

THE GREAT END OF THE CHURCH

Can Christianity Finally Compete With Atheism?

Text: Matthew 13:24-30

Introduction to the Scripture

We come today to the close of our series of reflections on how followers of Jesus can respond creatively to the vehement assault on Christian faith posed by the new and vigorous strain of atheism that has sprouted up in recent days. In the 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus provides some very wise counsel on this subject and points us as well to the central calling on which we'll be focusing in our Mission Festival this week. So let's turn together to Matthew 13 and hear what Jesus has to say to us, reading responsively verses 24-30... (Reading)

I

As I was backing out of my driveway this week, I could not help but notice the condition of my front lawn. I am embarrassed to say that I am almost single-handedly bringing down property values in my neighborhood right now. If there is a Hair Club for Lawns, I need the phone number. Some parts of my yard look like they have male-pattern balding. There's nothing but mud growing there. Other parts have these fresh green shoots that seem determined to fight their way up in spite of my appalling lack of attention to them. And all in-between are these confounding weeds that I half-suspect my enemies at the landscaping companies came and sowed during the night just before they deposited those advertisements at my door.

If truth be told, my yard has been getting "worse and worser" over a long period of time. That's why on Wednesday I made this solemn covenant before God and my worried neighbors that this will be the year that I do something significant to address this blight. I'm going to go out tomorrow, sow seed in that mud, fertilize the grass, nuke those weeds with some killer, and finally create the perfect lawn. Do I hear an "Amen" for this plan? You must be one of my neighbors.

Now, I tell you this story because I think it parallels in some ways the situation in which many Christians find themselves today. They look across the current landscape and feel a grave, if not embarrassed, concern for the present conditions. They see large and expanding patches of muddied, unproductive thinking. They regard the ideas that people not like us are sowing as weeds that are choking off and replacing the good grains of life. Whether it's in the government, the media, the schools, or the marketplace, they deeply resent the extent to which those wicked weeds seem to be in control of the yard in too many places. And so they resolve that something fast and furious must be done. Whether it's buying another book decrying the sin or stupidity of their enemies, or writing a check in response to the panic letters that come in the mail...

whether it's electing this candidate or urging the change or defense of that law... the prevailing thought is we must rip out the weeds of the enemy; we must take back this yard for good; we must and can make an Eden of our neighborhood.

II

I understand this drama, as I imagine many of you do too. I grow more and more concerned about the muddled thinking out there and the way that relativism and antitheism appear to be prospering. I look at all those empty cathedrals in Europe and those emptying churches here in America and know that the non-churchgoing population on both sides of the Atlantic is steadily expanding. Only 20% of Europeans describe faith as something "important" in their lives. Amidst the 70,000 words that make up the new constitution of the European Union, only a grudging reference to "the cultural, *religious*, and humanist inheritance of Europe" gives any clue that faith had anything to do with the rise of Western civilization.¹ Former president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel (a follower of Jesus himself), describes Europe as "the first atheistic civilization in the history of mankind."² Here in the United States during the last decade, the number of Americans who claim to have "no religious preference" has more than doubled.

It's clear to me that few of the universities and hospitals founded with a Christian vision retain much trace of it, save for the soot-stained inscriptions on their weathering stones. I know that to take faith seriously (except as a threat to true enlightenment) is to NOT be taken seriously on many campuses. I've read study after study that confirms that few Americans can name the Ten Commandments much less articulate the major doctrines that make up the Christian worldview. I worry for the survival of souls and civilizations that are being cut off at the roots from the God and spiritual soil from which they originally arose. There are moments when it feels to me that those who define religion as the weed and secular humanism as the life-giving wheat are winning and I wonder whether it will be in my kids' or grandkids lifetime that some descendent of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens will raise a champagne glass to toast the Great End of the Church.

III

And then I remember that there is another way to read that last phrase. When I was in my early twenties, I fell in love with the opening words of the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.* The words declared a mission statement which, if lived out, would make the Body of Christ the most fruitful, multiplying, and influential force on the face of the planet. Here is what it said: The Great Ends (or purposes) of the Church in all ages are: "The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; [and] the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."³

I believe that when Jesus said: **"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field,"** he was talking about someone who embarked on a mission like this. He was describing his own mission and the mission of all who would follow in his steps. Where the church sows this good seed, it cannot help but prevail and where it does not sow this seed, it cannot help but fail. In the year that I was born, the so-called mainline churches had one in six Americans sitting in their pews. Today, they have only one in thirty.⁴ One can easily conclude from these downward trend lines that Christian conviction is suffering the inevitable demise that it must before the flowering of secular reason, scientific progress, and modernization. And this is precisely what the New Atheists contend. They say that the abandonment of faith in God in favor of faith in human potential is an idea whose time has come.

