

Who are the Atheists?

In A.D. 156 (or possibly 166), Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the Apostle John, was martyred. He was a very old man, at least in his late eighties, when he was dragged into a coliseum packed with Romans and pagans. The Emperor was there, but he didn't want to make a martyr out of this man who was already very old for that would antagonize the people. Now, we need first to understand that at that time, Christians were regarded as atheists because they refused to worship the Roman gods, nor would they worship the Emperor who by this time was held to be a god. So the Emperor said, "If you, Polycarp, will denounce all you atheists, I'll spare your life." Polycarp replied, "Who are the atheists? Here are all the atheists," and he pointed to all the people sitting in the coliseum watching, as well as to the Emperor. In a rage, the Emperor ordered him to be put to death, by both being burned at a stake and impaled by a spear. So, good question: Who are atheists?

Better, let's ask this, Who are the atheists today? Anthony Flew was a highly esteemed British intellectual who, 30-40 years ago, was outspoken in his atheist beliefs. When challenged by the inability of science to create life in the laboratory, his atheism was shaken to its core. So he enraged the world of intellectuals by announcing he was abandoning atheism to believe instead in God. But he didn't become a Christian. He wouldn't submit to the authority of Scripture. He wouldn't give thanks to God His Creator. He essentially became a Deist. He was really an atheist still. He died suddenly and unexpectedly after his "conversion," as if, after a lifetime influencing others to become atheists, God wouldn't allow him to go further and actually become a believer.

Charles Murray is a sociologist and life-long atheist—although not a committed one. Years ago he read that the likelihood of a Big Bang was so low it almost certainly never really happened. That stirred his thinking: Was Creation right after all? A friend had come to faith by reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, which Murray then read too. And he was struck with the argument that Jesus had to be what He claimed because the alternatives really were unthinkable. The most persuasive book was Richard Bauckham's, "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses." Murray was able to deal with the three big issues that liberals pose: If the Gospels were written later in time and the belief in his deity was a later invention, why didn't any N.T. text record (or even allude to) the most cataclysmic event, the 70 AD destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, as would be expected? If the books were all written late, why didn't Acts end with a comment on the deaths of Peter and Paul, as would be expected? And why would the disciples go to their deaths as martyrs if they didn't really see Jesus risen? So Murray wrote a book describing all this thinking. But Murray still can't believe in the resurrection. He can't bring himself to accept a young earth Creation. Murray wants to decide what's true and what's not (or may not be) true; he refuses to submit to God's truths. There's no conversion here. Murray will not submit to God's Word as having authority over him. He's an atheist still.

It's interesting to observe that those audacious atheistic intellectuals of 20 years ago (Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett), those "New Atheists" who wrote books and spoke on campuses and enjoyed celebrity status, are now forgotten. And there are no new replacements. It's not fashionable to be an impudent atheist anymore. It's now a trend, I suspect, to be intellectually honest about religious claims—as long as one doesn't actually believe them. Atheism has become less public, more sophisticated.

Friedrich Nietzsche was correct stating that "all atheists are really unwilling believers." Atheists only pretend that there's no God. They know that there is, but they're in overt rebellion against Him. They want to be independent of Him, they want to be their own authority, and they have no desire to know Him. They scoff at the thought of submitting to His rule. Their desire in life is to live autonomously, as if they themselves are a god. They may study Christianity, admire aspects of the Bible, or even admit that Jesus was a real person—even a unique person—but they have no intention of submitting to Jesus. The Bible's norms, teachings, commands and promises may interest them, but at an intellectual level only.

Atheists don't know God and don't want to. They refuse ever to give thanks to Him. The essence of atheism is not refusing to believe in God's existence, but refusing to honor Him, refusing to submit to Him. Choosing to pursue life according to one's own lights, apart from God, indifferent to God's authority, will, wisdom and goodness, is surely the epitome of arrogance and shows contempt for God.

Adam, in the Garden, refused to submit to God's authority. God had created Adam; Adam existed only because God gave him life. God therefore has the right to rule, to stipulate how Adam was to live in God's world. Of course, Adam knew God exists, who He is. Adam even knew His Word for God had spoken directly to him. Yet . . . Adam refused to submit to God. We wouldn't say that Adam was an atheist, but Adam acted *as* an atheist, refusing to submit to God.

In America today we have a situation just like that which Polycarp faced. We live in a society made up of religious people. Many attend church on Sundays, and most would call themselves Christians. Yet, they're atheists—atheists in that they refuse to submit to God. They forget about God as soon as Sunday church is over, and they pursue their lives no differently than their neighbors, which is, sadly, without reference to God and His revealed will. They're engaged with the many pagan gods that inhabit our nation, and they're defenseless against the Serpent's whisperings. They don't know God, they don't give thanks to Him. They live as an atheist.

But if you're reading this, you must be more spiritual than just a Christian church-goer. So I implore you, dear Reader, don't assume that how others in church pursue life is OK, however many of them there may be. It's not OK. It's how we live, what our character is, and what we do with our lives that matter deeply to God. And God has revealed all that He expects of us in His Word. We must not be indifferent to what He has revealed because we're responsible for our response to Him. And our response to our Creator God must always be humble, loving, trusting, submissive obedience.

“Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue; He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God” (Psalm 50:22,23). With supernatural insight, the Psalmist here writes something critically—cosmically—important. (1) To forget God incites His wrath. He demands love and commitment, full-time, and as Creator He has the right to hold us accountable for it. Two hours on Sunday morning cannot satisfy this responsibility. To forget God is to reject Him; it's refusing to honor Him. (2) We exist for a purpose, and that is to honor God. He has revealed how we're to do that, by living according to His will and being the kind of person who mirrors His perfections. Our creaturely responsibility is to honor our Creator. (3) The most important way to honor God is by being grateful to Him for . . . for everything! For our life, for His providential care, for His Word, for the privilege of knowing Him, for the promises He's made, for the salvation He's made available, and for much more. (4) We thank God not with words, but by sacrificial offerings, that is, we offer *ourselves*. This is biblical worship. See Romans 12:1-2. There's no love for God or worship of Him without self-sacrifice or suffering loss of some kind. (5) Our humble stance before God, our honest creaturely attitude anticipates the enjoyment of the blessings of salvation.

A certain church broadcasts its meetings on TV. Once, after the congregation sang “He is worthy” (from Revelation 4 and 5), the song leader looked straight into the camera and proclaimed, “He is worthy!” This bothered me greatly, because it's not for us humans, condemned fallen creatures, to evaluate Jesus. Our only legitimate stance before Jesus is prostrate in the dust, thankful that He allows us to continue to exist. We dare not presume upon God's grace. Grace comes with certain obligations.

The gospel preached in too many churches is not biblical because it's indifferent to licentiousness. The Gospel in Scripture does not allow anyone who believes in Jesus to live as an atheist. In the biblical Gospel, Jesus invests His life in us, and we're responsible to respond in the only way that's appropriate, which is with biblical faith. That is, with self-sacrificing offerings of thankfulness, with loving obedience, with a life based on trust in His great promises for the future, and a commitment to serve Him. And with creaturely humility. May we be faithful.