also Keller’s newest book, especially his chapter on preaching as worldview confrontation and construction. Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 121–56.

²⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Kings: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2011), 454.

²⁵ This quote is with reference to Latina women in particular whose voices are muted and silenced in congregations. *Testimonios* make it possible for “women in the church to act as catalysts in the process of the liberation of women.” See Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Perez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangelicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 98. For more on *testimonios*, see also Loida Martell-Otero, “Women Doing Theology: Una Perspectiva Evangélica,” *Apuntes* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 81–82.

²⁶ See Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Latina Women and Immigration,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 3, no. 2 (2008): 64.

²⁷ Terry Mattingly, “Star-Wars – The Only Parable in Town,” *Scripps Howard News Service*, June 2, 1999, as cited in Stephen D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 20.

²⁸ Ed Stetzer, “Biblical Illiteracy by the Numbers Part 1: The Challenge,” *The Exchange: A Blog by Ed Stetzer (Christianity Today)*, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/october/biblical-illiteracy-by-numbers.html>.

²⁹ Andy L. Stanley, Andy Stanley: Assume People are Biblically Illiterate (Not Dumb), interview by Kevin P. Emmert, July 14, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/july-web-only/andy-stanley-stop-saying-bible-says.html>.

³⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 129.

³¹ Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 83.