

New Atheism

Does the Bible Really Teach That There Are No True Atheists?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Romans chapter one tells us that the answer, in a word, is Yes - and that a change of heart is possible for the one who denies God's existence.

The Bible's Pronouncement

Twice in the book of Psalms the Bible declares, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (14:1 and 53:1). The Hebrew word for "fool" is *nabal* (pronounced *na-báll*). Used eighteen times in the Old Testament, *nabal* describes a person who is a deliberate rebel against God, and who thinks and acts accordingly. The Hebrew word for "fool" denotes deliberate immorality in thought, word and deed, *not* lack of intellectual capacity.¹ As we shall see, this is an important distinction.

You may recall that there was a man in the Bible who bore the name *Nabal* (1 Samuel 25:2-39). It was said that he behaved in a way befitting his name (verse 25). So obstinate was his state of mind that people couldn't even have a reasonable conversation with him (verse 17).

Every Human Being Knows God

Sadly, the God-denying state of mind is also like that. The Apostle Paul develops this thought in Romans chapter 1, beginning at verse 18:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because *what may be known of God is manifest in them*, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead,

so that they are without excuse, because, *although they knew God*, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools...²

Note several things about man's knowledge of God:

- The subject of the passage in its context (1:18-3:26) is all of mankind — no exceptions. See especially 3:9-23.
- The Bible teaches that every man knows God (1:21). The Greek word is *ginosko*, denoting intelligent comprehension. The Bible teaches that God Himself has imparted this knowledge to mankind through the created order (1:19-20). The Biblical fool is neither unintelligent nor does he lack the evidence of God's existence to intelligently evaluate.
- The Bible teaches that mankind's knowledge of God through the created order is not a nebulous theism. It is *specific*. Through the created order, man possesses the *inward, God-given knowledge* that God exists (verse 19), God is the creator of the world (20), God possesses eternal power (20), and He is divine by nature (that is the meaning of "Godhead" - Greek *theiotes*, in verse 20).
- But, this passage tells us, fallen mankind has made the conscious choice not to glorify God or accord Him due honor as God (verse 21).

A God-Denying State of Mind

The passage also tells us that this conscious choice involves the God-denying state of mind that causes some people to go so far as to declare, "There is no God." Like *Nabal* of old, it is often difficult to have a reasonable conversation with them — in their case, a conversation about the existence and attributes of God. In their God-denying state of mind:

- They suppress the truth of God's existence and attributes (verse 18).
- They exhibit futility of thought (the force of the original language is *worthless reasoning*), and darkened thinking (verse 21).
- They openly insist, in their God-denial, that *they* are the ones who are wise, when in fact they are fools (verse 22).
- They want to "free" themselves, and society at large, of any knowledge of God because they believe it is worthless and even harmful. This is the force of the statement that "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" in verse 28.
- They worship and serve the created order rather than the Creator (verse 25).

This God-denying state of mind drives key developments in postmodern society. The "freedom from religion" movement suppresses the truth of God by seeking to remove acknowledgment of God and instruction about God from education, government, business, the media, and even the family. Naturalism, the belief that the world came into being and operates by time and chance without the intervention of a Creator, in effect worships and serves the created order, and man himself as the pinnacle of that order. Many atheists who choose spiritual darkness ironically refer to themselves as the "Brights" of this world, openly stating that those who believe in God are not-so-bright and therefore inferior. The Brights promote atheism as the cure for the world's ills, which they contend are the results of religion. The official logo of the Brights Movement is at the right.³

Atheism is a Belief System

The Apostle Paul writes that those who deny the one true God have "exchanged the truth of God for the lie" (verse 25). The force of the original language is that they have exchanged the intelligent understanding of God and His attributes — creatorship, power, divine nature, and



right to be worshipped as God, an understanding which corresponds to the facts of the case shown to them by God Himself through the created order — for the denial of the facts about God and His attributes. In other words, *professed atheism is a belief system that is the product of intellectual dishonesty resulting from spiritual darkness.*

Christian biologist and author Dr. Gary Parker, a former atheist, puts it this way: Everyone believes in the Creator God. It's just that Christians are really happy about it, while professed atheists are really unhappy about it! He points out that atheists' anger against God reveals their intellectual dishonesty: "Who's the maddest and the angriest against God? The atheist...You don't get that angry at Somebody who doesn't exist!"⁴

Is Change Possible?

