**New hope sermon I am not ashamed**

**Introduction**:

In our sermon series on the power of the gospel, Romans 1:16 kept echoing through my mind. Back in the first century, around A.D. 57-58 the Apostle Paul wrote these astonishing words to the Roman believers: ***“****I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of salvation of everyone who believers, first for the Jews and then for the Greek*.” He declared this faith when the Christians throughout the Middle East who had believed in Christ were already suffering acute persecution – from the Jews, from business people who made idols for worship and from Nero himself. Paul would die within less than 2 decades of writing this statement.

But his faith statement is all about what we focus on in our minds. As Paul told the Romans, later in this same epistle: D*o not conform to the patterns of this world but be transformed, , by the renewing of your mind*. (Romans 12:2.) We are to step out from society and the press of culture’s values and*Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold but be transformed, changing the way you think.*

Changing the way you think. Changing how the values of the world affect our own lives. *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ* is an amazing life witness and an incredibly powerful testimony today where Christians are being squeezed by many cultural and religious forces antagonistic to their faith. But note the logical syllogism, beloved: **If** we let the world squeeze us into its mold, we WILL be ashamed of the gospel. We will internalize its values and have these dilute or destroy our faith in Christ and in his gospel.

So today I want us to address 3 major cultural factors which are squeezing out the content of our gospel today: Then I want to suggest the antidote that combats these forces of culture. What is an antidote? It is remedy to counteract a poison (Webster’s New World College Dictionary 4th edition) – The term “antidote” is a Greek word, “antididonai,” meaning “given against.” Knowing Jesus deeply is our antidote that can cancel out the effect of all these cultural forces that poison our faith.

Now, why am I passionate about this? Because our goal in this church is to equip each member to be a life-changing witness in their home country or wherever God sends them in the world. That means we need to know the cultural factors that oppose the gospel and the power of Jesus Christ that is stronger than all these forces.

So let’s pray and seek God’s wisdom for how we think.

Today I want to look at three dominant cultural worldviews – ways people think – that are the opposite of God’s truth in Jesus Christ: Secularism, pluralism, and post-modernism.

First, Secularism:

Secularism is a system without a deity, but it still includes an ethical code: for instance, a secular person may believe strongly that smoking is bad, that healthy living is vital, or that a certain code of conduct is the most moral. Some believe in a form of eternal life through cloning. Oftentimes, Darwinism, gay rights, abortion, and other liberal issues are recognized.

* The point is that a secularist is vitally connected to the world, not attending to anything religious
* There is a denial or skepticism of the transcendent realities of God and the supernatural
* A discrediting of the Bible –
* An embracing only of the realities of the natural, scientific materialistic world
* A me-first culture of comfort and pleasure

Secular humanism is a dominant attitude in our western culture today and it was the worldview that my non-Christian family basically adopted. They saw no use for religion at all – they had money and the comforts and privileges money could buy and felt that religion was a crutch for weak people. I was told that in no uncertain terms when I became a Christian. They were appalled at my choice and dismissed it as immaturity and weakness that I would grow out of when I became more mature.

Part of that secularist stance involves discrediting the Bible by saying that the Gospel stories are a myth.

The thinking goes like this: “The gospel accounts of Jesus’ life were written down so long after the events they record that the figure they describe has been mythologized….Jesus started as a great preacher with some groundbreaking ethical ideas, but over the years, exaggerated claims crept in. A virgin birth here, a resurrection there, and *voila*! the prophet of Nazareth becomes the Son of God”.

But in his powerful new book, [Can We Trust the Gospels?](https://smile.amazon.com/Can-Trust-Gospels-Peter-Williams/dp/1433552957/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1543846781&sr=1-1&keywords=can+we+trust+the+gospels+peter+williams) New Testament scholar Peter Williams argues that there simply wasn’t *time* for Jesus to be mythologized. The gospels were written when eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life were still around. They include a wealth of geographical and cultural detail about the precise area in which he lived—details that would not have been available to remote authors fabricating stories. And in the rapid spread of Christianity, the accounts of his life traveled so far and fast and with such remarkable consistency that there would have been no opportunity for later editors to add miraculous claims. Moreover, as Williams reminds us, we have more and better manuscript evidence for the life and works of Jesus than for those of Tiberius, the Roman emperor who ruled during his ministry.”

Secularists have not room in their worldview for revelation and divine inspiration.

Or this thinking from the secular world?:

Douglass McConnell, in his current book Cultural Insights for Christian leaders describes “the secular sphere as the ‘real world’ – the marketplace of commerce, science, technology and medicine.” In mission circles the result is a prioritizing of preaching words of proclamation over doing deeds of reconciliation because the soul is seen by Christians as more important than the body. McConnell adds: “In this we are at risk of downgrading the relevance of God to his world by saying he is not interested in the care of bodies, the ethics of experimental bioscience, the justice of health-care systems inequities or the stewardship of the earth.” (pp. 44-45 – McConnell, Cultural Insights for Christian Leaders, Baker Academic, 2018).