But if you really study the numbers, it turns out that it is only those forms of Christianity that have forsaken **"the good seed"** that are in decline as modern influences rise. Those congregations which have abandoned a passionate pursuit of the Great Ends of the Church are withering away, while those for whom these commitments remain central continue to grow. In the last 50 years, for example, the Southern Baptist denomination has doubled in size, going from 8 to 16 million members, a growth factor larger than all the losses in membership by mainline denominations combined.

In Brazil, there were only a handful of evangelical Christians forty years ago. Today there are 50 million of them. Even the Catholic Church has experienced a profound revival as Evangelical and Pentecostal influences have reignited a passion for the Great Ends of the Church there. In 1950, there were 50 million Catholics in Brazil. Today, there are 120 million of them. In 1908, fewer than 10% of Africans claimed Christ as their hope. Today 50% do. That is a shift from 10 million to 350 million people. It is hard to think of a more rapidly modernizing country than China. Yet, as David Aikman points out in his book, *Jesus in Beijing*, even the most conservative estimates say that China will become within the next few decades the largest Christian country in the world.⁵

Much is said about the global expansion of Islam (and you'll hear more next week), but it is Christianity which is the fastest growing religion on Earth. Unlike Islam, it is growing not simply by biological reproduction but by conversion as well. All of the other major religions of the world express global aspirations, but only the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches into every continent and every major region of the world, save for (ironically) the Middle East, where it was born – bringing to mind the words of Jesus: **"A prophet is honored, except in his own country"** (John 4:44).

IV

The question that must be ringing in your mind at this moment is: *"What does all of this have to do with me?"* But this morning, I want to urge you to change the question. I

dare you to ask: *"What do I have to do to be part of all this?"* As I know from personal experience, if I am not careful, my life can become reduced to worrying about my lawn, to how I look in front my neighbors, to whether I am feeling happy and fulfilled, to whether the kids are getting good grades or I am climbing the career ladder on my way to an easy retirement.

I don't mean to mock these things. They are understandable and common concerns. But the God of the Universe invites you and me to live for something more than this. He created us for something greater than this. He calls us to be sowers of the **"good seed,"** amidst a world where the weeds of distraction and delusion grow thicker all around us. What does it mean in practice to fulfill that calling, that mission?

It means that you and I will dedicate ourselves to doing what the missionaries who'll join us shortly are doing already. We'll not worry so much about trying to pull up and throw away all the people who see life differently from us, but trust God to sort out the weeds in the end. Instead, we will devote ourselves to proclaiming the good news that Christ has made it possible for even the worst of sins to be forgiven and relationships with God and one another reconciled and that this is indispensable to the salvation of humankind. We will take a personal role in offering to others the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. Sowing the good seed means we will maintain a habit of divine worship, so that out of His fullness, God will keep supplying us with grace to give. It means we will preserve in our hearts and minds the truth of God's Word. We will promote in society the right treatment of others that Jesus commands. And we will exhibit in all these ways the life of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Will we do these things perfectly? I doubt it. But if we did it more passionately and purposefully than perhaps we have been doing it at present, do you think it's possible that a few people who are atheists today, might open themselves to the seed of new life? It once worked that way for me when I was an atheist, and made me want to pursue in a different sense, the Great End of the Church.

The yard is waiting.

¹ Brian M. Carney, "The Cube and the Cathedral," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2005.

² Vaclav Havel, "Paradise Lost," *New York Review of Books*, April 9, 1992.

³ *The Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church USA, Section G-1.0200

⁴ Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2007), pp.3-4.

⁵ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2004).

Discussion Guide

1. What signs or symptoms do you see in the world around you that atheism or anti-theism is gaining ground?
2. Which of the following describes your thoughts/feelings on the subject?
(check all that apply)
 - I'm not worried at all
 - I have some concern
 - I am specifically concerned about...
 - I fear that atheism/antitheism may eventually lead to the end of the church
3. What do you think Jesus meant by "the good seed"?
4. What are some of the "weeds" that afflict your life?
5. How would you go about (or have seen others go about) "pulling up" the weeds?
6. Which of the "Great Ends of the Church" most energizes/challenges you? Why?
 - The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
 - The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
 - The maintenance of divine worship
 - The preservation of the truth
 - The promotion of social righteousness
 - The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Matthew 13:24-30 (NIV) ²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' ²⁸ "'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹ "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" (cf. explanation of parable in Matthew 13:36-43)

Matthew 13:53-58 (NIV) ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. ⁵⁴ Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. ⁵⁵ "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor." ⁵⁸ And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.