Is it possible for a professed atheist to become a believer — not merely a theist, but a believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Yes, but this radical change must be brought about by the God the atheist denies! Christians can present all the evidence for the existence of God. In fact, as Romans chapter one tells us, God has already placed such evidence within every man. But in the end, for everyone who is not a true believer in Christ — whether theist or atheist — understanding must come to the darkened heart. And it is God the Holy Spirit who brings that understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 we read this: "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Man in his natural, unredeemed state is incapable of accepting God's Word as true, because he is a rebel. As Jesus said in John 3:18-20, "He who does not believe is condemned already...and this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light..."

Man in his unredeemed state lacks the ability to understand God's Word properly, because he refuses to come to the light. Understanding the truth about God and His Word is only possible when God the Holy Spirit brings an individual to spiritual light through His work of regeneration.

Often Christians tend to think about this matter backwards. We think that an unsaved person — especially a professed atheist — needs to come to a deeper understanding of God's Word in order to be saved; all of his objections must be dealt with first. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The unsaved man, it says, is incapable of accepting God's Word as true without God's help. New life, by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, must come first; saving faith, the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8) comes first. The rebel must bow the knee in faith before the God of the universe.

"Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). Saving faith comes first, then the fuller understanding of God's Word comes as the Author of the Book takes up residence in the individual. Only a Christian is capable of being taught, "not in words which man's (false) wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual (literally, "things from the Spirit with things from the Spirit", i.e., comparing Scripture with Scripture).

If you have friends or acquaintances who profess to be atheists, the best thing you can do is to recognize the spiritual bondage the Bible says they are in, and pray for them. Pray that God the Holy Spirit would bring light to their darkened hearts. Pray for opportunities to bear witness to them about that light, using God's Word as your sole authority. And trust God for the results.

References:

1. James Swanson, *Logos Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997)

2. Scripture quotations are from the New King James Bible.

3. According to the website <http://www.the-brights.net/>, the Brights Movement was named by atheist biologist Paul Geisert, who sought a name for the atheistic viewpoint that would be more positive-sounding than being called an "atheist" or "godless." He sought to coin a term for "atheist" that would become as commonly accepted (and certainly as misleading) as the term "gay" has for homosexuals. Leading atheist spokesmen such as Richard Dawkins in Britain and Daniel Dennett in the United States have popularized the term through their writings and public appearances.

The Brights Net website was begun in 2003 as a communications hub for the movement and to coordinate efforts to promote their agenda and convert people to it. According to the website, "The noun form of the term *bright* refers to *a person whose worldview is naturalistic* — free of supernatural and mystical elements. A Bright's ethics and actions are based on a naturalistic worldview" (emphasis theirs). "Think about your own worldview to decide if it is free of supernatural or mystical deities, forces, and entities. If you decide that you fit the description above, then you are, by definition, a Bright!"

The Brights are honest enough to call their God-denying viewpoint "a belief system." The Brights' essential problem is that they refuse to recognize the vast, life-and-death difference between authentic Biblical Christianity and all other religions. They lump authentic Christianity together not only with the many un-Biblical "Christian" counterfeits, but also with all other religions, and label them all as "evil."

4. Gary Parker, *From Evolution to Creation* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Master Books, 1994), 18:05. This video is Dr. Parker's personal testimony of his conversion.

tq0002

Copyright © 1998-2012

TeachingtheWord Ministries • www.teachingtheword.org

All rights reserved. This article may be reproduced in its entirety only, for non-commercial purposes, provided that this copyright notice is included.

We also suggest that you include a direct hyperlink to this article for the convenience of your readers.