But that is unscriptural. Ministry needs to be holistic – ministering the love of Jesus to people’s needs of their body, soul and spirit.

Finally, the secular mindset that constantly emphasizes seeking more pleasures, attaining more possessions and spending our lives around what will bring us the most comfort in this world.” (David Platt, Counter Culture. Tyndale, 2015, p. 248). Sound like anything you have encountered? Once you are back outside the Wheaton College bubble, you surely will. And all these presuppositions of secular thinking are in direct opposition to what Christ said and stood for. What is the antidote? We will get there shortly!



But there are two more subtle influences which can compromise our ardent witness to the gospel if we are not watchful – pluralism and post-modernism.

Look at the words in the “word cloud” for pluralism. What do you see that defines pluralism?

* A distinct definition of truth
* An acceptance of all religions – hence universalism

Pluralists believe that all religions are equally valid. There is no absolute truth, so tolerance needs to be in that word cloud.

Pastor Timothy Keller has written on this issue extensively, so I’d like to share how he preaches the Gospel in a pluralistic context. Keller’s church in Manhattan New York now is about 30% non-Christians. He says:

“Many of them are steeped in religious pluralism and have little patience for claims of Christianity's superiority. Maintaining my ministry to people of a pluralistic culture requires me to preach in a way that neither forsakes the truth of Christianity nor needlessly alienates those raised to assume a plurality of religions.

I don't directly make the naked claim "Christianity is a superior religion," and I certainly don't malign other faiths. Instead, I stress Christianity's distinctiveness. My father's pastor recently provided a living example. My mother had suffered a stroke, and my father needed someone to lean on. His pastor sat with him for hours in the hospital, ministering not with profound answers, but simply with his presence. In the same way, Christianity does not so much offer solutions to the problem of suffering, but rather provides the promise of a God who is completely present with us in suffering. Only Christians believe in a God who says, "Here I am alongside you. I have experienced the same suffering you have. I know what it is like." [A God who weeps when his people weep.] No other religion even begins to offer that assurance.

 After the World Trade Center 9/11 tragedy, between 600 and 800 new people began attending our church. The sudden influx of people pressed the question, "What does your God have to offer me at a time like this?"I preached, "Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a child in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only religion that tells you, therefore, God suffered as you have suffered." That's worded carefully as a way of saying, "Other religions tell you many good things, too. But Christianity is the only one that tells you this. If you deny this, then you lose a valuable spiritual resource."

Pluralists get stumped by that because they realize that they want the distinctives of Christianity—a God who has known human pain, salvation by grace, and the hope of heaven—in their times of need.

Today when I preach on lying, for example, I say: "Let me tell you why you're not going to be a truthful person. I lie most often to avoid others' disapproval. If I just try to stop lying, it won't work because my need for others' approval overwhelms my good intentions. I allow other people, instead of Jesus, to determine my worth. If you want to stop lying, you have to find what is motivating your sin—like my tendency to look to others for affirmation—and replace it with the security you can find in Jesus." Jesus gives me the power for transformation and that is the power of the gospel that I am living today. There is no substitute. “Preaching Amid Pluralism, Elevating Christ in a culture that sees all religions as equal.” Tim Keller.

Christianity’s distinctives.

The pluralistic mindset is closely tied to Post-Modernity

* Post modern thinking is suspicious of metanarratives and any claims of ultimate truth, believing there is no hierarchy of higher or lower truths – ‘you have your truth and I have mine.’
* Tolerance is the highest moral good. Sam Chan, in his current book Evangelism in a Skeptical World answers that presupposition with this comment: “If we are certain in our knowledge, we’ll be trapped in our narrow world-view, which only causes more intolerance and bigotry against other views.””(Sam Chan, Evangelism in a skeptical World, p. 102).
* Bishop Fulton Sheen agrees: He says:

“America, it is said, is suffering forim intolerance – it is not. It is suffering from tolerance. Tolerance of right and wrong, truth and error, virtue and evil, Christ and chaos. Our country is not nearly so overrun with the bigoted as it is overrun with the broadminded.”

* But on the positive side, post-moderns emphasize the importance of personal testimony and encounter and the role of community in coming alongside a person.

This later area is where the Christian distinctives can play powerfully in our society today.

But when you are surrounded by pluralistic, secular, post-modern thinking, and dismissed as an intolerant bigot, it can infiltrate your brain and cause doubt or shame in your faith and witness. So what is the antidote?

Paul said: *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ* ***for*** *it is the power of salvation of everyone who believers:.* Let’s unpack what’s involved in this statement.

**The power of the gospel for salvation.**

 I am unashamed to the extent that I know Christ. Knowing Christ is what really matters.

Why? Because:

* Jesus Christ is the source of all wisdom.
* He personifies sacrificial redeeming love
* He is the express image of God (Hebrew 1)
* He is Lord of all
* He is the Great Shepherd
* He holds the universe together by the word of His power
* He is the Giver of all grace.
* He is the One to focus on.

Knowing Jesus intimately gives believers the ability to be unashamed of Jesus – despite the ridicule or opposition. Here are two examples of the unashamed in John’s Gospel.

In John 6 Jesus has just claimed that He is the Bread of Life – when people eat his flesh and drink of His blood, they will live forever. But this was a hard statement. Verse 66 says “*From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God*.” There were then and there are now mysteries and difficult sayings in the Bible, and though Peter couldn’t understand all that Jesus meant, Peter knew enough of Jesus by the time of Christ’s claims to be the Bread of Life that he recognized the alternatives did not make sense. So in faith he stuck by his loyalty to Christ.

John 9 is the story of the man who was born blind whom Jesus healed. Look at v.13-16 *They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. 15Therefore the Pharisees also asked the healed man how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.” 16Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” 25The manreplied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”*

This, beloved, is the power of a personal testimony that humanists, secularists, and post-modernists can’t deny. A testimony that leads directly to Jesus. And the power of the gospel is in Him!

There’s a song by Bill Gaither – a praise musician of earlier decades – that actually captures that sense

of personal encounter. It’s called He Touched Me, and I want to sing it now together.

Shackled by a heavy burden, ‘Neath a load of guilt and shame
Then the hand of Jesus touched me, And now I am no longer the same.

Refrain: He touched me, O He touched me, And O, the joy that floods my soul
Something happened, and now I know, He touched me and made me whole.

Since I met this blessed Savior, Since he cleansed and made me whole,
I will never cease to praise Him, I’ll shout it while eternity rolls.

Refrain: He touched me, O He touched me, And O, the joy that floods my soul
Something happened, and now I know, He touched me and made me whole.

The power of a changed life, the testimony of transformation, is the strength of Christian witness in our world today. So therefore, as Carmelo Terranova preached at Lausanne:

“the greatest need for the church and for the world is that of producing men and women who know, live, and communicate holiness… Holiness, as well as the total Christian life, should be a reproduction of Jesus ‘ inward life—not his exterior life—of the pure and transparent character of Jesus Christ. The holy person does not imitate Jesus, he just looks like Jesus. The world is continually searching for people who look like Jesus. We have had a sufficient number of gifted people and eloquent speakers. We desperately need saints [that is the Bible word for Christians] with the fragrance of Jesus Christ and the aroma from heaven.” (Best of Lausanne, “Living Holy”, by Carmelo B. Terranova, May 2018)

An authentic Christ- filled life validates the power of the gospel.

There is also the need for the world to see the power of the gospel demonstrated in the authority of Jesus Christ over all other authorities and powers in the world. Paul tells the Philippians*:     Jesus humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. 9Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Every knee will bow, every tongue *declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* The name above all names – and all the evil spirits throughout the universe. This includes Christ’s power over Satan. I believe our witness today needs to include how we triumph over the lies and distortions and accusations of Satan and demonstrate Jesus’s power in our daily lives.

Cultural values that oppose us and the gospel create that squeeze we spoke of in Romans 2 – squeezed into the world’s mold. So, our real antidote against that squeezing process is knowing the Lord. This points us to the application of these thoughts today. **The most critical issue: is whether or not we are ashamed of the Lord Jesus Himself.** It’s not a matter of being ashamed of the doctrines of our faith. It is a matter of not being ashamed about the Author of our faith. The Apostle John said: “*We love Christ because He first loved us.(I Jn. 4:19).* And Paul told the Corinthians*. Christ’s love controls us.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Cor.+5%3A14-15&version=NLT" \l "fen-NLT-28852a" \o "See footnote a)] Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life.[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Cor.+5%3A14-15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28852b)*] 15He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.*

This is the key. Our confidence in the gospel all goes back to understanding and then celebrating who our Lord Jesus Christ really is. When our eyes are open to embrace Him as Savior and Lord, then that trumps all the debates on theological issues that can get us hopelessly entangled in fruitless discussions. What we want people to do is meet Jesus and decide on the merits of Christianity on the basis of Jesus only.

A contemporary song that speaks of our need to know Jesus deeply is *Knowing You.* Let’s sing it together as an affirmation of our trust in the Lord who alone has the power of the gospel:

Refrain: Knowing You, Jesus, knowing You, there is no greater thing. You’re my all, you’re the best, you’re my joy, my righteousness and I love you, Lord.”

That’s my prayer for each of us in this church: that our lives will demonstrate our living Lord to a skeptical non-believing world. Jesus Himself is the antidote who can stop all the poisons of wrong thinking in the world from taking center stage and keeping people from life and hope in Him. May He be “our all, our best, our joy, our righteousness [for] we love You, Lord.” Amen and Amen.

 Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 2/24/19